

*Discuss the key concepts of Michel Chion's 'Audio Visual 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 films of your choice to help articulate your discussion.*

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This essay will explore some of Michel Chion's theories looking at two key films *Apocalypse Now* and *Baby Driver*. In *Apocalypse Now* key scenes will be looked at to demonstrate how Chion's theories are applicable. In this essay some of Chion's key concepts are examined with some emphasis on key scenes that particularly demonstrate some of Chion's main ideas.

Michel Chion (1947-) is a French theorist who is a key thinker on audio/visual theory, and his book *the Audio-Vision* is a key text on the subject. Some of the main ideas he discusses include listening modes; causal listening, codal listening and reduced listening as well as developing ideas such as diegetic and non-diegetic sound, synchresis and vectorisation.

The first film that will be looked at is Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 classic *Apocalypse Now*. In the opening scene we are introduced to Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) through non-diegetic voice over narration. Early on the diegetic sound of the helicopter as it scantly flashes across serene tropical forestry is captivating but strange. Overlaid is the song *The End* by *The Doors*. The helicopter sounds waft over and land in with matching drum rolls with crescendo as we enter the world of Willard. The continual spinning blades of the helicopter simulate and are syncretic with the blades of the fan in the room.

Walter Murch was the sound designer for the film embellished sounds by using the pivot-dimension of two sounds that of the ceiling fan and a helicopter blade. (Jarret, 2000) The use of the helicopter blade sounds is a process of temporal vectorization that gives a sense of temporal reversibility. Discussing how he approached the sound design for Apocalypse Now he says:

Well, what was great about that mix began long before anybody got near a dubbing stage. In fact, it began with the script, and with Coppola's inclination to give the characters in "Apocalypse" the opportunity to listen to the world around them. (Thom, 1999)

In the next helicopter scene which is a beach scene the helicopter leaves the scene the bugle in the sound-track plays which is a sign of imminent battle, in contrast to the peaceful scenery. The tone changes to classical music as they approach the enemy lines. The backdrop is still a beautiful sunset. Then the fierce string instruments become prominent and as the soldiers on the ground had previously discussed: the enemy on hearing this suddenly become confused and frightened, and as the helicopter actually attack firing machine guns the song *Shall We Dance* starts to play which could be seen as an example of *Anempathy*, the song is in stark contrast to the onscreen action.

There are many of Chion's terminologies applied in this film. Marlon Brando's character Kurtz has a key presence in the film. He could be considered to be semi-*acousmetre* because you hear his voice without seeing him till very late on in the film but he still has a very important role to play. (Chion, 2019) We see the first presence of synchresis in the opening scene how Walter Murch uses his awareness of merging the contract of sound with the visuals. Discussing the process of creating sound for the film Murch says:

At the time of shooting almost no useable sound was recorded for the film because of the difficulties of production. We had what was called a “guide track.” We had to recreate the whole sonic environment, item by item. Once you have the image it immediately begins to narrow down what you will use for sound. It’s still a huge amount, but when you have sound, you’re, thankfully, being guided by what you see in the picture. (Walter Murch, 2000, p.5)

It is worth bearing in mind that at this time the process would have been analogue, not digital.

In a later scene which when you hear the helicopter it signifies that there is going to be an attack and that danger is imminent. The sound of the blades swooshing are diegetic and then again a use of a powerful music track comes in with Richard Wagner’s *Flight of the Valkyries*, a powerful combination. Several use of various songs were used as tracks from other artistes such as the Rolling Stones to represent the situation and the mood at the time.

The way the technologies available embellished the sounds to achieve the effects in a creative way. In particular the opening scene gives a sense that is disturbing – of the time the sound/vision was a ground-breaking approach to sound and editing. The use of distortion of sound and the upside down world draws you in to this estranged world that has been manufactured, and the sound has a large part to play in creating this sense of disillusionment. Coppola and Murch were pioneering of their time with their use of the audio and visual application.

The opening scene from *Apocalypse Now* is pivotal in the world of Audio-Vision. Many film Sound Designers and directors have used or followed the techniques and the ideology.

(O'Falt, 2019) behind Murch's approach to sound and vision. The opening scene was a typical example of how sound and vision was used to embellish scenes and create the Atmosphere.

Murch used techniques that were relatively new in the days of predominantly analogue recording 1979, 41 years ago. Seven Years later Peter Gabriel was breaking new grounds in 1986, 34 years ago with his Number One Billboard Chart Topping Hit recording "Sledge hammer" doing things like playing the analogue tape backwards to create new melodies to create ideal moments in Music Sound Recording.

With the analogue Recording process you did not have the digital facilities that are available now where today you could choose online or digitally create a mood or feeling for a scene by alternatively downloading from audio-banks previously recorded to match a required scene or sound performance. Murch is much respected by his peers decades later and to this day he is acclaimed as leading the way in sound design. (O'Falt, 2019)

Murch used the Render technique to simply record or use what is referred to today as Foley techniques which simulates and is synchretic to the visuals on screen. For example he created the helicopter sound by using the swirling sound of the helicopter blades as they turn. It was a ground breaking experiments and it was very successful. He applied this technique in many of his other film scenes to create the Audio-Visual experience. He created the diegetic experience by taking previously recorded soundtracks to indicate what the scene was at the time or what it was going to lead to.

Many sound engineers, record audio and visual film producers have used or copied Murch's approach and lots of them refer to opening scene in *Apocalypse Now* to inspire them.

In the Film *Baby Driver* which is an award-winning film. In two days Edgar Wright Film Director and Julian Slater (creative engineer) the sound man, used the digital technology to achieve what Murch created with the analogue techniques.

Michel Chion Audiovisual contract continues to be prevalent when applied to key films today's very popular films such as the recent hit film *Baby Driver* (2017, dir. Edgar Wright). It typifies Chion's understanding of Synchresis. In stark contrast to this period of film making circa 2018 Chion's Audio Visual contract is very relative to films made decades ago as it is today. (Trenholm, 2018) Particularly of note is the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in this film.

The leading actor (Baby) has a condition of Tinnitus which appears to be triggered from a life changing experience of witnessing his mother and father die in a horrendous car crash after a ferocious verbal fight with one another whilst driving and arguing in the front of their car as he looked on from the back seat at the tender age of approximately of 6 years old.

Later at the age of 18 he wears headsets with very hip music (Groove Beats) and pertinent lyrics to drown out memories of a most horrendous chapter in his life and helps him to cope with tinnitus and PTSD. He creates his own mixes from samples and sharp end recording with every beat, melody and lyrics that help him to cope with the trauma he has faced early in life. When he plays songs through his headphones it is both taking the viewer into his

world and is also used as the soundtrack for the film as well as very syncretic to the situation at peak times. It's ironic that when he leaves off half of the headset the music's (Spatial Audio soundtrack) is reduced to half. Therefore the use of this headset plays a pivotal part with the audio/sound track in this film. and is one of the first films to use this technique. The film received Oscar Nominations and Academy Awards in 2018.

In approaching this film the sound editor looked at the films in terms of bars not frames:

Noises made by things that appear on screen are called diegetic sounds (as opposed to nondiegetic sounds such as a film's musical score or a voice-over). Achieving the desired effect for 'Baby Driver' meant approaching the film in a whole new way. (Slater, 2018)

Baby Driver approached the sound in a unique and innovative way in as much the lines between the diegetic and the nondiegetic were played with every time Baby adjusted his head set to fully off fully on or occasionally half off and half on.

Baby (Baby Driver) charmed into a life of major serious robbery as a getaway driver by cunning criminals that discover he has an innate talent as a getaway driver.

When he returns home after a typical getaway job his all is calm as home stereo plays soft soul music on the radio an trauma is relaxed.

The telephone rings and the mood changes as the soundtrack enters causal listening that leads to the dominating villains enforcing the next criminal encounter over the phone. It causes extreme anxiety as he comes to terms that it means he must engage in another possibly another life threatening activity.

Later on in the film he's also trying to create a calmer lifestyle with his girlfriend and has promised himself that he will end the life of crime that he has virtually been blackmailed into at this later stage so when the phone rings then the mood completely changes again

and this is reflected in the tempo and change of music. There is Active offscreen sound with police sirens which are prevalent in this film representing the non-diagetics.

Synchresis happens a lot with various sound effects (guns, alarms, and various SFX in car chase scenes). There is a lot of foley in the film, which the sound recordist Julian Slater talks about. Talking about the Synchretic car chase scenes he says;

We got on a race track in Atlanta and re-recorded all those cars you see in the movie from every angle. We had microphones around the race track and we had microphone on the exhaust, we had another microphone under the hood, we had a microphone on the drivers side, we had another microphone in the back so we had these multithread recordings of every single car. (Trenholm, 2018)

Foley has been used to create a very realistic soundscape of the numerous car scenes in this film. This unique sound is evident in “Baby Driver” which was acknowledged in the film and Music industry and was awarded Best Sound Editing and Best Sound Mixing. (Trenholm, 2018)

These two films were chosen because of the different eras they were made in, which represents a change in technology. *Apocalypse Now* is a classic in what was achieved in the sound design of that film, at the time but also for sound designers looking back today, it is still a source of inspiration. The use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound is used in an incredibly effective way, as well as other techniques mentioned including anempathy and Brando’s character could be considered as a semi-acoustmetre. All these aspects make *Apocalypse Now* a seminal film.

*Baby Driver* was looked at because sound plays a huge part in this film in driving the narrative and is a predominant factor in the film. The way in which sound is used makes it a

very immersive experience. The tracks played in the film are used in a diegetic way to draw us into Baby Drivers world. Temporal vectorisation is used to great effect in the action scenes.

Chion's theories added value to relationship between sound and audio which enhances the feeling experience you get when watching a movie.

The relationship between sound and the moving image is essential in creating the movie experience. It's an ever evolving artform and new techniques have been developed to push the boundaries as to what is possible. Even though Chion's theories are still applicable and they help us understand and consider how sound and visuals work together. It has been useful to look at some of the theories now being applied such as diegetic and non diegetic, anempathetic and acousmetre. All of these techniques can be used to create different responses and emotions from the audience. Chion's Theory and the advanced technology now available has really revolutionise the way of approaching sound and the moving image. Many film directors are now acknowledging the importance of sound in the story telling process, such as Edgar Wright with Baby Driver. As technology continues to change the possibility of what is achievable and the boundaries also continue to be further explored.

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