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The Sound of Suspense: an analysis of music in Alfred Hitchcock films

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ABSTRACT

Music plays a very important role in cinema. In many films by acclaimed director, Alfred Hitchcock, the soundtrack is as important as the film itself. Often called the “Master of Suspense,” Hitchcock is also known for creating scenes that keep the audience at the edge of their seats. This project investigated the specific musical techniques used to evoke a feeling of suspense in films by Alfred Hitchcock. Six films which represent a 30-year span of Hitchcock’s career were used in the analysis. Scenes that contained moments of suspense were identified and the music for each of these scenes was analyzed (N=13). The analysis indicates that silence was used most often during moments of suspense in Alfred Hitchcock films. Silence was represented in various forms: abrupt silence within a musical sound track, total lack of musical soundtrack, and complete silence. Findings support Weis’ (1982) argument for the importance of silence as both a formal and thematic element throughout Hitchcock’s films. Results also suggest that silence is effective in creating a feeling of suspense.

Keywords

Music and Emotion, Music and Film

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Music is often used in film to help set the “mood” and to intensify the viewer’s emotional response to the film. Although many people may associate certain musical effects with certain feelings and emotions, researcher Robert Walker contends that these associations are learned through cultural memes, or beliefs that have evolved in a culture and have been passed down through generations (2004). Although these associations may not be innate, research has shown that certain parts of the brain may be responsible for associating certain types of music with certain emotions. Gosselin et al. found that the anteromedial temporal lobe may have a part in recognizing fear or danger in a musical context.

Film music may not only assist in eliciting an emotional response in the listener, but can affect viewer’s judgment about the visual contents of a film. In a study by Bolivar, Cohen, and Fentress (1994), subjects viewed clips of wolves where the wolves’ behavior had been prejudged as either friendly or aggressive. The clips were accompanied by semantically congruent music (e.g. aggressive audio/ aggressive video) or semantically incongruent music (e.g. aggressive audio/ friendly video). Results showed that subjects rated aggressive video more aggressive and friendly video more friendly with the presence of congruent music than with the presence of incongruent music. In other words, music influenced viewers’ perceptions of the video clips. A study by Bullerjahn and Guldenring (1994) also showed that music moves any ambiguous content of film toward the character of the music and influences viewers’ understanding of the plot.

Recent research provides insight into how music and film are encoded into memory. Boltz (2004) contends that when a film implements mood-congruent music, or music that sets a mood that matches the mood of the film, both the film and the music are jointly encoded into memory. As

part of Boltz's study, subjects who watched films with mood-congruent soundtracks could remember scenes in the film when given only music cues, and could remember the film music when presented with film scenes as cues. Perhaps these findings help provide an explanation of why the music is just as memorable as the film sequence in many movie scenes. Possibly one of the most famous examples of this is the shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 'Psycho'. It seems that few people recall Janet Leigh's character, Marion Crane, being stabbed in the shower without also remembering the violin screeches that provide the soundtrack.

In most of Hitchcock's films the soundtrack is as important as the film itself. The music in his various films is often described as having the "Hitchcock sound," despite the fact that he used many different composers over the course of his career. Jack Sullivan (2000) claims that the beginnings of this sound are evident in the movie "Rebecca" which had a score composed by Franz Waxman. Although Hitchcock's movies are known for having a characteristic sound, different compositional techniques were used from film to film. 'Rear Window,' for instance, was one of the first movies to incorporate pop music in the soundtrack (Sullivan, 2004). In that movie, background sound effects (i.e. street noise) as well as background music from radios were all part of the film's musical score. Despite this eclectic soundtrack, 'Rear Window' still conveys the "Hitchcock sound".

One of Hitchcock's most famous musical collaborators was composer Bernard Herrmann, with whom Hitchcock worked on 9 different films. Alex Ross (1996) writes:

In Herrmann, Hitchcock found a composer whose music would blend into the action with the same uncanny directness, but now on a different level. Herrmann would address the unconscious regions, summon atmosphere and dread. Music would play its own starring role: at times it would take over the action. (p. H17).

When Hitchcock found Herrmann, he was tired of illustrative film scores that were often very busy with music playing throughout most of the film. Ross states, "Hitchcock was not deaf to music; he simply wanted to make its use more pointed" (p. H17). Herrmann was especially good at implementing sudden loud sounds and

abrupt endings which had a powerful effect on the viewer. The shower scene from 'Psycho' is an excellent example of this technique (Biancorosso, 2001).

Although music may come to the forefront many times in Hitchcock's films, he often "makes its use more pointed" by using no music at all. In her book, *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Soundtrack* (1982), Elisabeth Weis writes about the use of silence in Hitchcock's films as both formal and thematic elements. The silence may be in the form of complete silence, lack of music, or lack of dialogue. Often silence in Hitchcock films is associated with control, whether it is a character's issues with control, or Hitchcock's own control over a scene. Weis states, "Nowhere is his association between silence and control clearer than in his montage sequences, his moments of greatest suspense and audience manipulation. Like a murderer, Hitchcock seems to think that these are most effective when done silently" (p.148).

METHOD

Horror/suspense films by director Alfred Hitchcock were analyzed for this experiment. Six Alfred Hitchcock films (Table 1) were chosen which represented a 30-year span of his career. Moments of suspense in each film were identified by the researcher. A moment of suspense was defined as a moment where the viewer is led to believe that action will occur during the scene. However, a suspenseful moment does not necessarily have to result in any action taking place. Scenes that built a feeling of suspense by foreshadowing events in future scenes were not considered moments of suspense. Any music that occurred during moments of suspense was analyzed according to the following categories: tempo, note speed, dynamics, sonority, note direction, instrumentation, and register. These categories were compared between movies in order to identify any common trends within the music.

Table 1. Films used for analysis

Film	Year	Composer
Rebecca	1940	Franz Waxman
The Man Who Knew Too Much	1953	Bernard Herrmann
Psycho	1960	Bernard Herrmann
The Birds	1963	Remi Gassman & Oskar Sala, Bernard Herrmann—consultant
Marnie	1964	Bernard Herrmann
Frenzy	1972	Ron Goodwin

^a Gassman and Oskar Sala were credited for electronic sound and composition for 'The Birds'

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RESULTS

Eleven moments of suspense were identified in the films. Of those eleven moments, six featured no music at all. Those scenes were from the films 'Psycho', 'The Birds', 'Marnie' and 'Frenzy'. In some of the suspenseful scenes where music was used, short moments of silence or sudden decreases in volume were apparent ('The Man Who Knew Too Much', 'Rebecca'). In each film that was analyzed, silence was used to some extent in at least one suspenseful moment. Among all the suspenseful moments from all of the films, silence occurred most often. The complete analysis appears in the appendix.

DISCUSSION

The results support Weis' argument concerning the importance of silence in Alfred Hitchcock films. Silence especially seemed to take on a more important role in the films that Hitchcock directed in the mid- 1950's and later. The 1940 film 'Rebecca' features a very busy soundtrack which is very common to films during its time period. In the opening scene, the audience is led to believe that a man is about to jump off of a cliff, and as he moves the edge, the music gets louder and higher. Then, as the man reaches the very edge of the cliff, the music suddenly drops to a very soft string tremolo without resolution. Although music is present at all times throughout the scene, the sudden dynamic change before the action may be early evidence of the use of quiet to build suspense in a Hitchcock film.

The use of silence is also apparent, despite the presence of music, in the Albert Hall scene in 'The Man Who Knew Too Much.' In this scene, an ambassador attending a concert at Albert Hall (where Bernard Herrmann makes an appearance conducting his own piece) is going to be shot during a loud cymbal crash at the climax of the piece being performed. Jimmy Stewart's and Dorris Day's characters know of the plot and are trying to stop it. As Jimmy Stewart frantically tries to find the assassin, the music builds in intensity. Brass, chorus, and organ are added one by one and the music increases in volume. The register of the orchestra also increases as it plays a series of sequences, with each sequence starting on a higher pitch than the previous sequence. A type of silence is demonstrated in this scene as all dialogue and other background sounds are masked by the orchestra. As the intensity of the music builds, there is a sudden pause followed by a chord which is then followed by a longer pause that precedes the fatal cymbal crash (the assassination is actually foiled by a well-placed scream by Doris Day). This sudden silence placed right before the climax of the action demonstrates how Hitchcock could use silence even within a musical setting to build suspense.

The findings of this analysis indicate that silence is an effective tool for creating a feeling of suspense in a viewer. However, it is unclear why silence works in such a way.

Perhaps descriptive music in films provides the audience clues which help them predict certain outcomes, but silence represents the unknown which is actually more frightening. Other explanations might also be found in nature. The phrase 'calm before the storm' is often used to describe silence that precedes some sort of natural disaster. Perhaps humans have an inclination to associate silence with future bad events. Walker contends that emotional associations with music are cultural; therefore future research could possibly explore emotional effects of silence in other cultures.

CONCLUSION

Analysis indicates that, most often, no music at all or silence is used during moments of suspense in Alfred Hitchcock films which suggests that silence may be more effective than other compositional techniques in creating a feeling of suspense.

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APPENDIX

Analysis of Music in Moments of Suspense

Film/Scene	Tempo	Note Speed	Dynamics	Sonority	Note direction	Instrumentation	Register	Comments
Rebecca (1940)- Opening Scene	Med-fast	Sustained brass, fast notes/ arpeggiation in strings, harp	Loud – crescendo	Minor/ diminished	Upward, by sequence	Strings, brass, harp	Upper register	Music builds to sudden Sub. Piano with a tremolo in the strings
Rebecca – Staircase scene	Slow	Slow melody with underlying tremolo	Loud crescendo	Minor/ dissonant	Upward	Strings, harp, woodwinds, tam tam, electronic instruments	Upper register	Electronic instruments used heavily for effect, tremolo used extensively
The Man Who Knew Too Much, (1956)- Albert Hall Scene	Slow to fast	Med-fast	Loud- crescendo	Minor	Upward, by sequence	Strings, woodwinds, brass, chorus, percussion (full orchestra)	Upper register	Music builds through increased speed and volume- instrumentation is layered in. Silence right before the 'event'
The Man Who Knew Too Much- Embassy Scene	Med-slow	Med-slow	Loud	Major	Alternating	Piano, alto voice	Middle register	Doris Day singing 'Que Sera Sera' - example of ironic application of music
Psycho (1960) Shower scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Psycho Car sinking scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

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Film/Scene	Tempo	Note Speed	Dynamics	Sonority	Note direction	Instrumentation	Register	Comments
Psycho Basement scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
The Birds (1963) School Scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
The Birds Walking to the Door opening scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Marnie (1964) Stealing scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Marnie Attempted suicide scene	Med-fast	Med-fast	Loud- crescendo	Minor	Upward by sequence	Full orchestra – strings, woodwinds, brass	Upper register	No silence used in scene
Frenzy (1972) Walking out of the pub	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Frenzy Potato truck scene	None	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----