

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. [Note: you may also respond practically to this question if you would like the opportunity to create some original audio/visual material as the basis for your analysis work.]

1802552

BA Music Technology

Robert Jones

Word Count - 2329

Introduction

Throughout this essay I will be using two different scenes to help explain and explore Michel Chion's key principles in an audiovisual analysis. The first scene is from *Wall-E* (filu005, 2010) and the second is a clip from a game called *Alien Isolation* (СЛАВКА БОЛТУН, 2015). Throughout the book Chion argues that we don't view sound and image as separate channels, but we view them as one. In film Chion argues that both sound and image manipulate our perceptions. One of Chion's key concepts is that sound does not naturally go hand in hand with an image, this is called the audiovisual contract. Chion describes it as a symbolic contract that the audio viewer enters agreeing to think of sound and image as forming a single entity. The purpose of this essay is to understand the way two different scenes work in their use of sound and image.

Audio-Vision Analysis

For the purpose of this essay the primarily two scenes analysed will be taken from the film *Wall-E* and the game *Alien Isolation*. In *Wall-E* the scene shows two robots meeting in outer space and engaging in a dance sequence; the game scene follows a player moving around a space station with an alien tracking them. Both clips are demonstrative of the relationship between sound and moving image. Chion describes ambient sound as the sound of the overall environment that won't raise suspicion about the location or source (Chion, 1994). In films this could be considered the sound of rain hitting the ground in a scene that visually depicts rain or the sounds of waves hitting a boat in a scene that depicts the sea. In *Wall-E*, the ambient sound is largely empty due to the scene taking place in space. Both *Wall-E* and *Eve* highlight this when they are flying past each other, from the reverb from *Eve*'s hum and *Wall-E*'s fire extinguisher. Due to how empty the acoustic environment is, it makes the interactions between *Eve* and *Wall-E* seem more intimate; this is especially the case when they finally meet. Although it's both *Eve* and *Wall-E* that highlight the emptiness of space there is a low-level white rumbling noise in the mix as well that contributes to the ambient sound of the scene. In 2017 Nasa released a playlist of radio emissions that had been converted into sound waves. Comparing this to the space sound in *Wall-E* there are many comparisons to be made in their sound qualities (Nasa.gov, 2017).

Another example of ambient sound can come from *Alien Isolation*. Like many horror games *Alien Isolation* uses sound to help the player survive. Instead of using visual cues to detect the Alien the game pushes the player survive using the players ears. As soon as the player starts to explore the spaceship the ambient sound of the ship is in line with the codes and conventions of a typical science fiction spacecraft. This comes from the alarm, static, beeping and other sounds all coming together to establish the ambient sound of ship and game.

In *Wall-E* both characters have specific sounds that originate through their movements which is called diegetic sound. Diegetic sound is sound that has a source on screen such as the movement noises Wall-E has or the hum of Eve flying in space (Lindskog, 2013). In contrast to this is non-diegetic sound; an example of this could be a narrator or the pit music heard later in the Wall-E scene. Non-diegetic sound doesn't belong to the scene shown on screen. The lines between non-diegetic and diegetic sound can be blurred. Near the end of the scene the Captain asks the computer to define dancing, after this it cuts to the next shot of Wall-E and Eve in space as the computer defines dancing while both Wall-E and Eve are dancing in space to non-diegetic music. In this context the computer is somewhat acting as a narrator although in this example it facilitates both non-diegetic and diegetic sound as the narrator is only part seen and then just heard.

The pit-music in this scene is very uplifting, joyful and carefree which empathetically corresponds with what is being shown on screen, from Wall-E and Eve dancing around the spaceship together. If the original music was removed and an additional piece such as Litvinovsky "L'Incendie" added this would change the perception of the scene. The increased tempo and dynamics of L'Incendie makes it seem like both Wall-E and Eve are in a race against each other instead of dancing; this changes the viewer's perception of the scene and the movement within it. With the dynamics of the piece it feels very suspenseful like something significant is about to happen in the film. Chion describes this experiment as forced marriage, the process of adding different accompaniment music to a scene. In this example the scene speeds up as a result of the increased tempo from the new music which adds a new understanding to the scene. The viewer's perception changes as they react differently; faster music means a faster heart rate which changes how a person feels about what is happening in the scene.

Changing the music over the same scene (forced marriage) demonstrates some of Chion's key concepts like added value and synchresis. Added value is the notion that sound can alter the audience's perception of an image differently than what the perception of the image would be on its own, this also works the other way around (Chion, 1994). This principle was shown during the Wall-E forced marriage example. Another example of added value can come from Alien Isolation. Throughout the gameplay of Alien Isolation, the ambient sound of the ship is intended to make the audience feel uncomfortable, one of these sounds is an alarm. Alarms are made with the intent of alerting people in ear shot. In the context of this game the alarm sound is there to make the player feel uncomfortable and on high alert while playing in a stressful environment. If this alarm sound was isolated and instead of gameplay, an image of a lorry reversing was shown, this would alter the way an audience would perceive the sound. Although in both context the alarm is used to alert the listener both have different impacts and intents due to the images shown with the alarm sound.

Synchresis is Chion's term for the perception of viewing a sound and visual event as a single phenomenon. It is the mental fusion between the sound and an image at the same time (Chion, 1994). During Foley recordings for film, Foley artists try to find way to recreate certain sounds for specific objects and movements. For synchresis to work the reassociation of image and sound is fundamental to Foley artists work. There are many times where the artist might not be able to record the object shown on screen and will have to try and recreate that sound using other objects. In *Wall-E* the fire extinguisher sound could be replaced by many different sounds and it'll still work. This is because when the audience expects a sound a sound designer or film maker can use about any sound effect to create a point of synchresis which would then be read as a single event.

In *Wall-E* and *Alien Isolation*, both have empathetic sound. As discussed earlier, the music in *Wall-E* matches what is shown on screen, this is called empathetic music. Chion also proposed another term, anempathetic sound. One of the most memorable instances of this in film is from *Reservoir Dogs* during the scene in which Mr. Blonde cuts off the undercover police officers' ear to the song "Stuck In The Middle With You". Anempathetic sound is indifferent to what is happening during a films plot, the anempathetic effect also works with sound effects. This can occur in many ways but a great example of this can come from *Hitcock's Psycho* during the shower murder scene. After the woman is murdered the shower that was on continues running indifferent to the violent actions that had just occurred.

Michel Chion argues that there at least three different listening modes to perceive and decode sound in the world, these are; causal, codal and reduced listening (Chion, 1994). Causal listening refers to listening to a sound in order to determine what is producing it (BELMEGA, 2018). This is done without thought most of the time, as most people would be able to identify a car engine sound without seeing that the sound is coming from the car. Causal listening comes from people's experiences, over time people begin to build memory banks of sounds in their memory. Due to the nature of causal listening it can be very broad. *Wall-E's* fire extinguisher is identifiable to a certain degree just by sound alone. But by listening to the sound on its own, it is not identifiable as a fire extinguisher. Instead in a blind fold test, the listener might suggest that the sound is being produced from a can of compressed air or possibly an aerosol can. This is like the car engine example above. The listener may be able to identify that it's a car but, in most cases, would not be able to describe what brand or model that car is just by sound.

Causal listening can also be used in conjunction with codal listening. Codal is the listening mode that refers to the listening of an auditory code, this code could be Morse code or spoken words (BELMEGA, 2018). *Wall-E* is an interesting example of codal listening. Although Eve and Wall-E can't speak in the traditional sense there is dialogue going on between them. Both robots are expressive in how they call each other's name, using different tones and length in their speech to help convey different meanings. Example of this is when both Eve and Wall-E meet, Eve calls Wall-E's name in excitement while Wall-E stops her both visually and through sound to show the plant. Although visual aid might be needed for this example, it is still a good example of the two listening modes in use. For the causal mode, both Wall-E and Eve have their own individual sounds, these sounds are as recognisable as family members or friends' voices. Codal listening is what comes from understanding both Eve and Wall-E in their expressive use of their voice. Reduced listening is final of Chion's three listening modes. Reduced listening requires the listener to primarily focus on the traits of the sound itself without consideration for the cause or intent/meaning. Because of this, reduced listening is the most difficult to practice due to needing multiple listening of the same sound to fully describe the qualities of the sound.

Temporalization is the influence of sound on the perception of time in the image. There are three different aspects of temporalization, temporal animation, temporal linearization, and finally temporal vectorization (Chion, 1994). Temporal animation is the idea that sound can temporarily animate an image to a greater or lesser degree, but this depends on the features of the sound itself. One of these factors is how the sound is sustained. Short chromatic plucking string instruments, over a still image would make the image feel more intense and cause the audience to focus in on the image. Contrast to this, if instead a slow chord was played over the same image it would naturally feel less intense and more relaxing. Experimenting this over a still image would change the overall perception of time. Another factor would be how predictable the sound is. If a sound is following an even tempo it would be felt more predictable and therefore demand less focus than an irregular out of time sound. Lastly the sound qualities in a sound would command more, or less perception. Hearing a single sine wave of 440hz would command less perception than what a sound rich in low, mid and high frequencies would do. In *Alien Isolation*, temporalization happens throughout the gameplay. Whilst the player is in their living quarters, the ambient sound of the room calmer than exploring the rest of the ship. This then commands more attention, creating an environment that's intense.

Another aspect specific to sound cinema is temporal linearization. The notion that sound can linearise a compilation of images that would otherwise have no clear direction. There are two shots without sound, one shows a dog barking and then another of a cat hissing. Without diegetic sound there isn't a concise way of knowing what order the shots are in. Both shots of each animal could be taking place at the same time or one after the other. With diegetic sound added it can make the shots be perceived in a linear way. If the dog bark sound was first and then it cut to the cat hissing it would be creating the perception of a linear story, the dog barks at a cat then the cat hisses back. Lastly there is temporal vectorization. This is the idea that sound moves the images forward. Images can be reversed and still feel natural while sound cannot. A shot of a guitarist strumming chords could seem natural reversed if sound was removed. Once added the sound will show the true direction of the shot. This is because the sound doesn't sound the same in either direction, sound is oriented in time.

Conclusion

Looking back of the module and essay I have learned a considerable amount about Michel Chion's principles. I believe it has helped me understand the relationship between sound and image to a greater degree, especially regarding the audio-visual analysis for both Wall-E and Alien Isolation. Terms like added value and three listening modes have helped me have a deeper understanding of what is happening in film and a better perspective on how to appreciate sounds. Learning that sound and image should be viewed as one instead of separately has pushed me more into Michel Chion's work and other thinkers like him too.

Bibliography

BELMEGA, D. and BOIANGIU, C., 2018. A SURVEY ON SOUND-BASED GAMES. *Journal of Information Systems & Operations Management*, , pp. 349-359.

СЛАВКА БОЛТУН (2015). *ALIEN ISOLATION Scary Gameplay (no commentary)*. [video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_H7t3RJdsRw [Accessed 19 Dec. 2019].

Chion, M. (1994). *Audio-vision*. 1st ed. New York: Columbia University Press.

filu005 (2010). *Wall-E: Define Dancing HQ*. [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPW3mvAN0Rc> [Accessed 19 Dec. 2019].

Lindskog, S. (2013). *Computer Game Sound and Flow Experience*. Undergraduate. Luleå University of Technology.

NASA. (2017). *Spooky Space 'Sounds'*. [online] Available at: https://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/features/halloween_sounds.html [Accessed 19 Dec. 2019].