

Research in Context Essay

Max Wright

Question 2. 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.]

Student Number: 1806033

BA Film & Television

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Tutor: Rob Jones

After going on a cinematic adventure that uses the tools of sight and sound in order to tell a story, you will often inform someone by saying “I just *saw* a film.” Despite the fact that a film is made up of equal parts sound and vision, the visual stimulus is the aspect that we associate with film much more heavily than its audio counterpart.

Michel Chion’s concept of the audiovisual contract ascertains the equal importance we must put on sound in film as it correlates with a corresponding image. There is a misconception that film is merely an art of image. The notion that a narrative witnessed through the means of hearing and seeing is to be primarily treated as something we have viewed, highlights what Chion refers to as audiovisual illusion.

Chion refers to the concept of added value as:

the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression ‘naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself

(Chion, 1994, p. 5)

Through the exploration of this concept it can be seen that sound does more than merely accompany an image, but also has the ability to enhance it and give the image the majority of the power that is associated with it in a viewing experience. The vox populi will most likely think of a sound as simply rising to the call of the image that it is needed to pair with, although it can be proven that the audio will lift that visual stimuli up to a higher level beyond what was imaginable.

Sound does not only play an important and necessary role in giving life to a cinematic journey, but it also has many moments in which the audio can become a character within

itself. Much like a setting can become characterized, audio can also provide the sense of an unseen and important character of a film. During production of *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979) a member of the crew physically altered the mufflers of the vehicles used in the film in order to give each car its own distinct sound. The end result achieved by this mechanical tweak was to provide a characterization of each individual car in the film and provide the audience with a sense of personality from them, as opposed to a homogenous blur of revving engines. This example shows an instance where we might have been paired with quite simple sounds that matched the images and produced an underwhelming effect. Instead a brilliant feat in sound design created sounds that were more than just noises, but rather characters to the audience; a moment where the sound did not just rise to the image but surpassed it and enhanced the storytelling experience for the audio-viewer. It is unappreciated moments of synchresis like this that proves the power that sound has over an image.

Chion describes synchresis as “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time” (Chion, 1994, p. 63). This joining of sight and sound is convenient and necessary for a number of practical reasons. A great example of a practical use of synchresis can be seen eleven and a half minutes into the film *Gone in 60 Seconds* (Halicki, 1974). Two characters walk through a park while having a conversation; the scene is as simple as that. It is quite obvious that shots were filmed silently and the audio was added in post-production. The images we see of a couple moving through the park barely match up with the added audio of them having a conversation, but, even when poorly done, the viewer is able to join the sound and image together and accept that the scene is of a couple walking through a park and discussing plans. The synchresis of their dialogue and the visuals of the two of them is still instantaneous to the viewer despite the fact that it is just as immediately noticed how

shoddy the workmanship that the joining of the two really was. Even in cases of sound and image being most distant from each other, when experienced at the same time the average viewer's brain will still do the job of joining the two together and creating the closest connection possible.

Synchresis is what makes dubbing, postsynchronization, and sound-effects mixing possible, and enables such a wide array of choice in these processes. For a single body and a single face on the screen, thanks to synchresis, there are dozens of allowable voices – just as, for a shot of a hammer, any one of a hundred sounds will do.

(Chion, 1994, p. 63)

Although this principal described by Chion can assist the filmmaker for numerous practical reasons, the artistic freedom and support that it gives them through its gift of added value is immeasurable in its contribution to the art of cinematic expression. A perfect example can be seen in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980). During moments where boxer Jake LaMotta is fighting in the ring, sound effects supervising editor Frank Warner cleverly chose to include animal sound effects during key moments in the fight. Although they are sounds that are entirely removed from the diegetic sound of the film, they manage to integrate themselves into the occurrences of the film world that the viewer is witnessing. It is the agreement contained in the audiovisual contract that allows a viewer to accept that these sounds fit in the moments that they hear them and through synchresis they accept that what we are hearing and what we are seeing go together naturally. Despite being non-diegetic sound, the cries of different animals at pivotal moments in the fight successfully presents us with something much more than an accurate representation of what the audio would have been like at that moment in

time. It is this seemingly unconventional artistic choice that presents us with something so much more than viewing and hearing a boxing match, but instead our brains are given more to work with so that we can experience things like raw emotion and animalistic instinct. The audiovisual contract through the aid of synchresis is what helps us achieve a heightened cinematic experience, stretching far beyond simply witnessing a story unfold, but instead connecting on a deeper level to the images contained on a screen and in this we find what Chion describes as added value.

Equally important to the non-diegetic sounds helping to achieve artistic expression through synchresis, is non-diegetic silence. At moments when silence is uncharacteristic of the cinema world, it can play a pivotal role in conveying a number of emotions and ambiances. Again in *Raging Bull*, at the behest of sound effects supervising editor Frank Warner, there are key instants of Jake LaMotta's fights that are completely and utterly devoid of sound. While correspondingly talented at creating unconventional yet innovative sound effects throughout the film, Warner was also integral in knowing when the right moments were not to use sound. Warner states "I felt within myself, and I still do, the richest sound that I had to offer was nothing" (*Raging Bull: After the Fight*, 2005). The role that silence can play in film is profoundly important for illustrating many of a story's essential moments and the emotions and intensity that can go with them. In warfare, the barrage of gunfire and onslaught of military forces pushing their war machine forward can be so loud that it is deafening, however in *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) the artistic choice was made to include a moment of silence as we follow Tom Hanks' lead character of Captain John H. Miller into the storming of Omaha Beach at Normandy on D-Day. It goes without saying that those moments of horrifying warfare and bloodshed were anything but silent, but the use of silence allows the audience to experience the world through the character's eyes, it allows them to reflect on the intensity of the situation and it allows emotion to come to the forefront

of the sequence. The silence in this moment is a wholly non-diegetic silence, however the audience accepts it as part of the story and the juxtaposition of silence and warfare achieve perfect synchresis within the scene. In this modern world we have become so acquainted with constant noise and audio-stimuli that we rarely experience moments of silence in our daily lives, however silence can play a very real and integral part of communication. This joining of non-diegetic silence with moments normally paired with a high-decibel power can create an awe-inspiring connection with the viewer and it is only through the audiovisual contract that this is made possible.

The use of diegetic silence also plays an important role in various cinematic achievements. More often than not we see non-diegetic music used quite successfully to help build on tension, emotion, fear and a number of other themes. Many films successfully use the very real sound of silence that exists within the film world and utilize it to their strengths. Examples of this can be most successfully seen and heard with moments of great tension. Silence has a tendency to heighten awareness during tense moments. This can first be illustrated by a comedic use of non-diegetic silence in *Band of Outsiders* (Godard, 1964). In the film Franz, Odile, and Arhtur sit in a very busy and noisy café. The character of Franz, played by Sami Frey, speaks to them about how long a minute silence can be and states “a real minute can last an eternity” (*Band of Outsiders*, 1964). The character of Odile, played by Anna Karina, then suggests that they try sitting in silence for a minute. After a count of three by Odile all of the characters fall silent, however all the background noise cuts out with them and we are left with absolute silence. This non-diegetic silence helps to illustrate the character’s point of how much longer time can seem to go by when presented with absolute silence. Although the non-diegetic silence appears to be mildly comedic in this particular film, the relationship between the silence and the background sounds helps illustrate the

effectiveness of the use of silence. This further shows how such a technique could be successful in the use of diegetic silence cutting through a non-diegetic score in a film.

In *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977) we witness a scene in which a young girl, the character Sara played by Stefania Casini, is chased throughout her dance academy by an ominous villain. She finds shelter in an empty room and locks the door behind her with a latch. The assailant chasing her begins attempting to lift the latch with a straight razor that fits between the door and the wall. Throughout these sequences the audience has heard a powerful and dramatic score created by Dario Argento and progressive rock band Goblin. The score has followed Sara through this terrifying chase and heightened our senses to these desperate moments of a frightened character's attempt to flee a relentless pursuer. Then, as the aggressor continues to caress the lock attempting to undue it, Sara begins to stack boxes in an attempt to hoist herself up to a high window to escape the room. At this moment the score quite suddenly drops out, leaving us with the moans and whimpers of a desperate Sara and the very subtle and slight tickling of the metal on metal sound of the straight razor touching the latch. This sound of the villain attempting to lift the lock was hardly noticeable to the audience, but now that Argento has removed the blaring and cascading soundtrack surrounding it, the seemingly small noise is suddenly deafening. This brilliant use of diegetic silence is one of the finest examples of silence building tension as it is so closely paired with a moment of non-diegetic music. The audience has the ability to perceive the horror even more acutely due to them being previously presented with the score and realizing the harsh reality once it is removed. In this instance the viewer enters an audiovisual contract that accepts the score as part of this film world and part of the pursuit of Sara. Due to entering this agreement with the audio and visuals, the realism has the ability to be all the more shocking once it is presented.

It is the audiovisual contract that a viewer enters that allows them to achieve a heightened experience of cinematic storytelling. Widely unnoticed and underappreciated, the ability of sound to find synchresis with the images on the screen and present the audience with added value is an immeasurable contribution to the craft.

The “modest” phenomenon of synchresis – modest because it is so common – opens the floodgates of sound film. Synchresis permits filmmakers to make the most subtle and astonishing audiovisual configurations.

(Chion, 1994, p. 64)

Due to the human nature of joining together a corresponding sound and image, the sound department and filmmaker are given the gift of being able to use these natural connections to find areas for added value.

Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image

(Chion, 1994, p.5)

This added value is what can generate the importance we put on the images we see. The emotions being felt within a scene, the tension occurring within the film world or any number of themes and ideas are contained within this concept. The audio, although unnoticed and underappreciated, advances the storytelling process to a level that is so much more difficult to achieve without it.

Something is to be said for silent cinema and the amount of work that went into telling a story purely with visuals. The early days of cinema was truly a time when sight

dominated the craft. With that first introduction of synchronized sound a whole new world was opened. Not just a world of convenience, but a world of greater artistic expression. Just as a higher level was able to be reached within moments of creative use of sound in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980) and *Suspira* (Argento, 1977), sound has the ability to not only rise to the call of what an image asks of it, but help bring that image to a higher level than was possibly thought of before.

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