

Silence as a creative tool in the films of Paul Thomas Anderson

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ABSTRACT

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This paper shows how the use of silence complements other diegetic sounds and music in crafting a successful film soundtrack. Through careful examination of selected works by director Paul Thomas Anderson and comparison of scholarly articles on silence in film, the paper draws attention to the myriad of creative possibilities offered by the use of silence. Although silence has been used as a creative tool in the past by directors like Bergman, Godard and Antonioni, a younger generation, led by auteurs such as Anderson has taken these sonic experiments a step further to reveal new and innovative ways of synthesizing music, silence, dialogue and muteness and through this approach create films that have such a profound impact on their viewers.

When contemplating the creative possibilities of sound within film as an artistic medium, film theorist Des O’Rawe states that silence “still tends to be a historical issue, rather than a theoretical one, invoked in relation to the birth and early life of the cinematograph rather than in terms of its range of expressive properties and possibilities within the sound film” (O’Rawe, 2009, p. 87). Many people still think of silence as a remnant from the era of silent film and as something rightfully left behind with the advent of synchronised sound. But this does a disservice to the myriad of creative opportunities presented by a considered use of silence within a film’s overall sound design and musical accompaniment. By examining the work of Paul Thomas Anderson and his collaborations with composer Johnny Greenwood on *Phantom Thread* and *There Will Be Blood*, this paper hopes to establish how exactly the use of silence complements sounds and music in crafting a successful film soundtrack.

In a film as musically rich and sonically captivating as *Phantom Thread*, it is easy to lose track of the moments and exchanges where there is no musical accompaniment. With a running time of just over two hours, the film includes almost ninety minutes of music. As a result, moments of silence are not necessarily easy to notice on a first-time viewing. But a closer look shows how these moments of silence shed a specific light on the character dynamics and dysfunctional relationship between the film’s protagonists, dress designer Reynolds Woodcock, and his muse and lover Alma Elson.

Initially, when Alma’s character is introduced as a waitress at a distinguished hotel, Reynolds is completely enthralled with her beauty. As they start going out to dinners, he is inspired to create many new dresses. These early scenes are accompanied by sweeping, lush orchestrations and meditative piano melodies, providing insight into Reynolds’ inspired state and his resulting prolific output of new clothes designs.

The first cracks in the facade of romantic bliss begin to appear roughly 38 minutes into the film, when Alma makes the mistake of buttering her toast too loudly at breakfast. The playful violin melodies, which accompanied the scene from the previous night out, are suddenly replaced by a deafening silence, interrupted only by the grating sound of the knife scraping across a piece of toast. To add insult to injury, Alma then reaches for more butter and repeats the same gesture. Then, the lid of the teapot makes a deafening racket as she pours herself a cup of tea. Reynolds, at this point visibly irritated, exc-

laims: “This is entirely too much movement at breakfast!!” before storming out of the room (Sellar, Ellison & Lupi, 2017, 00:38:57).

The absence of music here is essential, musical accompaniment being replaced by what film scholar Danijela Kulezic-Wilson describes as “cinematic silence... as layered and often as carefully designed as any film soundscape” (Kulezic-Wilson, 2009, p.2). In other words, the silence here is not just an absence of music, but rather a shift in focus to a soundscape of mundane, everyday sounds for which Reynolds has neither patience nor understanding. To communicate this, director Anderson raises the volume of the scraping and clattering to an exaggeratedly loud level, which, combined with the omission of musical accompaniment, clearly communicates Reynolds’ mental state. The sound of a knife scraping across a piece of toast is not something a designer of his stature should normally be bothered by, but the noise and commotion has nonetheless shattered the delicate equilibrium of his deep focus. The scene also effectively punctures the bubble of Reynolds’ initial experience of Alma as the perfect muse, because she has dared to disturb his deep focus needed for sketching new designs. At the same time, Alma’s seemingly mundane gestures, heightened to cinematic significance by the absence of music and the exaggerated volume of the accompanying sounds, give the viewer the sense that Alma is not someone who will allow herself to be pushed around. As such, cinematic silence here marks an important change in the protagonists’ relationship,

Another compelling use of silence occurs after Alma slips what appear to be poisonous mushrooms into Reynolds’ tea. After falling ill for a number of days, he begins to hallucinate and has a vision of his deceased mother standing in his bedroom in her wedding dress. He speaks to her with great emotion, saying he thinks about her constantly and hears her voice in his dreams. Yet, she doesn’t reply nor respond in any manner. For the duration of the sequence, she simply stands motionless and doesn’t utter a sound, leading Reynolds ultimately to exclaim: “I don’t understand what you’re saying. I can’t hear your voice” (Sellar et al., 2017, 1:29:37).

Again in this instance, director P.T. Anderson uses silence in an arresting and deeply significant manner. By choosing to have Reynolds’ mother be mute, Anderson taps into a motif Michel Chion describes as “The body without a voice... a source of both diegetic and pro-filmic ambiguity.” As Chion explains, “The mute in the sound film is both elusive and ubiquitous, both an

absence and a presence: 'to encounter the mute is to encounter questions of identity, origins and desire'" (O'Rawe, 2009, p.93; cf. Chion, M. & C. Gorbman, 1999; on diegetic and non-diegetic silence cf. Gorbman, 1987, p.18).

In the scene described above, the apparition of Reynolds' mother feels almost accusatory as a result of her silence. Its effect on Reynolds is excruciating: the viewer can see Reynolds getting more and more worked up. Her wedding dress, the very one he labored over for many months, seems to recall to him a purity and dedication dissipated by his gradual descent into womanizing and a hedonistic lifestyle. His mother's visitation is also humbling, in the sense that it reminds him that his remaining time to live is limited. As a result, it brings about a profound shift in how he views his relationship with Alma. Whereas before he viewed his liaisons as temporary and disposable, the encounter with his mother incites him to profess his love to Alma the next morning, and to declare he can't imagine his life without her. Anderson thus deploys the voiceless mother as a catalyst for change in Reynolds' and Alma's relationship. Here, again, the role of silence is central in crafting a substantial shift in the narrative's trajectory.

Silence also plays a critical role in the climactic dinner table scene just before the two-hour mark in the film. Reynolds and Alma are at his countryside cottage and she is preparing him a mushroom omelette. As he watches her in the kitchen, a look of realization comes across his face, and it dawns on him that it must have been Alma who caused him to become so ill by giving him poisonous mushrooms. Rather than confront her about it, though, he waits patiently for the omelette to be ready. Once she's served it to him, they sit across from each other in silence. He playfully raises the plate to smell the omelet and then very slowly cuts off a piece, all the while staring at Alma, almost daring her to say something. He suspects she's also poisoning him now, yet he's still prepared to eat the omelette.

In the sequence that follows, the audience witnesses a wordless power struggle. The absence of speech in this confrontation gives it a strange power, generating ambiguity and tension. We are filled with anticipation, and wait with baited breath for one or the other to give in. Perhaps we hope that Alma will warn Reynolds, thrust his fork away just before he takes the first bite. Or maybe we hope that he'll let on he knows what she's up to, and smash the plate against the wall in anger. But neither of those things happens. In fact, we see Reynolds submit willingly to Alma and take the poisonous bite, per-

haps realizing in that moment that he actually wants her to have power over him, and that he believes that surrender rather than control is the secret to making this strange relationship last.

Silence plays a slightly different role in Anderson's Upton Sinclair adaptation *There Will Be Blood*. In the early scenes, set in 1898, we encounter prospector Daniel Plainview struggling against the unforgiving elements of the New Mexico terrain as he digs down further and further in search of silver. (Later in the film we will find him in search of crude oil.) His descent into a mine shaft goes awry when a rung of his ladder snaps. He tumbles all the way down, breaking his leg in the process. After losing consciousness, Plainview awakes, with a sharp intake of breath and a barely audible yelp. In the ensuing scene, depicting his struggle to climb back out of the shaft with only one leg able to support his weight, it is eerily quiet. There is no musical accompaniment and the only sounds we hear are grunting, scraping and heavy breathing.

The cinematic silence surrounding Plainview in this scene is crucial in a storytelling sense, because it emphasizes the primal, life-and-death struggle between man and nature that is one of the core themes of this film. More so than any piece of music ever could, the silence here makes it clear that no one is coming to help Plainview. The scraping and grunting are the sounds of man's desperate struggle to tease and coax the precious ore from far beneath the earth's surface.

In later scenes, silence reappears as a harbinger of danger. Take for instance the scene just after the chapel for Eli's Church of the Third Revelation is being completed. As the scene cuts to Plainview's drilling platform, the sustained string textures are replaced by the naked sound of creaking wood, recurring gusts of wind, and the groaning of the oil pump moving up and down. As the camera tracks in, we see Plainview's son H.W. peering over the edge of a makeshift roof, studying the pump. The groaning sound grows louder and louder as the camera moves closer and the framing tightens toward the pump. This, combined with the visuals of the pump lowering to obscure H.W.'s face, creates an ominous guillotine-like effect.

Moments later, the pump snaps and collapses, resulting in a gas explosion which throws H.W. several meters. In the next shot, the camera shows him crumpled on the roof with all sound removed. The accident has rendered him deaf.

The groaning of the pump and the creaking wood of the platform is of the utmost significance here, because it gives a voice to nature in its struggle against man who would exploit her. The land will yield its precious oil, but it does so reluctantly and angrily. Plainview wants to tame and control nature, but ultimately, he cannot. The pump collapses and takes with it his son's hearing. The extraction of those tens of thousands of barrels of oil comes at a terrible price, robbing him of the ability to communicate with his son.

Anderson's omission of speech and music in this sequence is critical because it builds tension and expectation, while simultaneously, through the creaking and groaning sounds of the wooden pump, giving a voice to the land which Plainview is trying to subdue and exploit. The son's resulting deafness acts as a symbolic victory of nature against man, because unlike Plainview's temporary imprisonment in the mineshaft, the silence that now engulfs H.W. is permanent and irreversible.

Despite Plainview's growing material success through his pipeline deal with Union Oil, his well-being and mental health continue to decline. In the film's final scenes, set in 1927, we find him in an opulent and cavernous mansion. We see shots of empty rooms, a deserted private bowling alley, marble floors polished to a resplendent sheen - but none of the rooms are occupied. Finally, the camera discovers Plainview, hunched over in a large gold-encrusted chair, firing a revolver into a pile of furniture. Cinematic silence plays an important role here too, conveying Plainview's utter isolation and his descent into alcoholism. At the end of his journey, he has no family or loved ones to share his wealth with. His paranoia and suspicion of others had induced him to drive away all those around him.

Sitting on his golden throne, Plainview seems a broken man, his eyes drooping and his body frail. He fires his gun aimlessly, in order to shatter the suffocating silence that surrounds him, and to remind himself that he is master of his environment. But, just as with H.W., silence now envelopes him, too. The price of becoming an oil baron has been a terrible one. His own son wants nothing more to do with him, his brother turns out to be a con man who impersonates him, and even his most loyal associate Fletcher Hamilton is nowhere to be found. The silence of the huge mansion frightens Plainview, because it makes him feel as if he were living in a mausoleum. He had escaped death in a silver mine only to be locked into a granite and marble temple, where he's now slowly drowning in a never-ending stream of bourbon and

single malt.

P.T. Anderson exercises exquisite restraint in this sequence, once again deploying the unique power of silence as an aural tool. Rather than relying on the underscore to evoke a sense of dread, he allows it to develop organically from the contrast between Plainview's deafening gunshots and the empty, hollow stillness that follows. The cavernous, reverberant mansion and the footsteps echoing whenever someone walks through its corridors are more unsettling than any musical accompaniment would be, because they so effectively convey the simultaneous presence of extreme wealth and spiritual emptiness. Silence allows Anderson to show how, in the end, Plainview is only shouting into the void - firing his revolver to keep the cavernous walls from suffocating him with their stillness.

Whether it's the hollow promise of the American dream, the struggle of man against nature or the exploration of dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics, Paul Thomas Anderson has succeeded in harnessing the power of silence in his pursuit of cinematic truth. His unique incorporation of mute characters, diegetic sounds and voiceless conversations add an additional depth to his nuanced examinations of the human condition. In the era of the superhero blockbuster, blanketed as it is with larger-than-life orchestrations and walls of sound, Anderson intentionally chooses entire sequences without music, to let the natural and mechanical sounds within the diegetic space gradually build an immersive soundscape, in order to draw us further into his story worlds. When the music does eventually return, the effect is all the more potent because of the structured silence and tension that precedes it.

Some might argue that there is nothing new in this approach and that directors like Antonioni, Bergman and Godard had discovered and utilized the unique creative possibilities of silence decades before Anderson even made his first feature. But it is also true that many of the great auteurs of the post-war period wanted to make films that “encounter politics through aesthetics, that rejuvenate the dream of a cinema of genuine synthesis rather than one of antithesis...” In the encounter with their effort, one may easily agree that “what they are **for** matters more than what they are **against**” (O’Rawe, 2009, 95).

While Bergman, Godard and Antonioni may have laid the groundwork for incorporating the various sonic possibilities afforded by the use of silence, they would undoubtedly also have admitted to this not being a simple, finite

process. As film directors passionate about the intricacies of sound and silence, they would surely have seen Anderson as one of their own, and they would have welcomed the attempts of a new generation of directors to develop these sound explorations and experiments even further. Pushing boundaries and discovering new ways of synthesizing this delicate interplay of music and silence, of dialogue and muteness, is as important now as it was then. And as someone who has carried on and expanded their search, Anderson's work is a gift to all those who appreciate cinema.

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TIŠINA KAO KREATIVNI ALAT U FILMOVIMA PAULA THOMASA ANDERSONA

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SAŽETAK

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:
filmski zvuk, filmska
tišina, filmska teorija,
Paul Thomas Anderson,
oblikovanje zvuka

U ovom radu razmatra se uloga tišine u suvremenom filmu te pitanje kako njezino korištenje uz druge dijegetske zvukove i glazbu pridonosi stvaranju uspješnog filmskog glazbenog zapisa. Detaljnom analizom izabranih filmova Paula Thomasa Andersona, te uspoređivanjem sa spoznajama znanstvenih istraživanja o ulozi tišine u filmu, ovaj rad nastojat će prikazati mnoštvo izražajnih mogućnosti kojom tišina obogaćuje i upotpunjuje zvučno stvaralaštvo u filmskom mediju. Iako su već u prošlosti režiseri poput Bergmana, Godarda i Antonionija koristili tišinu kao stvaralački alat, mlađa generacija predvođena redateljima poput Andersona uspjela je pronaći originalne i inovativne načine kako sintetizirati glazbu, tišinu, dijalog i nijemost te tim pristupom ostvariti filmove koji kod gledatelja ostavljaju upečatljiv dojam.