

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

How storytellers have utilised film and/or music/sound design to explore each of the following: the weird & eerie, Silence and the sublime.

Jenna Swain - 1809866

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Cluster - Rob Jones

Introduction

This essay will be answering the question how storytellers have utilised film and/or music/sound design to explore each of the following: the weird & eerie, Silence and the sublime. This essay will use three key scenes from films all within the scifi genre to explore the three individual expressions.

Sound and image have an important relationship within film. "The Audiovisual Contract is a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, agreeing to think of sound and image as forming a single entity." (Chion 1994, p216) this gives great depth to a story.

The three elements explored here are demonstrated in differing ways but all with great effect.

When we think of the weird & eerie in film, horror movies seem like the more obvious choice. But various genres have explored these concepts in creative and imaginative ways. The weird, the abnormal, take any story setting and simply introduce or change some elements to conform to this concept and it can be an effective storytelling tool.

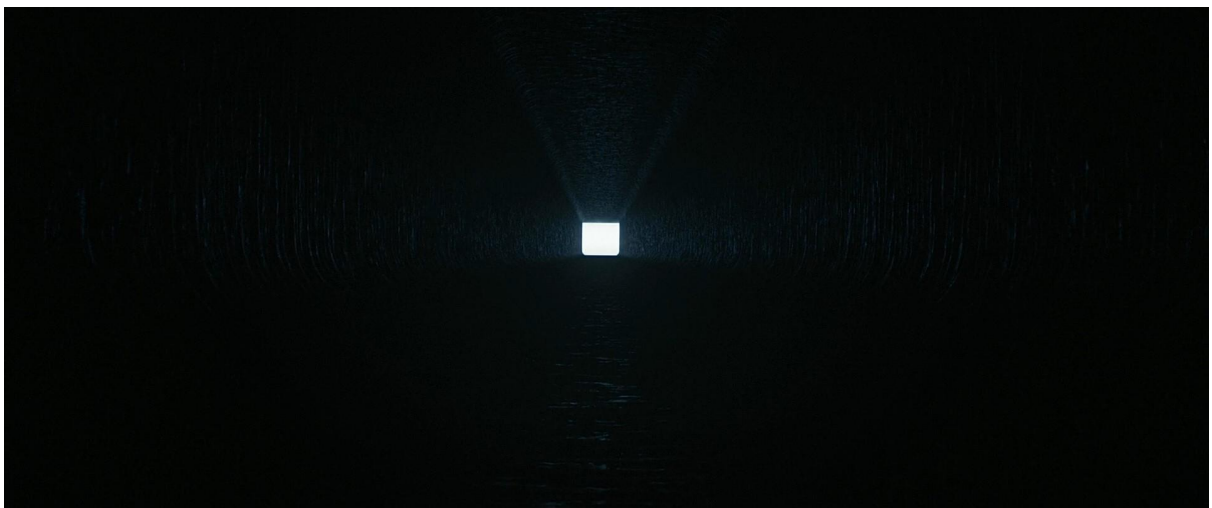
Silence is often thought as simply the absence of noise but this is untrue. The concept of silence can vary depending on the context. An absence of certain noises can feel like silence even when analysed and other quieter more natural noises are still present. This use of removing certain sounds rather than introducing more can really play with the perception of a scene.

The sublime in film can be used as a beautiful form of perspective. It can show fragility and beauty, give the audience a sense of awe and wonder. When the sublime is the backdrop to

a story it can change the scale. Giving the characters a fragility that would be difficult to show in a more simple way.

Arrival

For the first example we take a scene from the Denis Villeneuve film Arrival. In this scene we get a strong representation of the weird and eerie through the score by Jóhann Jóhannsson and the seamless sound design. A fleet of spherical spaceships come to earth. Unsuccessful in establishing first contact the american government brings in a professor of linguistics Dr Banks.



Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

This is both her first time entering the spacecraft and the audiences. The audience can experience this through her character. There is a mixture of soldiers and drs boarding the craft. They ascend upwards into the craft from the ground on a mechanical lift. There's comms chatter as they ascend and a low rumbling of non diegetic sound. The lift comes to an abrupt stop at this point. They stop it. We see a birds eye view of them in the lift and people walking below this gives the perspective that they are quite high up.

A few of the people leap upwards into the tunnel. Landing on the side of the tunnel as the gravity changes. The low rumble progresses to a mix of music and nondiegetic sound. This sound is louder and has a lot of similarities to the sounds the aliens make, this gives a sense for foreboding and an unsettling familiarity. They leap from the lift onto the side of the tunnel as gravity switches them.

Dr Banks is visibly stressed and we can hear her breathing heavily. This becomes a key part of the sound in this scene. One of the few inherently natural sounds. The last person leaves the lift. They stumble onto the wall of the tunnel and fall. The camera then shows him standing on the side of the tunnel and a view of people walking around down below. This gives a twisting of perspectives and a feeling of disorientation as logically it looks like they should be falling down the tunnel towards the entrance.

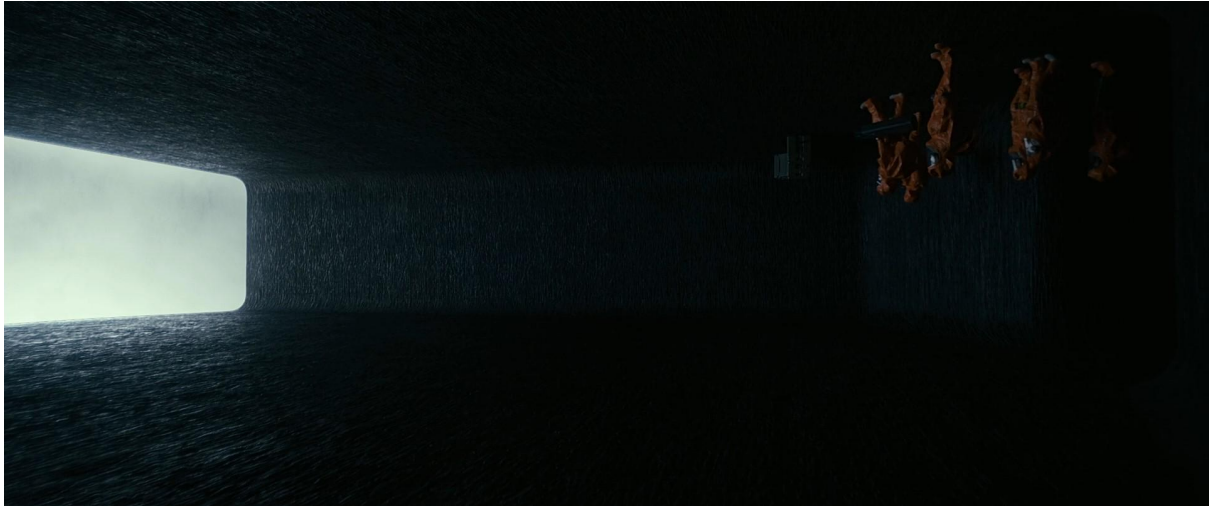


Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

They walk up the walls of the tunnel into the antichamber. As they proceed a loud pulsing non diegetic beat mixing with the setting gives a feeling of foreboding. The unnatural sounds continue, building.

The camera is flipped upside down as they enter the antichamber giving a disorienting quality to the scene.

The breathing of the woman continues heavily and the camera flips back to her perspective from inside her suit looking out. We see her reaction and hear her breathing. This has become the leading sound.



Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

One side of the antichamber is a large white opaque window. This is a soft bright light diffused. It reflects off the plastic on their suits. The whole window is one big soft box lighting wise and a key light for the scene.

The chamber is black and looks like it's made of stone. This along with the opaque window gives a contrast to the orange hazmat suits. The suits themselves make the people look alien in this setting.



Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

There are small crates they unpack. For the first time a bird cage is seen. It's dropped into place with the camera facing the window and silhouetting the bird inside. This is the first time we hear the bird. The bird being used as a canary in a coal mine. A natural alarm. The bird continues to be heard in the background of the scene. Like a ticking clock but uneven in its rhythm.



Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

The intensity of the woman's voice continues. We don't just hear her speak, we hear each breath and can clearly define the nervous breathing with her words. She is afraid. The colonel in comparison sounds calm. He's not heavy breathing and his words are clearer but it's clear through lack of emotional breathing not the microphone or sound quality.

She asks what happens now? He says they arrive. Slow creep in of the camera behind the people as the window changes. Behind the white opaque window we see what looks like grey clouds swirling onto the window from behind. The room darkens slightly and we see a reaction of the secondary characters as the window changes

We hear diegetic sounds of liquid being moved and Non diegetic beats pulsing this gives a feeling of building tension.



Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

A score of soft rhythmic beating can be heard under this. The other noises, the bird sounds fade out. We hear the aliens themselves for the first time. Almost organic sounding. Like a whale or elephant this is both familiar and alien in sound, an eerie organic noise that hasn't been heard before.

They make deep reverberant droning noises as the smoke and shapes move behind the window. Then they go silent. The non diegetic beat crescendos. Again the main sound is of Dr Banks nervous breathing. Then they appear. We hear them and see them slowly approach the window. The size and scale set against the main characters. The colonel addresses dr banks to get her attention but doesn't take his gaze away from the window. She looks visibly stunned and shocked. The aliens become more animated behind the window. We see her close her first and take a half step backwards. She steadys herself clearly fighting the urge to run. The colonel tells her she can start. The scene ends abruptly.

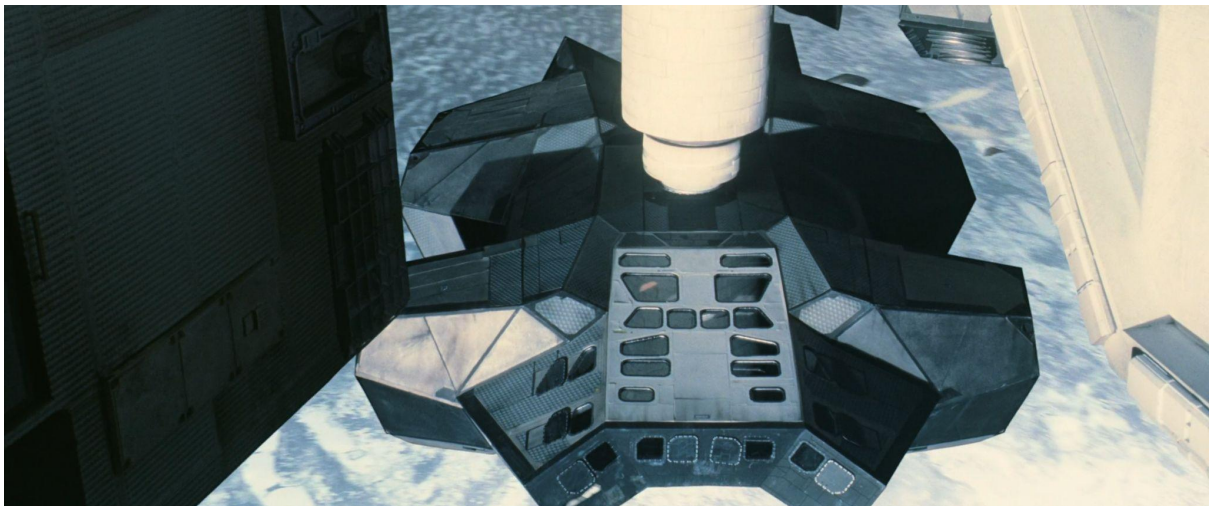


Arrival. 2016. [film] Sony Pictures Releasing International.

Interstellar

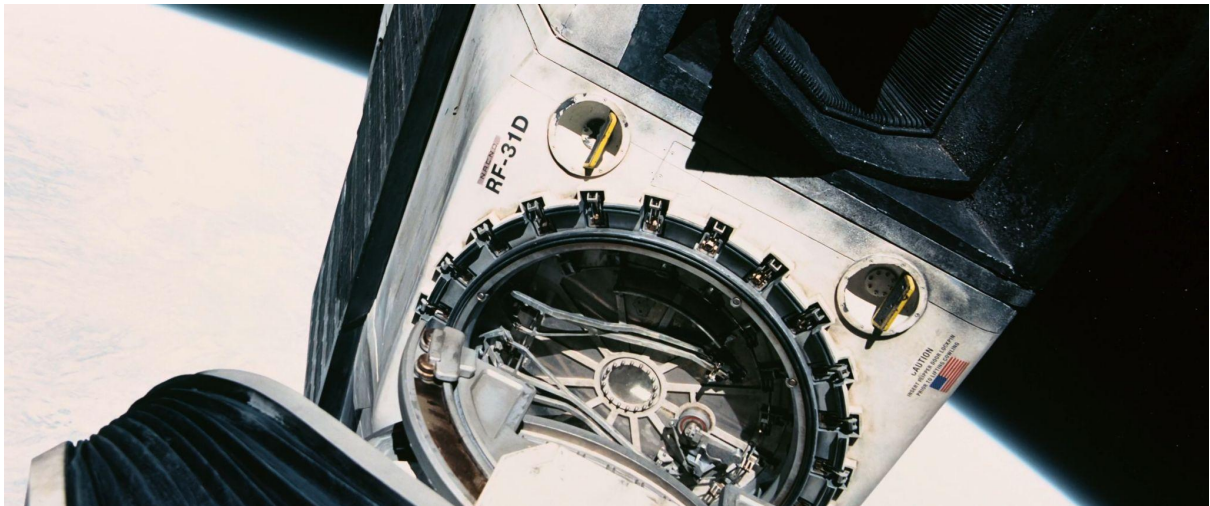
The second example shows an effective use of silence to add an impact to a scene.

This scene taken from Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* takes place at the start of the third act of the film. A race to the main ship between two of its smaller crafts. A Dr Mann is attempting to dock and board the station. Over this a musical score of a subtle ticking tying into the themes of space and time that is present throughout the film. This ticking turns into a simple beat which adds a subtle suspense.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.

Dr Mann is trying to steal the ship and head back to earth marooning the other 2 astronauts. The auto procedure has been disabled and he doesn't know how to doc the lander effectively manually. Inside the lander an alarm pulses rhythmically. This is cut between shots of the docking procedure failing to correctly engage outside the ship. The outside shots are punctuated with silence and this gives a harsh contrast to the sounds of the alarm and machinery inside.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.

The music continues in a low pulsing during this sequence, turning to a very subtle crescendo as the other pilots try and warn him about the danger he is now in.

The other pilots discuss his actions forewarning that something bad is going to happen. They change the communications to an emergency broadcast as he's not responding to their warnings unaware that he had turned off the communications on board.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.

The other ship, seeing that Dr Mann won't stop or listen, backs away quickly.

The music is constant and builds the foreboding. The characters know something bad is about to happen but haven't expressly detailed what is coming up.

The message comes through to Dr Mann. He turns back on coms. The music is cycling, a low beat getting louder then starting low again. This keeps the tension building without the music having to build in an overly dramatic way.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.

Mann is ignoring the warnings and justifying his actions while trying to complete the docking sequence. He makes claims that this is about mankind and he's not doing this for himself.

A seemingly unimportant relatively quiet alarm is going off in the background as he continues his speech. Suddenly the airlock is ripped open. He's sucked out into space. This starts as a loud noise and is abruptly cut to silence. After a silent explosion the quiet music returns as the other characters can be seen witnessing these events from the other ship.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.



Interstellar. 2014. [film] Warner Bros. Pictures.

This effective use of silence is applied to give a quietly dramatic result. We expect to hear an explosion but don't. This is effective visuals and the silence is somehow louder than a regular explosion we would expect to hear. The very lack of sound makes a big impact.

Ad Astra

The third and final example is the use of the sublime within an opening scene. James Gray's Ad Astra. This is where the character is really established against a backdrop of incredible beauty. This scene uses a mixture of music, sound and some clever cinematography from Hoyte Van Hoytema to really use the sublime as a key element in the story.

The third and final example is the use of the sublime within an opening scene. James Gray's Ad Astra. This is where the character is really established against a backdrop of incredible beauty. This scene uses a mixture of music, sound and some clever cinematography from Hoyte Van Hoytema to really use the sublime as a key element in the story.



Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

The scene begins with the character of Roy McBride. McBride is walking through a living area within the international space antenna. We are given his perspective using the first person framing of the camera and Vococentrism (Chion's term for the cinematic soundtracks prioritization of the human voice over sound effects and music) this gives us a really effective dive into the character as his inner monologue is mixed with the perspective of the camera. He's greeted by people as the camera follows a path to the outside of the station. He talks in a personal way about becoming an astronaut and how he feels about people around him He leaves the hub and steps out onto a landing area centre frame.



Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

There's a juxtaposition from leaving the mundane environment inside the structure and the view we are given when exiting. As Mc Bride leaves the hub we see him centre frame almost a silhouette against a magnificent horizon of planet earth below.



Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

There's a ladder on a catwalk. He climbs down it. An aeroplane flies below him as he descends the steps. This adds perspective to the height without giving a sense of danger. McBride is calm and collected and enjoys working here. The camera cuts into a mid close of him as he climbs down. The sun in the corner of the screen sends light flaring through the camera lense. This was a designed lighting choice and used to effectively add to the beauty of the scene.



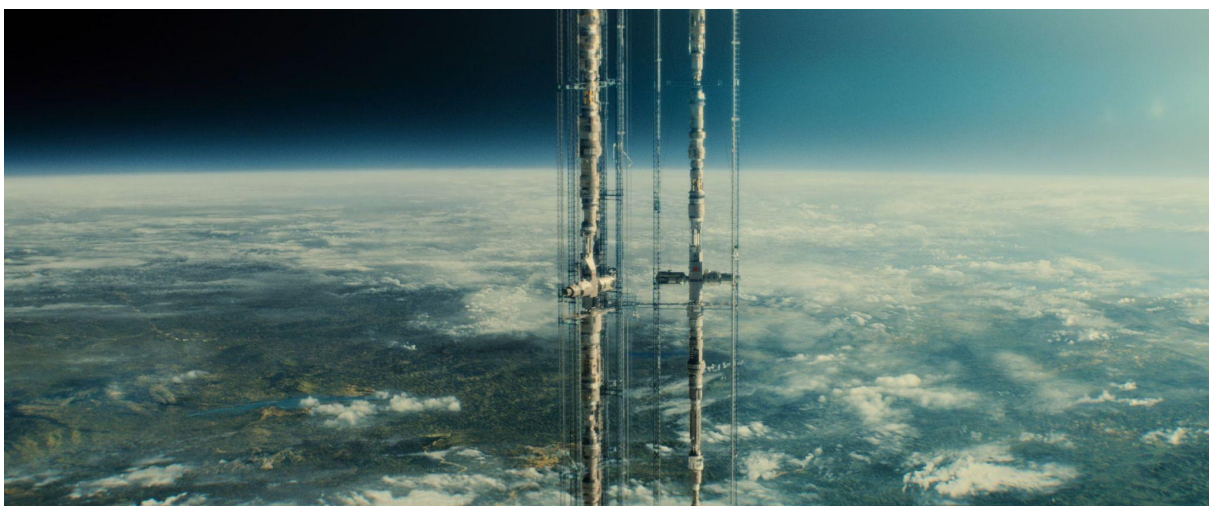
Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

As he reaches the first lower platform the camera pulls back to show the scale of the earth below and how small he looks on this structure.



Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

There's a low music playing that seems to interact with the camera movements. Gary Rydstrom's sound design mixes subtly with the score from Max Richter as a voice comes over a radio. This non diegetic voice gives more information to the story about the location of McBride and some very on the nose commentary expressing what a beautiful day this is. This played over the camera moving back and capturing a breathtaking scene of earth, outer space and the large structure with the character becoming smaller and smaller giving the audience a real feel of the sublime.



Ad Astra. 2019. [film] 20th Century Fox.

Conclusion

We see within these examples effective and creative use of sound and imagery to really add depth and subtext to these scenes. The different aspects of the film work together to give the audience an experience beyond that of the basic plot line and story.

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