

What role does  
cinematic music play  
in creating tension?



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In a time in which films were better known as “moving pictures”, the atmosphere in a 1900s theatre was one of awe-struck silence, interrupted only by the drone of the kinescope spinning through hundreds of metres of film reel and the occasional rustle of the “intertitles” as viewers followed events with the aid of written notes.

Today, more than a century after the projection of The Berlin Wintergarten Novelty Program (1895), the first motion picture to grace a cinema’s screens, audiences are able to enjoy not only the actors’ voices, but also the film scores: arguably one of the most valuable assets in a film director’s arsenal. However, ‘real life’ is not accompanied by epic soundtracks, which leads to the question of how pivotal music really is in film. The titles that have left a sizeable imprint in cinematographic history, ranging from the iconic Psycho (1960) to Monsters Inc. (2001) all contain, to many, the most memorable type of scene: that of tension. Whether they were intended to leave audiences in a cold sweat for the duration of the screening (and the following nights), or simply to give viewers a momentary instance of edge-of-seat suspense, the most successful films have employed music to maximum effect to play on paranoia, evoke fear and elevate pulses.

At the word Psycho, the snippet that first enters the minds of both seasoned horror movie veterans and youths (thanks to endless parodies) alike is the infamous, curtain-tearing fear of the shower scene. In fact, the special effects used in this murder scene are sparse, with no sign of gore to terrify and disgust audiences. At this point, the fear is purely psychological, with the tension and horror being constructed principally on sound. As Marion, the victim, sits at a desk, tentative string chords sound, ebbing and flowing to <https://assignbuster.com/what-role-does-cinematic-music-play-in-creating-tension/>

create a sense of unease in the audience, or even perhaps suggest that something in the background is creeping.

Evidently, to maintain this suspense and prolong the climax, Hitchcock, the film's director, cannot cut to the murderer and consequently spoil the surprise, but music provides the pathway through which he can hint at a darker presence- one which is not right. The soft nature of these chords makes them almost imperceptible, which allows the unease to lurk in the background and- for the moment- be suppressed by the minds of the audience as they await a development. Marion's entry into the bathroom is met by an immediate drop in pitch, which serves to hint at the danger of her last action. Not a word has been spoken, and the actress cannot hear the music, so in a subtle alteration in tone, the audience knows the actress' fate before any significant visual clues are provided.

This leaves viewers an agonising wait as they anticipate the murder, with the ominous minor key of the music encouraging them to envisage the victim's death before it has actually happened. The sudden, discordant violin notes that screech with a high pitched relentlessness as the woman is attacked mimic the stabbing motions, rising in tempo to emphasise the frenzy of the struggle. Coupled with the screaming and the period of eerie silence preceding this famous ' noise', the tension builds to an unbearable crescendo before falling to a lower pitched echo as the mystery murderer leaves. The gasping texture of the strings orchestra playing perhaps replicates the dying breaths of Marion, fading out to the background monotony of a tap running to conclude three of the tensest minutes ever to have been screened in cinemas. The way in which music directly reflects the <https://assignbuster.com/what-role-does-cinematic-music-play-in-creating-tension/>

action unfolding on the screen is not characteristic only to Psycho, but the vast majority of films, ranging from Tom & Jerry to Casino Royale.

While also enhancing the viewer's experience, this music makes otherwise chaotic scenes comprehensive and easy to follow, instantly clarifying the 'good' and 'bad' forces in the plot. Of course, tension is not simply constrained to Certificate 18 horror films. In fact, delving into the realms of Parental Guidance will yield one of the most satisfying examples of tension: that which appears in Pixar's Monsters Inc. Set in a child's bedroom at night, the scene opens with the click of a light-switch, followed by a still shot of the child's toys.

The absence of music in the film, which has almost constant score throughout, suddenly becomes prominent; prompting listeners to strain their ears in search of sound, in the same way a frightened child would at night. Once again, anticipation is married perfectly with the music; it is not difficult to predict that this scene (bearing in mind the film's name) will be one of fright. As the camera pans over the dozing child, the reassuring long, drawn out notes of a horn sound to reflect steady breathing, putting both the audience and on-screen character at ease, although it should be noted that the progression that the horn undergoes is not in a major key, suggesting- as it did in Psycho- that the scene has a climax of tension in store. The soft notes are high and regular, which makes the sudden jarring of the camera towards an open door all the more shocking. A single low staccato note designed to scare the audience at this point stops the edgy legato, forming a complete contrast with the opening tune.

Such a leap to an 'innocently' open door is the first step up this scale of tension, and the camera apparently recovers, reflected by the lighter, more playful version of the initial long notes. However, the tension does not evaporate completely with this relief because although the apparent exact same tune as the opening is played again, hinting at a return to the boy's peaceful sleep, this tune is overarched by an even higher note above the melody that does not relent, making the lulling 'sleep music' slightly discordant and heavily unsettling. The tension at this point is punctuated by the sudden appearance of the classic two red eyes beneath the child's bed- a presence heralded by another abrupt and low staccato note. As the monster rears up onto its hind legs, this low note repeats, but this time, a slow, sustained arpeggio of higher notes is gradually constructed, giving a dissonant tone to the chord that grows in volume to signify that the suspense at this moment is paramount. Despite the fact that this scene resolves itself in a hilarious fashion, *Monsters Inc.* only succeeds in being so comic due to the preceding-build up of tension contributed mainly by the film's music.

While *Psycho* and *Monsters Inc.* demonstrate the use of similar tension-building techniques, the *American Psycho* 'Huey Lewis' scene has become notorious for its completely unconventional use of music. It would be possible to go so far as arguing that the manic tension that is conveyed by the background music shares the protagonist's distinguishing quality: it is clinically insane. In the same way as the Christian Bale, immaculately dressed and sporting a plastic poncho, holds an empty exuberance as he dances across the room wielding an axe that his friend cannot see, the

excessively bright pop music that plays in the 30 seconds preceding the victim's brutal death catches the audience completely unawares.

This scene is perhaps the 'rebel' of all suspense scenes as it stubbornly refuses to employ any of the aforementioned devices of reflecting how the characters act. The "pleasures of conformity and the importance of trend" that is coupled with the fact that Bale plays an axe-wielding lunatic causes a confused sense of dread amongst viewers as up until the moment of the murder, they are left questioning whether to take Bale seriously amidst the comically 'cheesy' music. It is perhaps important that the pop music chosen has a strong beat to it, as it becomes almost monotonous in the build-up, not accelerating to create tension as in *Monsters Inc.* but rather bewildering the audience as it awaits the moment of the killing. By the time the axe strikes, with liberal use of bloody effects, the Huey Lewis music becomes cruelly ironic and relentless, disturbing viewers in how the inevitable bloody murder is portrayed with a mixture of inappropriate humour and horror.

Tension in this case is built by music by forcing viewers to adopt the mind-set of a psychopath- a technique that is disturbingly effective as a result of its shocking uniqueness. The vitality of music in film is perhaps best expressed by observing how it is instrumental in creating tension and the most effective conclusion of this importance can be summarised by a simple experiment. In the references to this essay are the links to the 3 films that have formed the basis of the discussion. Watching the clips through with sound, as they should be seen, will almost certainly evoke some form of fearful psychological reaction from the viewer. However, what would happen is one was to watch the clips again on mute? Music can no longer perform its <https://assignbuster.com/what-role-does-cinematic-music-play-in-creating-tension/>

magic and Psycho becomes a low-budget clip of a woman writing, a plughole, and that woman being slain in an almost humorously unrealistic fashion by a man that suddenly appears.

Monsters Inc. devolves into a series of random shots of toys, a boy in bed, a sudden cut to an open door and a the abrupt appearance of a monster, with the comedy that follows completely marred by the fact that it has no preceding suspense to make light of. American Psycho: well, if this scene didn't include music, it would have fared slightly better than the others due to Christian Bale's admirable performance, but it would have degenerated into a calculated murder, rather than the impulsive display of insanity that it was meant to portray. Without the underlying threats, hints and unspoken explanations that cinematic music provides, these titans of the big screen would be nothing, relegated to the recesses of our memory for their laughable dullness.