

- **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.]**
- **1702929**
- **Film & Television Design**
- **2323 Words**
- **Robert Jones**

The 'Audio-visual contract' posited by Michel Chion highlights the significance the role that sound and music play in the action and horror genres. Simply put, the 'contract' is an unwritten agreement between the film and the audience that the audience forgets the imagery and sound produced from the film comes from an external source, such as screens and speakers, and instead exist in the same space and are tied to one another. This creates the effect of one sense can influence, or even potentially transform the other. In other words, "We never see the same thing when we also hear. We don't hear the same thing when we see as well" (Chion, 1994, pXXVI). Chion also details how sound is used in a variety of ways in film, notably how it can be used to tie several shots or images into a narrative sequence and how certain sounds can lend impact to certain actions if used right. This is particularly effective in action films, where over the top, significant or dramatic actions are oftentimes accompanied by an equally over the top sound effect to lend a dramatic gravitas to these actions. Some notable films that exemplify this are *Commando* (1985), *John Wick* (2014) and *Sicario* (2015), each using certain audio techniques to achieve their different stylistic goals.

Commando aims to stand among its genre peers of the time by featuring a one man army with a limitless supply of weapons and ammunition, and to compliment this the soundscape is used to add emphasis to almost every action. *John Wick*, comparatively, is an extension of this 'old-school' style of action movies, continuing the theme of a one man army out for revenge, but instead of them being a muscle bound uber-mensch, the protagonist is a more nimble and more vulnerable. As a result the music reflects the flow of the action and the sound effects have been scaled back a little to ground the action in more realistic terms. Finally, *Sicario* completely ignores the previous character archetype to feature a more realistic depiction of law enforcement officers, and as such features a completely toned back soundtrack and very stark use of sound effects, all to create a rising sense of tension throughout the film. It's important to analyse these films, and their peers, as they are indicative of the progress action movies have taken to appeal to not only their core audience, but also a wider audience that normally would not have watched these films. It is also important to note that while these films may be used as examples of the different eras of action films, there are also examples to the rule, where there would be more experimentation in style, tone and practice, though it would be best to analyse the standard set for the genre first of all.

As with many action films from the 70's-90's period of cinema, *Commando's* primary function is to empower the audience by using the protagonist, John Matrix, as a surrogate. By empowering this protagonist, through various means, the audience summarily feels empowered as they are viewing these events through the perspective, and typically are actively rooting for the protagonist to succeed. Audio design plays a major part in this empowerment, and the most notable example of this in *Commando* is in the audio difference between Matrix's weapons, and those used by the enemies he

faces. This added-value places more emphasis on Matrix and his actions, making his presence stand out in the scene and gives the impression that his weapons are bulkier, heavier in weight than those used by his opponents, further cementing the idea in the audience's head that this is a character that is in control of the situation and not to be messed with (*Chion, Audio-vision, pg.5*). This emphasis is useful in an action-heavy scene that liberally uses fast paced cuts and transitions to keep the movement flowing. To compliment this the film uses a mixture of 'L-cuts' and 'J-cuts' primarily to keep the pace of the scene consistent, but the added benefit of using these cuts is that they clearly show the cause and effect of the character's actions, in this case firing their weapons. Seeing and hearing the weapons being fired before cutting to the intended target falling down from being hit, all while the weapon, typically a machine gun, is still being fired in the background reinforces the idea that we are watching a professional at work. This acousmatic technique works both ways however, as the audience is attuned to the sound of the enemy's gunfire we can recognise it when they are firing at Matrix from off screen, often in an ambush, before they are revealed and summarily taken down, often with relative ease. *Commando* isn't unique in using these audio techniques, however, as they were emblematic of late 20th century action films, as most of the examples stated here were typically found in *Commando's* contemporaries, just remixed and shuffled to fit their individual themes and stories.

Near the turn of the century, movie-goers, especially those who are more casual in their viewing experience, started to analyse and understand the films they consumed to a greater degree than before. This can first be seen in the horror genre, becoming more meta and self aware in the mid-90's, before other genres slowly started to catch up. Arguably the last genre to re-invent itself was the action genre, as while there are films today that take more care to create a story the audience cares for through tension and unique audio design, there are still many that hold onto the principals of the old macho fests of the 70's/80's. At the forefront of this genre re-invention is *John Wick (2014)*, starring Keanue Reeves and directed by his long time stuntman Chad Stahelski. With this intimate understanding of the genre the production team was able to create a solid action film with tangible stakes and tension. This is in no small part aided by the audio design throughout the films many action scenes. At first Wick is portrayed as being on near equal footing to his adversaries, his weapons and theirs sound relatively similar, clearly shown through the scene early on in the Red Circle club. This lack of emphasis on the sound of Wick's weaponry shows how, narratively, he is still not entirely back into his old, not in focus. The scene barely uses any particular audio effects, reserving the use of acousmatic gun shots and L-cuts for the henchman Wick faces, where as almost all of his shots, the ones that hit at least, are kept entirely on screen, reflecting his professionalism and focus. In fact, a greater emphasis is placed on the soundtrack playing throughout the scene, an electro dance number,

barely giving way to the sparse dialogue and hard hitting gunshots, almost exactly like the bystanders around the fight.

This scene can be easily compared to a later scene, where Wick is finally able to eliminate his main target Iosef. This scene now uses some audio techniques not found, at least in any significant amount, in the earlier scene. Added-value is placed on a few certain key elements, namely the video game Iosef's bodyguard is distractedly playing, punching through the soundtrack and similarly drawing the audience's attention at the same time. Wick's weapons now have their own value placed upon them, almost entirely breaking through the relative silence of the scene and drawing things to a crawl at two key moments. The scene also uses a very slight amount of acousmatic sound, cutting from Wick as he fires his rifle to his targets, with a fraction of the gunshot still being heard as they go down. Not only does the use of this L-cut technique imply the travel time of the bullet, but also Wick's skill in a subtle way, as he would have had to factor this into his shots. The most significant moment is at the tail end of this scene, where Wick is able to catch up to his quarry and cut him off with a final gunshot, almost as punctuation and bringing the song to an abrupt decrescendo and close.

Sicario (2015) came out just a year after the first *John Wick* film, and despite the short time between the release of the two and the fact that they could both be considered action films to an extent, both films couldn't feel more different in terms of audio design and how that influences the narrative. Unlike both examples before this, and the 2018 sequel, *Sicario* doesn't follow a one man army against the criminal underworld, instead it focuses on Kate Macer, an FBI agent being recruited into a task force to take down the Mexican cartel's operations. This switch in subject and structure is also seen in the audio-scape of the film, where the previous films had bombastic and thumping or stylish and slick music, both reflecting their protagonists personalities and fighting styles, this film features a more drawn out and monotone soundtrack for the majority of the run time. This then often leads to the soundtrack cutting out before and during scenes of high intensity, leaving the audience to take in every detail as Macer and the others in her unit do. This is best seen in the extended sequence centred around Juarez and the local border crossing, where for the longest time there is no soundtrack as the convoy travels into and back out from the city, before a soft drum is introduced as they are stuck in traffic and start to notice they are being followed, which leads to the drum beat gradually building in volume and intensity, before cutting out again to give focus to the gun shots on screen. The multiple cuts between the US force shooting and the cartel members being hit uses a very brief instance of acousmatic sound, letting the audience see the resulting carnage unimpeded.

This scene can be directly compared to the later scene of the border tunnel raid, as that not only uses the same techniques, but some more alongside as well. The first and most notable audio effect used

in this scene is the slow, acousmatic introduction of the fire fight deep in the tunnels. The slow roll of this reveal works to, again, replace the subtle soundtrack with the sounds of battle, but now due to the plot having progressed and the tension of the film reaching its peak, the sounds of the fireight are heard for longer than earlier. This is in direct contrast of the previous two films, as they have their recognisable soundtracks play over and around their fights, emphasising the actions of the protagonists and keeping the audience in a sense of wonder about them. Here though this gradual technique reminds the audience that Macer is only a small part in the operation happening around her, especially evident as the camera works in tandem and pans across the other members of Macer's unit.

Analysing each of the three films has lead to some interesting conclusions as to the evolution of the action genre's use of use of sound and soundtrack, paying homage to the audio-visual contract. As stated, *Commando* was typical of the 80's-90's macho action film, empowering the audience as proxies to Matrix's one man army rampage, which lead to the rise of films such as *John Wick*, celebrating the past of the genre while adding its own flair and details, ensuring the genre would not grow any more stale and to open the door to a wider audience. Shortly following *John Wick's* release, *Sicario* blended thriller and action in a number of effective scenes and ways, namely not giving instant and gratifying catharsis for the audience to enjoy through Macer. Each of these have a soundtrack distinct from one another as well, though all serving the exact same purpose of bringing the protagonists inner self be expressed in those moments with no exposition, whether it be a brash and bombastic piece, a fast and slick tone, or a monotonous rising ringing in the ears.

The techniques used in all of these films have barely changed over the years either, only their implementation and the context within. Each film uses a mix of L-cuts and J-cuts to denote a firefight of some kind, for example, though each have differing contexts for this. One may have them used in equal measure among both sides, effectively showing they are on equal footing and have an equal chance of winning, where as another may use L-cuts for a character in control and dominating a situation, showing their proficiency and experience. Two techniques prevalent in each of the films, however, is acousmatic sound and added value. On their own these two can add their own meaning to a scene, but if used together, as they often are in action films, then they not only make it easier for the audience to follow a particularly hectic scene, by showing the audience a character making an action that can be immediately followed uponand by giving that action a distinct sound that stands apart from the surrounding soundscape respectively. Two great examples of this are the already analysed mansion shootout scene from *Commando* and the Red Circle scene from *John Wick*. Despite the protagonists firing similar weapons to their enemies, the added-value placed on their own weapons lets the audience know when they fire it as it stands apart, even if it's ever so slightly, and

the cuts to and from the protagonist repeatedly firing at and hitting their targets enhance this further by letting the sound carry the audience through the scene with more of a flow.

Action films have come a long way since the late 20th century, and with films celebrating this journey and others carving their own path out from it, it's a genre that is sure to last with audiences for years to come yet.

Bibliography

Bruckner, D. (1985). FILM: SCHWARZENGGGER, 'COMMANDO'. *The New York Times*, [online] p.13. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/04/movies/film-schwarzenegger-commando.html> [Accessed 21 Nov. 2019].

Chion, M., Gorbman, C. and Murch, W. (1994). *Audio-vision*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Commando. (1985). [film] Directed by M. Lester. Silver Pictures.

Filmsound.org. (2019). *Audiovisual Contract*. [online] Available at: <http://filmsound.org/chion/av-contr.htm> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2019].

Gallagher, M., 2006. *Action figures: Men, action films, and contemporary adventure narratives*. Springer.

Hoffman, J. (2014). John Wick review – a thrill ride driven by a relentless vengeance machine. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/23/john-wick-review-thrill-ride-relentless-vengeance-machine> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2019].

John Wick. (2014). [DVD] Directed by C. Stahelski. Summit Entertainment.

Kermode, M. (2015). *Sicario review – Emily Blunt's star quality lifts Mexican drugs thriller*. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/11/sicario-review-emily-blunt-star-quality-lifts-thriller> [Accessed 21 Nov. 2019].

LaSalle, M. (2008). *Evolution of the action film*. [online] SFGate. Available at: <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Evolution-of-the-action-film-3210046.php> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2019].

SFX Secrets: The J Cut & The L Cut. (2018). [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyH-a964kAs> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2019].

Sicario. (2015). [film] Directed by D. Villeneuve. Lionsgate.