



THINKING FILM
thinking FILM
FILM LANGUAGE

SOUND

When we experience a film, we talk about *watching* it; our primary engagement with a film text is on a visual level. But a film's sound or audio track has a profound effect on how it communicates meaning to an audience and creates the filmic world. It creates mood and atmosphere, aids our interpretation of characters and action, and links together sequences and moments.

Before we look at how sound works in a film let's consider the following idea. We can only look in front of us, not behind. But we hear in 360 degrees. So although we can't see what's happening behind us, we can hear it.

ACTIVITY

Take a minute to listen where you are now or when you are walking down the street later. What can you hear but cannot see? Can you identify every sound? What sounds particularly draw your attention?

SOUND QUALITY

How might we describe the qualities of these sounds? In a film all we can see is what is on the cinema screen, contained within the frame. However, as in life, films allow us to hear things (noises, people talking etc.) that do not appear on the screen. These sounds are as deliberately placed in the film as any of the images.

Think about a conversation in a film between two people. At times the image will cut from one person to another. We might hear someone speak but not be able to see them. However, in the world of the film we know that they are there. If we hear a dog bark in a film it is the dog that is outside the frame, not the barking!

SOUND EFFECTS

There are so many different audio elements in a film sequence that it is easier to group them into certain 'types'. A very simple way to identify and divide the different sounds is as follows:

- Dialogue – all the words and vocal expressions of the actors
- Music – the music soundtrack that may be in parts or all of the sequence
- Effects – other sounds such as footsteps, gunfire, cars, for example



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Music helps to create the mood of a piece. It can also influence the rhythm of the editing for that sequence. For example, if the music is romantic the editor might cut very slowly from one scene to another, leaving individual shots on screen for a longer amount of time compared to editing an action sequence where the editor might cut from one shot to another fairly rapidly. Is the sequence cut on the beat of the music, or off the beat of the music? What difference does this make? Does any background music create a tone or mood to the sequence?

Sound effects help create a sense of the ‘reality’ of what is happening – we see a door opening and expect to hear it open as well.

ON AND OFF SCREEN

We also need to consider how these different types of sound relate to what we see on the screen. We can broadly separate sounds in film into two reasonably distinct areas: **diegetic sound** and **non-diegetic sound**.

Diegetic sound refers to sounds which exist ‘within the world of the film’; if we were a character in the film, or if we were transported into the action taking place onscreen, diegetic sound is what we would still be able to hear. The most basic expectation would be that we could hear characters talking (**dialogue**), and all the wider noises made by objects, processes and forces in the world around us (**sound effects**).

Non-diegetic sound refers to sounds which no character or spectator ‘inside’ the film can hear. These sounds have been added to create a reaction in the audience or give them information. Most audience expects to hear **music** overlaying action to prompt our expectations and emotions. We might also be given access to a characters’ thoughts in a **voiceover** that no one in the film can hear, or hear certain **sound effects** even though there are no objects or processes causing them in the action.

ENHANCING SOUND

Filmmakers and their sound team will often enhance the sounds that we hear on a soundtrack. When filming is taking place then the sound team will mainly concentrate on recording the dialogue. The sounds of what is occurring around the action will probably be added later. Not just added, they will be created. And the levels at which we hear different sounds will be carefully balanced so that the most important events that we see happening at any one moment are given sounds which enhance the telling of the story and the mood of the scene.