

Question 3. Provide an account of the function of silence in the sound-image relationship. Include at least two short analyses of film scenes of your choice to help articulate your discussion.

Fenn Ingram (1806379)

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Tutor: Rob Jones

Silence in cinema dates back to its conception and as such predates soundtracks and dialogue, sfx and foley. Originally, then, cinema was without one of the essential elements of modern cinema. These silent films would often be accompanied by a musician employed by the studio to mask the noise of the film projector which led to the musicians adding sound effects to specific moments in these films and enhancing the visuals with them. From there, sound has become more and more key to the way media is digested by the audience. Now, nearly every film is a barrage of sound, chaotic and cacophonous. Which makes silence in modern cinema all the more special. This process is detailed in *Music in Film* by Pauline Reay (2004). Sound and silence can tell the audience a lot of things that the visuals cannot. When deconstructing a scene, it is important to deconstruct the visuals and the audio separately as well as collectively.

This essay will firstly describe how silence is applied in key scenes from two films, Lumet's *The Verdict* (1982) and Lucas's *Attack of the Clones* (2002), then the functions of sound will be described and it will be seen how these two films use these functions: How silence is used in contrast to sound, in juxtaposition to the visuals and how it affects the psychology of the viewer. Finally, this essay will look at the effectiveness of silence as a storytelling technique and assess its value.

To illustrate the various ways that silence is used in cinema, then, this essay will firstly describe how silence is applied in two instances: in the Sidney Lumet's 1982 courtroom drama *The Verdict* (1982); and in George Lucas' 2002 space adventure, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2002)

Nearing the conclusion of the film, *The Verdict*, one of the characters (Mickey) discovers another character (Laura) had been bought by the opposing side and was feeding them information. Mickey goes to tell the protagonist of the story (Frank). Rather than allow the audience to hear the words shared between them the dialogue fades out to be replaced with the sounds of the street. The audience watches the characters gesture and can judge the kinds of things being said from their actions. While there is no complete silence, in this scene there is a kind of silence in that the dialogue is silent (*The Verdict*, 1982).

In the second of George Lucas's *Star Wars* prequel films, there is a dogfight in an asteroid field between one of the main heroes (Obi-Wan Kenobi) and the one of the villains of the film (Jango Fett). Jango is being followed by Obi-Wan and decides to drop a series of 'seismic charges' to attempt to stop, or kill, Obi-Wan. These charges are highly dangerous, and the usual way to show their destructive capabilities would be to overpower the previous sounds with a grand, loud, explosion of noise. Instead we are presented with complete silence, an absence of all noise, upon the seismic charge's detonation, with this detonation quickly followed by the strange sound of the shockwave which accompanies visuals of the shockwave splitting asteroids apart (*Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, 2002).

Having described the application of silence in these scenes, this essay will now consider them in relation to how silence contrasts with sound; how silence and sound can work in juxtaposition to the visuals; and how silence can affect the psychology of the viewer.

Silence is often used in conjunction with sound to provide contrast and make those sounds appear louder than they would, using the quiet to create a sound that is deafening by comparison, Voegelin (2010) states in her book, 'Listening to Noise and Silence', that silence in fact makes things loud. This is commonly used in horror movies just before a jump-scare: the silence leading up to the scare allows the viewer to hold their breath in anticipation, the silence tells them something is about to happen, then, when it does happen, it is loud, placing emphasis on the horror and terror (*Halloween*, 1978).

A similar thing is happening in *Attack of the Clones*. The complete lack of sound creates an audible vacuum that mirrors the way an explosion might cause a shockwave, but in reverse. When the sound drops out all matter (including the very matter that might carry the sound waves) are absorbed by the power of the blast. It is only after the explosion, after the visuals, that the sound is heard as an aftermath of the explosion. It is then that we get the audible repercussion of the explosion. It is as though the explosion itself is too large, too devastating to comprehend, there are no sounds that can effectively give voice to the reality of the physical destruction.

In *The Verdict*, again, a similar thing happens. The silence is used in contrast to the sounds of the street, it subsumes the dialogue into the everyday noises, into the sounds of the street and, arguably, the innumerable conversations taking place throughout the city by extension. This contrast makes what we don't hear all the more 'loud'. Unlike *Attack of the Clones*, wherein all sound has actually ceased to be, in *The Verdict* the actual sounds, the dialogue, still exists - we are just unable to hear it. Yewdall (2007) speaks of the necessity of giving the audience breaks from the soundtrack. But this can also relate to the dialogue in *The Verdict*. By giving the audience this

break from the Dialogue they are drawn into the characters psychology while also allowing them a break from the potentially repetitive sound of the dialogue. The audience returns from this break to the rest of the film subconsciously refreshed.

While silence contrasts with sound that is not the only thing it can contrast with, as both sound and silence can contrast with the ever-present visuals that appear on-screen. However, before considering how silence is used in contrast to the visuals in *The Verdict* and *Attack of the Clones*, concepts of diegetic and non-diegetic sound and silence will first be considered along with ideas on how silence overlaps the divide between the diegetic and non-diegetic.

These terms, diegetic and non-diegetic, (independent of silence) refer to the sound that emerges from the story world the audience sees on screen, dialogue, music coming from a radio, sound effects, ambience, all of these elements are Diegetic. Non-Diegetic refers to the sound in film that does not come from the story world, soundtracks, narration, music, all of these elements are non-diegetic. Both of these are described in more depth by Reay (2004).

If diegetic sound is that which emerges from the actual location and people present in the scene, then diegetic silence is an absence of these sounds, either showing only selected diegetic sounds or filling the lack of diegetic sounds with non-diegetic audio (Crook, 2012). Diegetic silence can make the audience feel more of a spectator, watching the visuals more objectively while non-diegetic soundtrack or an inner monologue fills this objective divide.

If non-diegetic sound is that which originates outside the location or people in the scene then non-diegetic silence adds realism by not presenting the audience with sound that wouldn't normally be heard in the location that is present (Chion, 1990). Non-diegetic silence pulls the viewer into the story and makes it appear as though the scene is that much more realistic. Both diegetic and non-diegetic silence can be used individually and simultaneously, with different effects (Crook, 2012).

In *The Verdict*, when the camera pulls back and the conversation goes silent leaving only the sounds of the street, there is a lack of diegetic sound and non-diegetic sound. This is an instance of diegetic and non-diegetic silence. It is however not complete diegetic silence as the sounds of the traffic remain and are enhanced by contrast to the silent conversation. This diegetic silence is in marked contrast to the dialogue, the information being conveyed is, arguably, the most important in the film which makes this scene the most dramatic. The silence adds to the power of the scene and the importance of the information being passed from Mickey to Frank (*The Verdict*, 1982).

In *Attack of the Clones*, when the seismic charges are set off there is a complete lack of both diegetic and non-diegetic sound. This is an instance of simultaneous non-diegetic and diegetic silence. Before and after the charges go off there is the usual diegetic sound accompanied by non-diegetic silence, this silence then continues and is added to with diegetic silence.

This complete silence is in marked contrast to the visuals which show a vast explosion of light and kinetic energy. This clearly juxtaposes against the visuals and heightens them, whereas the

contrast of sound and silence happens serially and temporally (sound, silence, sound) the juxtaposition silence and visuals happens simultaneously (*Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, 2002).

Both of these films use contrast between the visual and the audio to enhance scenes. A conversation where all you hear is the cacophonous sound of the street. A massive explosion in complete silence. This disconnect from the audience's expectations draws the audience into the world of the story.

Clearly then, when both are silent the audience becomes a spectator, separated from the images shown to them, but this doesn't always come at the cost of immersion. Chion (1990) points out that silence actually draws the audience into the characters they see on screen.

Having explored these ideas on silence and how it contrasts with both sound and visuals, how silence is used in relation to the audience and their perceptions will now be discussed.

It is clear that sound and silence have a psychological and emotional effect on the audience (Voegelin, 2010). In *Attack of the Clones*, by presenting the audience with complete silence when a loud bombastic explosion is expected, the viewer is drawn in with curiosity, its unexpected nature draws the audience in as they try to decipher why the sound is gone - in essence creating the uncertainty that the characters feel when awaiting the outcome of the blast. The shockwave sound serves to provide us with a moment of awe as the explosion cuts through asteroids. The viewer is left feeling as though those explosions were more destructive than any other

in the film and feel the same psychological and emotional impact on themselves that the characters are feeling. Chion (1990) writes that silence in film often precedes a sinister development. Chion (1990) also writes of the effectiveness of sounds arising out of silence. This is that same effect on a smaller narrative scale.

In *The Verdict* the silence emphasises the sounds of the chaotic street, this noise gives the audience insight into mental state of the character of Frank as he comes to realise, he's been lied to. During this the camera zooms out to show the isolation the character is put in, which the audience feels also. Laura had seduced him, now with the discovery of her lie, he is alone again. The lack of dialogue could also be seen as a metaphor for the end of the relationship. The silence of the dialogue further effects the audience by allowing them to add their own words to the conversation. According to Voegelin (2010), the audience hears themselves during silence. By now the audience know the characters and know the kinds of things that may be said. But the audience cannot tell for sure what is said, yet the conversation between the two characters becomes all the more powerful because of this. The audience does not need to hear the words to feel their weight. The lack of dialogue makes the words actually spoken louder in their meaning. The silence says more than the audio, it is louder. Voegelin (2010) describes silence as a refusal of speech, and *The Verdict* depicts this in a very literal way, the absence of dialogue being this refusal to speak.

True silence cannot be accomplished. But the appearance of silence can have a massive effect on the impact of a story. Silence is space in which the viewer is able to fill the noise. Voegelin (2010) points out that Silence reveals the sounds inside our heads. With panic in tense scenes, with sadness and grief in emotional scenes, it can humble as you witness the vastness of space, it

can make you fear what comes next. By letting the viewer into the story with the use of silence the viewer gains a deeper connection with the story. In those moments of silence, the viewer is a part of that story. The effect of dramatic silence is described as follows in *The Sound Handbook* by Tim Crook (2012, p. 13) 'It often invites a powerful engagement of audience interaction'.

In conclusion, there are many functions of silence in film and media. When used correctly silence can increase tension and anticipation, drastically increasing the quality and profoundness of a story. When used incorrectly silence will detract from the story, distracting the viewers' mind and causing them to lose interest. This balancing act is key to storytelling in film and media. For each story the line of benefit and loss differs. Some films require silence in order to appear more realistic, in others the use of silence must fit a contextual obligation within the scene, as seen in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, or to indicate a message in the story, such as a character's disconnection from the world as seen in *The Verdict*. This makes the use of silence a skill like any other. Just like any instrument it can be used in many ways to derive many effects, in that way Silence is itself an instrument to be played and experimented with. The use of silence like all other aspects of filmmaking is a skill that can be used to great effect or be misused to detract from the story. Silence is as useful a storytelling technique as every other aspect of a film's soundtrack.

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