

Glossary

Asynchronous sound: That which does not match the image. It might be dubbed dialogue that doesn't match the on-screen lip movements; a dog might miaow. Alternatively, synchronous sound is that which is heard at the same time that it is produced in the diegesis, for example dialogue or gun shots. Synchronised sound can be on-screen or off and is in time with the image.

So far we've looked at how film images are edited to create a filmic space, whether coherent or not. However, although we often take it for granted, sound is one of the most important parts of film's overall aesthetic design. Sound, just as much as anything visual, can create convincing realist spaces, or distort and subvert realism.

Sound and space

Sound can give an audience the illusion of a 360° world. Often, film sound can seem spatialised and directed, so the audience might hear dialogue perfectly, even if characters are speaking in a noisy environment like a nightclub or a crowded restaurant. The dialogue might also be louder or quieter depending on how close the characters are to the camera. Sound would be prioritised due to the narrative's requirements. Therefore, sound has perspective, just as vision does.

Sound can roughly be broken down into two categories: diegetic and non-diegetic.

Diegetic (or actual) sound refers to any sound emanating from the fictional world (the diegesis) within the film, including:

- character's voices
- sound effects, both on- and off-screen
- music that can be identified as coming from a diegetic source such as jukeboxes, instruments and so on.

Non-diegetic (or commentary) sound refers to anything that does not emanate from the fictional world, including:

- voice-over narration
- dramatic or imagined sound effects
- a musical score or soundtrack.

This is not to be confused with live or post-production sound. Diegetic sound can, and usually is, added in post-production. Some cinemas have traditionally worked entirely with post-synchronised sound, especially in Italy and Hong Kong.

Sound quality

In *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979) David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson identify a series of qualities that film sound exhibits:

- Acoustic properties:
 - loudness
 - pitch
 - timbre
- Dimensions of sound:
 - rhythm
 - fidelity
 - space
 - time

All film sounds will exhibit these seven qualities. In *Ringu* (dir: Hideo Nakata 1998), the sound of the cursed videotape is manipulated for pitch and timbre to sound metallic, scratchy and to affect the audience physically. Other films, such as David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), play with the fidelity of sound – its time and space. This helps the audience question the sounds used and to explore the lack of reality in the relationship between film and its soundtrack.

Recommended reading

Sound Practice, Sound Theory (1992) is a collection of essays edited by Rick Altman that looks at the technique, theory and history of film sound. Each essay discusses a different aspect or type of film sound, from the sound of cartoons to the recording of women's voices.

Tip

Asynchronous sound is often exploited for artistic or comic effect, as in *Singin' in the Rain* (dir: Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly 1952) when an early sound film goes out of synch. This technique usually reminds the audience that they are watching a film.

EXERCISE

Listening to the soundtrack

Try watching a sequence from one of your favourite films with your eyes closed. Listen to the soundtrack closely. How do you get a sense of space just from listening to the soundtrack? Now watch with your eyes open. How does the soundtrack relate to the images? Does the sequence use any non-diegetic or **asynchronous sound**?

Tip

Sound perspective is the apparent direction of sound reverberating in space. Perspective can be suggested by manipulating volume, echo and the balance in relation to other sounds in the diegesis.

Recommended viewing

Watch the first half or so of *Wall-E* (dir: Andrew Stanton 2008) and listen to the ways in which sound is used to tell the story. There is no dialogue, so the narrative needs to be driven in other ways. Try to hear how the acoustic properties and dimensions of sound are manipulated.

Multi-layered sound

Robert Altman developed a very distinctive and realist way of using sound. Altman often directed films with big ensemble casts, from *MASH* (1970) to *Gosford Park* (2001). He recorded sound with radio microphones attached to individual actors. Therefore when we watch one of his films, sound is often cluttered with dialogue from multiple characters (although it was often manipulated). At times, however, we might see characters on-screen, but be listening to dialogue from off-screen. The overall effect was a constant 360° space filled with characters and activity that doesn't stop just because it isn't necessary for the narrative or is off-screen.

EXERCISE

Creating a sequence

Many film-makers consider film to be an editor's art. Film comes alive in editing. Try to think about how shots fit together and how cinema isn't just about the things that we can see.

Now, using all of the knowledge of film aesthetics from the previous two chapters, take a piece of text, a stage play or short story, and create a cinematic sequence. Try to pay attention to how you will tell the story, which shots will work best, how the sequence will cut together and how it will sound. Think about what you are trying to achieve overall: realism? non-realism? expressionism? emotion?