
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47960/2303-7431.25.2021.58>

UDK: 781.22.036:791.44(430)

Review article

Received on March 31, 2021

Accepted on June 14, 2021

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THE INTERPLAY OF SILENCE, DIEGETIC SOUND AND MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

Abstract

Scholarly works on film sound are vastly outnumbered by works on film visual aspects. One reason for this discrepancy lies in the “hegemony of the visual”. Another may be the dominance of the visual in the cinema viewing experience, which results in our being naturally less attuned to how we are affected by the aural aspect. Nonetheless, the interaction of music, diegetic sound, and silence plays a vital role in achieving the director’s intention in creating a film and is crucial to establishing the bond between the film and its viewer. In his paper, the author shows, on the example of German contemporary film and TV series, that any analysis of film must examine the interaction of film music, dialogue, silence and diegetic sounds. The paper explores a specific approach to the sonic landscape in German film and TV series and raises questions to be pursued in further research on this topic.

Keywords: film sound; film theory; German cinema; sound design; diegetic sound

Introduction

When looking into scholarly articles on film sound, it quickly becomes clear how vastly they are outnumbered by articles investigating cinema's visual aspects. Film is, of course, a visually driven medium, with lavish budgets spent on exclusive locations, production design, set dressing and costumes. But there is also a further phenomenon responsible for this discrepancy, one that film scholar Elsie Walker describes as the "hegemony of the visual". In her seminal work *Understanding Soundtracks Through Film Theory*, Walker draws attention to this by addressing what she calls an "enduring visual bias within film scholarship." Walker notes how many of the foundational works which inspired her book "reveal a similar visual bias" which "all too often goes uncontested" (Walker, 2015: 3). In her analysis of Murray Pomerance's *The Eyes Have It*, Walker sees a more systemic problem at work. Scholars, namely, dedicate a lot of attention to cinema's visual characteristics. As a result, sound too often takes a back seat.

Perhaps at some level this is also a result of the cinema viewing experience, where the screen is certainly the most dominant and by far the largest element in the theatre. The intricate array of speakers, on the other hand, is positioned much more discreetly. Because of this, we are less naturally attuned to how we as viewers are being affected by a film in an aural sense.

Film reviews in print and online rarely mention a film soundtrack, unless it is to remark on its jarring and unusual characteristics. This is the case, for example, for Johnny Greenwood's score which accompanies P.T. Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. Yet, a pretty substantial portion of any film budget is dedicated to music and sound. Recording sessions with prestigious orchestras such as the LA Symphony Orchestra often easily run into six-figure budgets. Sound designers and foley artists spend countless hours replacing dialogue and re-creating diegetic sounds to craft a pristine and immersive sonic landscape. In light of these circumstances, the question that emerges is why, until recently,

there has been such a discrepancy between how film creators as opposed to film scholars view film sound?

One such reason is certainly that the effects of the film music and diegetic sound are complex. They often affect the viewer at a more visceral level, and the intricate ways in which different sonic layers such as diegetic and non-diegetic sound, music and silence interact with each other, are not always easy to parse. Film scholar Claudia Gorbman writes:

Music in film mediates. Its nonverbal and non-denotative status allows it to cross all varieties of 'borders': between levels of narration (diegetic / non-diegetic), between narrating agencies (objective/ subjective narrators), between viewing time and psychological time, between points in diegetic space and time (as narrative transition). (Gorbman, 1987: 30)

In other words, aural components of a film and especially music have a unique ability to move freely between narrative layers. In addition, they easily transcend temporal boundaries. That is, first of all, they affect how we as viewers perceive the passage of time at a story level. At the same time, they give us cues as to whether a scene is being narrated from a neutral perspective or instead from a highly subjective point of view belonging to one of the film characters. Gorbman's statement also speaks to the inherent complexity of how a film music, and by extension aural components as a whole, function in affecting the filmgoer's viewing experience. Not only does the music move freely between narrative layers, but also simultaneously interacts with the dialogue, silence and all other diegetic sounds that populate any given scene.

1. The enhancement of our experience of a film through the presence of film music

How then, does film music enhance our experience of a film? Some points emerge which lend themselves to a general overview:

a) First of all, *film music lowers our defenses*.

In other words, film music makes us untroublesome viewers and makes us open to being immersed in the story world of a film.

- b) Second, the presence of music that the film characters do not hear, but the viewer does *helps create the illusion that the viewing experience is one's own*.

In other words, music heard only by me, the viewer, creates the illusion that this is my story, unrolling for me on screen.

- c) Third, music *lessens our awareness* of the artificial, rectangular frame through which we experience a film, liberating the viewer from the constraints of mundane reality.
- d) Furthermore, music helps *mask contradictions*, lessens temporal and spatial discontinuity through providing melodic and harmonic continuity.
- e) Another important use of music in the aural landscape of film is the *leitmotif*, a melody or theme that is associated with a specific character or important moment in the narrative.

Once the audience has connected the musical theme with the event, a later re-appearance of the theme on its own with no visual cue is enough to evoke a strong emotional response in the audience, leading them to think back to its earlier appearance. As such it acts as a powerful yet subtle creative tool for the director to utilize.

The role of music is complemented by that of diegetic sound and silence.

2. Purpose of a film soundtrack: Helping the director realize their intentions at the story level

At its most basic level, a film soundtrack and music cues help to establish a film time period, its genre and the overall tone. Film music has to manage a delicate balancing act. It has to complement and enhance the emotion of a scene without being too catchy and drawing the audience's attention away from the narrative. It is important when considering the interplay of silence, diegetic sound and music to look deeper at some of the more subtle creative possibilities that occur through the

juxtaposition of music with other diegetic sounds such as dialogue, voice-overs, and silence and what the consequences of these interactions are.

In considering the influence of silence and diegetic sound on the film soundtrack several questions arise. First, we need to ask ourselves how the interaction of silence, dialogue and music affects the viewer and in what way this heightens impact of a film on its audience. Next, we need to consider how it is possible for music to move so freely between narrative layers and be effective at both a diegetic and non-diegetic level of the story. Of further interest is specifically the question of how the themes explored in contemporary German cinema relate to sound and how the German approach to film sound differs from US and UK productions.

In trying to understand this constellation of sonic elements, it can be helpful to look at some specific examples from a few selected films. Recent German films and series, in particular, tend to have a strong emphasis on aural components, both in terms of the themes that are explored and in the technical execution of the projects.

Take for instance Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006), in which one of the central themes revolves around audio surveillance. Stasi officer and protagonist Gerd Wiesler is tasked with observing and listening to playwright Georg Dreyman in an effort to expose his supposed dissident activities. The film often uses tape machines, headphones and microphones as on-screen props to emphasize the importance of the act of listening. In addition, we learn a lot about the protagonist's transformation from observing how he listens to his targets. When he interacts with people face to face there is a clinical and unnerving lack of emotion. When he is alone, however, and listening to his targets, we see him let down his guard and experience a plethora of emotions. Part of why the film stays so compelling throughout is this stark contrast between the public agent Wiesler and the private listener Wiesler. In brief, unguarded moments when he is eavesdropping while he is alone we see a rich inner life, a sense of compassion for the suffering of his targets and ultimately the spark that sets him on a path diametrically opposed to the directives of his superiors.

Director von Donnersmarck plays deftly with these different aural layers. He has the audience listen to Wiesler as he in turn listens to Dreyman playing the „Sonata Vom Guten Menschen“. These different layers of listening create a really unique relationship between the audience and the characters on screen. In some ways, Wiesler becomes part of the audience, and by extension we as the audience also grow complicit in this intrusive act of surveillance. Perhaps here, Donnersmarck tries to imply that there is a Wiesler in each of us, that a small push is all it takes to go from civilian to ruthless interrogator. Or maybe his point is that in each Wiesler there is a person with good intentions led astray. Either way, the ambiguity of this constellation is what makes for such a rich, layered viewing experience. Although we experience excerpts of the piano performance directly in the room with Dreyman, the most powerful parts of the scene occur when we see Wiesler reacting to all of it; because only he knows how much of a role he has played in wreaking havoc on Dreyman's personal and professional life.

In Wiesler's unguarded, visceral reaction we see decades of ruthlessness crash against this moment of sonic truth, the music perfectly encapsulating the tragedy of the moment, the destruction of Dreyman's and Sieland's life over a minister's envy and on a larger scale the desperate sadness of a country that only continues to function by crushing its citizens' will to live.

In general, one can say that the themes commonly explored in German cinema have a strong aural component. One example of this was the audio surveillance- and the relationship between the listener and the target in *The Lives of Others* discussed above. Another case is the television series *Babylon, Berlin*, where the protagonist Gereon Rath undergoes hypnosis treatment to help with his shell shock and World War I PTSD. Gradually, Rath becomes more and more consumed with the voice of his therapist and the visions and sounds he experiences during these sessions.

The very first scene of the series reveals a lot about the nuances of the German approach to film sound. Series creator Tom Tykwer masterfully draws the audience into an eerie hypnotic seance in which things

and people move backwards. Gereon gulps for air, screams in a tunnel, but no sounds come out. A vivid dance scene in a nightclub plays out entirely mute, the fast-paced, dynamic visuals accompanied only by the jarringly calm voice of the therapist inviting both Gereon and the viewer to “go back to the source of your fear.”

By withholding sound and dialogue at the diegetic level, and pairing it with the eerie voice-over from outside the scene, the viewer, much like Gereon, becomes trapped in a dream state, and the slow crescendo of the scratchy, droning musical textures of the score makes the tension almost unbearable. Tykwer’s masterful use of all these different sonic techniques makes the series stand out immediately and provides a window into why it is precisely the interaction between silence and diegetic sound as well as music that is so central to the contemporary German approach to cinema.

These examples from Tykwer’s and von Donnersmarck’s work give just a small taste of the ways in which contemporary German cinema has carved out its own niche when it comes to sound design and the crafting of soundtracks. By withholding sound and creatively using muteness, by redefining the sonic relationship between viewer and on-screen characters, and through a sparing deployment of musical elements, these filmmakers create a unique aesthetic that feels markedly different from the tentpole, blockbuster approach of mainstream American cinema.

Even more impressively, these directors manage to be avant-garde without seeming aloof, always grounding their sonic landscapes in a visceral authenticity that feels refreshingly free of artifice. Their films and series work so well in terms of sound because they manage to provide both the grandeur and escapism that the casual viewer demands while at the same time weaving in additional sonic layers that interact in ways that are subtle and not always immediately apparent. By doing so they endow the source material with an added sense of ambiguity and mystery that begs for a second viewing, as even the most discerning viewer cannot help but be amazed by the craftsmanship of these trail-blazing auteurs.

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