

An exploration of the
function of sound in
the film the fugitive
essay sample



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The majority of academic literature relating to the New Hollywood Blockbuster since the 1970s to the current day has been primarily focussed on the analysis and appraisal of the visual spectacle, complementing the merits of spectacular digital effects produced by Computer Generated Imagery. Furthermore, Alexandra Keller states that 'we tend to expect them to be loud and noisy' (Keller, 1999: 136), referring to the soundtrack of archetypal blockbusters such as *Star Wars* and *The Fugitive*. Keller is suggesting a 'dismissive attitude,' disregarding the significance of sound in the filmic experience, and thus epitomising the lack of academic attention to the study of sound in Hollywood blockbusters (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 141).

On the contrary, one of the predominant reasons why *The Fugitive* became a blockbuster was because of the heavy incorporation of innovative aural techniques. Moreover, Bruce Stambler admits that 'we had a great visual movie,' nevertheless in this particular feature, there was more emphasis on the 'aural spectacle' rather than the visual spectacle. The fact that the blockbuster went 'over the top with sound, but tastefully' including a diverse range of artificial sound effects, created a meaningful and cohesive audio-visual relationship, even though the incredible sound did not accurately match the visual images, which is particularly highlighted in the film's opening sequence. The sound used at the beginning encapsulates the 'more of it than it's there' type of sound that appears throughout the film, where it is sensationalised without killing it (Sergi, 2004: 125).

During the opening titles, the first layer of the non-diegetic soundtrack is a low-toned, sombre arrangement, providing an initial dramatic and solemn atmosphere. Additionally, this first layer inflects into a high pitched

synthesiser that innately acts as a typical aural corroboration to the visual sequence, which encourages the spectator to feel sorrow for Kimble's wife who is being tragically murdered. Nevertheless, the sound editors Bruce Stambler and John Leveque contravene the generic convention of using diegetic sound to mirror the visual actions, using an additional non-diegetic layer. This second layer begins by the sound of a heavy, slamming door that is repeated three times with six echoes, resembling the noise of prison doors. This particular sound is multi-directional without a visual equivalent, creating a disturbing, threatening tone (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 144-145).

Furthermore, during the opening sequence, there is also a non-diegetic growl that is not too dissimilar to a grizzly bear, metaphorically producing an animalistic image of Kimble's murderer, with a predatory quality as he visually overpowers the female. This particularly low frequency growl complies with the 'emotional sound equation' that equates low frequencies with a potential threat (Holman, Roles of sound: 1999). This is appropriate, as Kimble's wife is subsequently shot. Moreover, there is also an absence of screaming from Kimble's wife as she is savagely murdered and no sound of her body hitting the floor. Instead, the background sound is thunderous indicating a violent storm; however there is no suggestion of any rain from the visual aerial shots. Throughout the copious camera flashes, a more aggressive impression is generated, where the sound resembles a 'muffled gunshot.' Finally, the aural conclusion of this sequence reverts to the slamming door that was used at the beginning (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 145).

The second layer of the non-diegetic soundtrack echoes Stambler's

statement that 'we did not want to be real' (Sergi, 2004: 125), reflecting the <https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-of-the-function-of-sound-in-the-film-the-fugitive-essay-sample/>

ambitious and inventive soundscape of diverging from verisimilitude. This is clearly evident of the exhibition of newly created sound technologies, foregrounded by the advent of digital sound in the late 1980s (Sergi-Neale and Smith, 1998: 159). Moreover, the fact that the background sound effects do not provide a diegetic support to the visual sequence breaches the THX notion that 'we see a sound, hear a sound.' Thus the soundtrack is departing from the audio-visual norm in film discourse; where the sound does not diegetically complement the visual images.

During this opening sequence, the audience is being bombarded by the second layer of the soundtrack with a variety of non-naturalistic sound effects, such as the slamming door and gun shots. Equally, these non-faithful effects also imply the lack of fidelity, where the sounds for example, the women falling to the floor not being heard, are not faithful to the source as we conceive it in real-life, conveying a surreal, inconceivable atmosphere (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004: 365). Moreover, the sonic texture of the soundtrack is an amalgamation of timbre, echoes and reverberations, as the spectator is being aurally assaulted, generating an emotional resonance with a sombre, melodramatic quality. Therefore, the function of the non-diegetic sound in the opening sequence is to signify violation, presaging the visual action and subtly interpellating Kimble's subsequent violation of being wrongly accused of murdering his wife, foreshadowing the initial equilibrium of *The Fugitive's* narrative structure.

The soundtrack throughout *The Fugitive* has a particularly direct relationship on how particular narrative events are structured. For instance, the sound has a grammatical function, and a 'direct narrative role' conforming to <https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-of-the-function-of-sound-in-the-film-the-fugitive-essay-sample/>

Tomlinson Holman's notion of the functions of film sound (Holman, *Roles of sound*: 1999). The grammatical role of the sound is realised when Kimble is at the police station and is reminiscing on the night of his wife's murder. As he is recollecting, the scene cuts from the police station to Kimble's car where his wife utters "I'll wait up for you," which is echoed three times, apparently in his mind. During the echo, the scene jump cuts back to the police station, informing the spectator that Kimble is remembering the previous night's events. Thus this echoing diegetic sound performs a significant function of grammatically providing a cohesive sequence to support the otherwise uncertain and vague visual sequence.

The direct narrative role of the sound is indicated when the diegetic sound of the train siren interpellates the viewer for the arrival of the train that collides with the fallen coach. In this instance, we can hear the sound before seeing the object that is producing it. Therefore the sound effect from the train announces the most monolithic narrative event of the entire film, acting as a significant narrative device, where the disequilibrium of the narrative commences, firstly Kimble's escape, and his consequential search to discover the identity of his wife's 'real' killer.

Unlike the non-diegetic soundtrack during the opening sequence, the sound also has a specifically important function of creating a realistic narrative, authenticating the arrangement of the moving images in a sequence that conveys a high degree of plausibility (Rowe-Nelmes, 1996: 111). This is certainly the case throughout the collision of the train and coach, where Kimble is trying to escape from the train carriage that derails during the

accident. Initially, the tension is created by an operatic, pulsating high pitched non-diegetic soundtrack, as Kimble only just reaches a safe zone.

Concerning the acoustic properties of the sound, this narrative event is shot essentially as a close-up sequence, conjuring up a very loud, dramatic atmosphere, corresponding to the theory of 'loudness,' where louder equates to closer (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004: 350). In particular, realistic connotations are evoked by a diverse range of diegetic sound effects such as hyperbolic explosions of fire in every rural building, crash noises between both coach and train, and screeches from the train as it derails. The fact that the sequence is close-up, demonstrates that the aurality has an immediate, visceral and onomatopoeic effect on the spectator. Thus, this particularly momentous event fundamentally encapsulates the superordinance of the diegetic soundtrack in creating a believable visual event. The additional layer of the non-diegetic soundtrack assists in producing a spectacular filmic experience.

The soundtrack also plays a key function of encouraging the spectator to respond to the experience as a 'preferred reading.' For example, the scene where Gerard is chasing Kimble in the cylinder-shaped tunnel, the non-diegetic soundtrack is serious, powerful and alarming, acting semiotically, as the fundamental symbolic sign to confirm the emotional response of the viewer, where the audience sympathise with Kimble throughout the pursuit of Gerard (Rowe-Nelmes, 1996: 111).

Regarding visual cinematography, it is acceptable to arrange a series of shots beginning with an establishing shot, then a medium shot and finally a

variety of medium close-up and close-up shots of individual protagonists. This particular sequence segments the 'narrative space' into smaller elements in a generic fashion. However, this would be more difficult for the soundscape to accomplish concerning the spatial structure of the narrative. Generally, audiences expect the sound to remain stable and continuous without constantly readjusting its 'aural perspective,' from the beginning to the end of the scene (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 147-148).

Bruce Stambler states that the revolutionary soundtrack of *The Fugitive* has undertaken a 'process of refinement,' where the sound has been made more stylish and elegant. This is highlighted in one scene during *The Fugitive*, where sound has a specific function of sustaining narrative space. The initial presence of US Marshall Deputy Gerard is aurally interpellated by a prominent, diegetic police siren that can be heard clearly above all the other police activity, indicating the arrival of a protagonist. When Gerard says "My my my, what a mess," the non-diegetic soundtrack becomes rather disconcerting, sombre and has a low-toned frequency to suggest a dense atmosphere.

At this point, the background music runs parallel with a range of diegetic sounds emitting from police cars, ambulances and rescuers that appears to be non-directional, where the audience cannot accurately identify the exact location of the sounds. Essentially however, the spectators are aware that the sounds are coming from the site that Gerard is surveying. Interestingly, as Gerard and the rest of his team walk through the area, the non-directional sound becomes directional. For example, the audience are provided with visual evidence of diegetic sparks from machinery and on-site workers,
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reflecting their clear point of provenance. In this scene, the visual shots may change radically; nevertheless, the soundtrack supplies a continuous, cohesive sense of 'density' and 'directionality,' placing the audience at the centre of the 'narrative space' (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 149).

In conclusion, the functions of sound in *The Fugitive* are to initially suggest violation in a form of prolepsis throughout the opening sequence, anticipating Kimble's subsequent violation of being wrongly accused of murder, and the train siren anticipating the arrival of the train that led to Kimble's escape and journey of redemption to find the 'real' murderer. Furthermore, the specific use of non-naturalistic, implausible non-diegetic sound at the beginning contravenes Ed Buscombe's traditional argument that the revolution of sound 'arose from the need for a more realistic narrative' as the aural arrangement is based on non-realism (Rowe-Nelmes, 1996: 109).

However, plausibility is generated in the superordinate train and coach accident, which is sensationalised by immense diegetic sound effects. This conforms to the rule of LucasFilm of 'seeing a sound, and hearing a sound' (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 144). Additionally, the use of an additional non-diegetic soundtrack is an example of amalgamating both forms of film sound to produce an aurally spectacular experience.

The sound also has other important functions, such as a grammatical role of cohesively linking visual shots to produce significations and a direct narrative function through the use of aural interpellation of subsequent narrative events that is particularly evident during the opening titles and the

train and coach accident. The sound also creatively maintains narrative space and semiotically helps to confirm the emotional response of the viewer.

All these particular features encompass Gianluca Sergi's notion of 'aural spectacle,' where innovative sound effects and strategies both in a diegetic and non-diegetic manner, work as fundamental aural components of the filmic experience. This also challenges the production of film where the creative abilities are predominantly based on the visual style, as the norms of sound production are also an innovative product of cinematic construction. (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 146) Relating to the 'big' train and coach accident and the opening sequence, the sound becomes 'physical' and 'three dimensional,' as the aural experience is now more sensual and immediate than ever.

Moreover, the overall soundscape that is conveyed throughout *The Fugitive* is a complete departure from Classical Hollywood Cinema, concerning its 'bigness,' superiority, sense of directionality and presaging visual events. Thus, these revolutions in New Hollywood Blockbuster sound transform the relationship between sound and image, particularly indicative in the film's opening sequence. The sound is now not just an 'aural backdrop' to the visual image, however it has taken centre stage (Sergi-Neale and Smith, 1998: 162), which is directly symptomatic of Sergi's creation of 'aural spectacle,' and why *The Fugitive* has become known as the ultimate sound blockbuster (Sergi-Stringer, 2003: 143).

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