CIN105 (Summer 2025)
Week 7 – Sound

Housekeeping

- Questions about the assignment?
- Due date extended (June 12th, one week extension)

Lecture

Today we will be examining the last of the four stylistic categories on our agenda, sound

Sound is divorced from the other three categories we've discussed (mise en scene, cinematography, editing) for a couple of reasons:

- first, it comes to us via a separate strand of technology – the recording of audio is an entirely separate set of processes that happen in parallel to the recording of the image.

- second, it became a permanent component of film style much later historically than images; indeed, the first films to have pre-recorded, synchronized sound came only in the late 1920s, more than 3 decades after cinema's invention in the 1890s

- perhaps the fact that cinema matured as a medium without pre-recorded sound accounts for why film is often casually described as though sound is unnecessary or an afterthought – or at least of secondary importance to the images

- We often describe ourselves as only "watching" a movie rather than both watching and hearing it and as though we really were only viewers rather than both viewers and listeners

- Indeed, we frequently describe cinema as one of the *visual* mediums, implicitly downplaying the role that sound plays in the meaning making that takes place when we engage in what might be better thought of as a kind of audio-vision

Ironically, however, this frequent disregard of sound is counterbalanced by its undeniable centrality to our experience of film.

It may well be the *most* significant element when it comes to making filmgoing the immersive and absorbing experience it is.

Film theorist Kaja Silverman describes the audio track of a film as a "sonorous envelope" due to its capacity to envelop us, to convince us that we are surrounded by the presence of a diegetic world rather than removed from its mere two-dimensional representation.

Without sound we may see images, we may even be engaged by them, but they don't have the capacity to draw us in in the same way they do when paired with sound.

Moreover, at an even more fundamental level, we rely on sound in most films very heavily for basic narrative information.

That said, even in the face of the many important roles sound plays, it is notoriously difficult to analyze.

It cannot be frozen in place like an image, nor can its individual elements be itemized as easily as, say, elements of the mise-en-scene. Casually, most of us are often much better equipped at describing things we see than things we hear.

Moreover, one component of sound, music, can be lifted wholesale from other art forms, compounding the potential complexity of sound usage within a film.

All this is to say that while sound may be the most resonant of the stylistic categories, it is also the one that seems to resist analysis most successfully, which simply means you have to be all the more attentive to a film's soundtrack when analyzing it. We will talk more about ways we can do this, but for now I will suggest that, when doing your assignment, one thing you may want to do is to play the film with no image – perhaps just put your

headphones on an listen to the audio while closing your eyes, in an attempt at isolating those features of the soundscape that you may otherwise take for granted.

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The Functions of Sound

One way in which you can fine-tune that attentiveness is to adopt the same analytical attitude toward sound as you do toward the various properties of the film image

As a first step in doing that, let's consider the possible functions that sound fulfills as you watch *and listen* to a movie

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One function is that sound **directs the spectator's attention**

- Just as a filmmaker can choose to use certain visual cues such as selective focus or the tight framing of a close-up in order to direct our attention to a certain figure onscreen or a certain plane of action, they can also **use auditory cues**

- The reasons for this is that we tend to **direct our gaze to the source of the most prominent sound** on the soundtrack

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Second function is that sound **actively shapes how images are interpreted**

- Specifically, it can render an image more comprehensible or more ambiguous, depending on what sound is being used and to what end

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Third function is that sound, particularly music but also ambient sound, can

set a palpable mood

- Probably some of the best evidence of such is to be found in horror films, which use everything from creaking to screaming to music in a minor chord to produce a foreboding and suspenseful atmosphere

Fourth: sound can create **motifs**

- In doing so, sound contributes substantially to the **structuring of a narrative** by offering up opportunities for **repetition**, even repetition with variation (which we know from previous discussions is often central to a plot's development)
- Both films we watched last week, and the film we will be watching today, feature use of such structuring motifs in the soundtrack.
- With *Millennium Mambo* this is through the use of the non-diegetic song that opens the film, which is repeated multiple times at key moments late to provide some sense of formal structure – to provide the plot with some sense of rhythm – in a film that otherwise lacks strong narrative coherence.
- With *His Motorbike Her Island* this is likewise through the musical motif of the love song that Ko sings to Miyo, a tune which is also repeated non-diegetically at several moments of narrative development in the film
- With today's film, what you will look out for is the way diegetic sounds are used to create structuring motifs that cue the viewer for various expectations.

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Fifth: through its various acoustic properties, sound can define **onscreen space.** We will speak more about this, but consider how important sound is for making what we see coherent – sound effects, for example, can make props seem more realistic, or additional recorded sound can help us orient ourselves in space, help us understand where characters are relative to eachother, or can help accentuate movements that would otherwise be very minimal to the eye.

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Sixth: through its mere presence sound can **create off-screen space** and thus create the illusion of a diegetic world that is much more expansive than the corner of it we can actually see. Often we will hear sounds that we are meant to infer are coming from a source just out of view – a source that the camera is not currently observing. This creates the impression that the world of the film does not end at the boundaries of the frame and thus helps with viewer immersion.

Seventh: sound can **mask cuts** and thereby contribute to continuity editing

- One way it can do so is by helping us form expectations that the film then meets. For example, when we hear an offscreen noise, we want to see the source of that noise
- So when the film cuts to a shot of that source, we hardly notice the edit because it is as if the film has anticipated our desire and then met it
- Another way sound masks cuts is by providing a bridge across an edit
- This is precisely what we get with both a dialogue overlap and a sound bridge, two techniques that I will illustrate later in the lecture
- In the case of a dialogue overlap the line spoken by one character is carried over from a shot of that character to a shot of another character with whom he or she is conversing
- In the case of a sound bridge, an example of which we will see later, sound is carried over from one scene to the next

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Finally: sound **enables silence to signify**

- That is, sound allows silence, its lack, to assume an expressive function. While it may seem paradoxical to consider a lack of sound as a function or element of sound, filmmaker's frequently exploit silence for dramatic effect, and we want to watch out for that.

NOTE: over the course of the rest of the lecture we should see examples of almost every function we've named here

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So let's begin our discussion of sound proper.

Following the lead of your textbook we are going to start out our discussion of the nuts and bolts of film sound by noting two of its fundamental, foundational aspects

1) the FIRST is its perceptual properties

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According to Bordwell and Thompson, every sound in a film -- be it an example of speech, music, or noise -- can be defined in terms of three perceptual properties, namely

- **Loudness** - its volume and, by implication, its perceived distance from the viewer
- **Pitch** - how high or low the sound is
- **Timbre** - tonal quality, which lends it a particular texture or feel

The main thing we want to think about is how films often manipulate these qualities for effect. *Citizen Kane*, a film we have already watched some clips of, is a film particularly sensitive to perceptual acoustic properties.

For example, pay attention to this scene, when the film introduces the character Thatcher's library. The film uses all of the properties mentioned above to stress the monumental qualities of the space and thereby to sketch economically Thatcher's sense of self-importance

SLIDE: SHOW clip #1 from CK

NOTE the music, the hushed tone of the attendant, the echo, the click-clack of heels on marble, the low groan of the door, which lends the room the feel of a vault.

In another example from Kane, the gulf between Susan and Kane is registered in the contrasting pitch of the voice of each

SLIDE: SHOW clip #2 from CK

To imagine a contrast to the scenario we just watched, I want to show you a clip from The Big Sleep wherein the similarities of Bogart's and Bacall's voices in loudness, timbre, but especially pitch reinforce their compatibility as a couple.

SLIDE: CLIP

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2) Now the SECOND fundamental of film sound is related to the selection, alteration, and combination of various sound elements

The most important thing to bear in mind as you begin to contemplate aspects of film sound is that most sound is **not merely recorded and then reproduced, but that the** the soundtrack of any given film is **just as modified and manipulated**, just as deliberately determined, as the image track, even if it appears "natural."

What we mean by this, even more specifically, is three things:

- Selection - Any given sound on a film's sound track has been chosen specifically to be included in a film

- Alteration - That sound may very well be mechanically generated or modified at some point in the process of mixing the soundtrack

- Combination - finally, that sound will most likely be blended with other sounds to create an intricate and layered mix at any given moment

In order to illustrate the many components of the sound mix, I want to show you a clip from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film The Marriage of Maria Braun, wherein we have speech, sound effects, and music all intermingling to create a dense weave in which no element takes precedence over the other

SLIDE: SHOW clip from the Marriage of MB

The result of equal levels: chaotic. Another film we might think about that exploits sound for a chaotic effect is *The Player*, which often mixed multiple dialogue tracks over one another to create a particularly chaotic effect.

Far more typical is a sound mix wherein certain sounds are given acoustic priority in order to direct our attention in particular ways at particular moments

SLIDE: SHOW clip from Stagecoach

- At first, music dominates while the general noise of the stagecoach approaching is also audible
- Then the music recedes in both volume and importance so that ambient noise, which now includes voices, can take center stage
- And, finally, once players of central importance are introduced, their dialogue is privileged above everything else

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Dimensions of Film Sound

By virtue of being part of a movie, which is both an audio and visual experience, sound in film typically enters into a relationship with other formal elements. This relationship produces distinct sonic dimensions which require further explanation

- First, sound possesses the capacity for **rhythm** in a manner that is distinct from, but frequently related to, the rhythmic relationships created by editing.
- Second, sound operates in accordance with its perceived source to a greater or lesser degree, which we call **fidelity**
- Third, sound has a distinct relation to the **space** in which it occurs
- Fourth, sound has a distinct relation to the **temporality** of depicted events

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RHYTHM

Our consideration of rhythm in sound will be very similar to our consideration of rhythm in editing. Here we are dealing with issues such as beat, pace, and accents.

While we readily associate rhythm with music it is important to acknowledge that it is also manifest in speech patterns and sound effects.

For example, we can speak of the fast-paced chattering of a warring couple in a screwball comedy, or the staccato blast of a machine gun in a gangster film

Given that a film's sound track necessarily interacts with that film's image track, there is always the possibility of a dynamic interplay between the rhythms manifest in each.

In other words, the rhythms of a film's sound may work with OR AGAINST the rhythms produced by its mise-en-scene (especially figure movement); by its cinematography; or by its editing

SLIDE: SHOW clip from Delicatessen

FIDELITY

Fidelity relates to how faithful a sound is to its perceived source. You should note the word "**perceived**" here because it is significant

When we see someone get punched in a film and we hear a thudding sound that seems to match that action, we would say there is fidelity between image and sound

Yet the truth is that thudding sound was probably a constructed and engineered sound effect.

As is conventional, it may very well have been created by someone punching a sack of flour or hitting a watermelon with a hammer during the post-production process. Often this does not actually sound like a real punch at all, the sound is intentionally dramatized, but it nevertheless corresponds for us with its source in a way that makes sense. We visually see an impact and a corresponding synchronized thud, and thus connect the two automatically.

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A lack of fidelity characterizes those situations in which there is an incommensurability between sound and image.

To cite the example from your textbook, if a dog appears to be barking on screen and we hear a cat meow, we have a lack of fidelity.

Such discrepancies between originating image and produced sound are usually used as a way of giving us access to a particular character's subjective experience or of generating a surprise or humorous effect

SLIDE: SHOW clip of Monsieur Hulot's Holiday

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SPACE

This brings us to our third dimension, which is space. Sound has a spatial dimension because it comes from a source, and it can be characterized in three ways based on the nature of that source

- diegetic or non-diegetic
- onscreen or offscreen
- external or internal

In identifying a sound in terms of these three components, we arrive an understanding of a sound-image relationship as it is spatially determined

Let's examine them in turn:

1. Diegetic/non-diegetic

The key here is the term diegesis, which we have already encountered in our study of narrative: **the world of the story.**

Diegetic sound comes from the world of the story while nondiegetic sound does not.

In almost any given film the majority of sound you hear will be diegetic: the dialogue the film's characters speak, the sounds of hands clapping when we see an audience applaud, the roar of a car engine as an automobile speeds away, etc.

When you do hear non diegetic sound it will most likely be music, yet there are other varieties of nondiegetic sound that make repeated appearances in cinema as well.

For example, across film history there are many examples of a nondiegetic voice-over, that is, a bodiless voice that speaks over the image track from a position outside the narrative…an omniscient presence that is not recalling events from their personal past but simply presenting those events from a somewhat distanced vantage

Here is an example of such, from Orson Welles's The Magnificent Ambersons

SLIDE: SHOW clip from TMA

In all the examples I just mentioned the distinctions between diegetic and nondiegetic sound are pretty clear-cut and, moreover, fixed

It is important to note, however, that a sound that seems nondiegetic can turn out to be diegetic

Example: a narrator like that from The Magnificent Ambersons could suddenly show up as a character in the film he's been narrating

Alternately, a sound can start out diegetic and then become nondiegetic

For example, a character could be listening to a song on the radio but that song keeps playing even after the character has turned the radio off – this is a fairly common technique.

SLIDE: SHOW clip from Boys Don't Cry

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2. Onscreen/offscreen

A sound whose source is visible is defined as onscreen sound, while that with an invisible source is offscreen.

While this distinction is pretty obvious and hardly in need of clarification, it is worth noting that certain filmmakers play with onscreen and offscreen sound to great effect. The play of offscreen and onscreen sound will be used to great effect in today's film *M*, where it will be combined with other ideas we have encountered – motif and repetition – to establish certain expectations in the viewer.

Here is a clip from Orlando, wherein Sally Potter uses sound to evoke a presence that would have been very costly and complicated to create visually.

SLIDE SHOW clip from Orlando

3. External/internal

The last distinction is between internally and externally motivated diegetic sound

Typically, the bulk of sound in most films is external, that is to say, physically produced by elements within the story space, often elements that we can see or, as in the clip above, that we can infer based on our referential

knowledge from the real world (in this instance, we know what a train is and what it sounds like)

However, some films rely to varying degrees on internal sound, or sound that is produced by a character's consciousness.

- Here is an example of internal sound from Psycho

SLIDE: SHOW clip from Psycho

Synopsis: if you can hear a character's thoughts while viewing the character pensively staring outward (but not moving her lips) you can assume such sound is diegetic, but internal.

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TIME

Finally, when it comes to the temporal dimension of film sound, you need to know two sets of terms that are always operative:

1. Synchronous and asynchronous
2. Simultaneous and non-simultaneous

Before we define them explicitly we should remember from our discussion of narrative that there are three types of time relevant to a film:

- First, its viewing time (screen duration) -- the time it takes to watch a film
- Then there is the story time, which spans all events of relevance to the narrative in their full duration and proper order and frequency
- Finally, there is plot time, which spans all events actually depicted, including the duration, order and the frequency involved in their depiction through formal means – the way the story time is actually communicated formally to us by the film's stylistic system.

The terms **synchronous** and **asynchronous** sound are related to the first of

these, viewing time.

- Usually sound is synchronous, meaning it corresponds in viewing time to the source. A gun is fired, and the sound of the gun is immediately heard by us, the viewer. In this case, the sound and image are in sync. BUT…
- Asynchronous sound refers to an instance when the image and sound tracks are out of sync with each other, producing a temporal gap between a sound's apparent production on the image track and its actual occurrence on the sound track

SLIDE: SHOW clip from Singin' in the Rain

Of greater analytical importance are those terms related to plot and story time, however. Sound may issue from the same temporal moment in both plot and story. In other words, sound and image occur at the same time. This is known as **simultaneous** sound

However, it can also be the case that the sound we hear may be occurring within a different timeframe than the events we see depicted, in which case it is labelled **non-simultaneous**

There are three scenarios in which **nonsimultaneous sound** is rather commonplace:

- The first is with **internal sound**. In the clip we just watched from Psycho Marion Crane drives and imagines what her boss might be saying about her at that very moment. This sound is not actually happening in the diegesis at that moment, so it is nonsimultaneous with the events depicted in the story and plot.
- But it is also easy for us to picture a character like her engaged in an act of memory rather than imagination -- thinking back on things said to her earlier in the day
- Were that the case, we would say that the sound occurs earlier in story than the image with which it is paired, making it, again, nonsimultaneous.

- A second scenario in which non-simultaneous sound is commonplace in one wherein a character narrates a story

SLIDE: SHOW clip of The Killers

In this instance, the sound occurs later than the image, though both are external – ie neither is in only in the character's consciousness, and both are also diegetic and both are onscreen at one point.

The third scenario that often conditions non-simultaneous sound is a sound bridge.

SLIDE: SHOW clip from The Silence of the Lambs

In this case Clarice's voice from scene A continues on past the end of scene A on the image track to be matched up with the opening imagery from scene B

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A sound bridge is an important technique that, while a property of sound, is also heavily implicated in editing. Sound bridges can help create coherence between shots – they can accompany the joining of two different shots, even two different spaces in the diegesis, through an association that is spoken to us, as in the above clip, where Clarice is speaking about a location that we are then transported to in the next scene.

The bridge itself is frequently used in the continuity editing system for this reason – in connecting the images this way the sound bridge helps distract us from the cut. The cut is still just a straight cut, but the sound bridge aids in story clarity.

Now I want to note here that there is a difference between this technique, the sound bridge, and a different technique that is known as dialogue overlap

- **sound bridge** = any sound that continues across a cut between two scenes
- **dialogue overlap** = when dialogue continues across a cut within a scene

SLIDE: SHOW clip for dialogue overlap (from The Silence of the Lambs)