

Sound in Filmmaking

“Sound” refers to everything we hear in a movie — words, sound effects, and music. Sound is used in film to heighten a mood, provide us with information about the location of a scene, advance the plot, and tell us about the characters in the story.

There are two categories of sound in film: **Diegetic** and **Non-Diegetic**. Diegetic Sound refers to all those audio elements that come from sources inside the world we see on the screen, including dialogue, doors slamming, footsteps, etc. Non-Diegetic Sound refers to all those audio elements that come from outside of the fictional world we see on screen, including the musical score and sound effects like the screeches in the shower scene in *Psycho*.

How do Sound Effects help to Shape a Film?

Sound effects can be used to add mood or atmosphere to a film by creating a soundscape that accents or adds another layer of meaning to the images on the screen. Pitch, tempo, and volume may be altered to indicate how the filmmaker expects the audience to respond to a given noise. For instance, high-pitched sounds, including screams or squealing tires, help to create a sense of anxiety, while low-pitched sounds, including the sounds of waves or the swinging of a door, can be used to create a sense of calm or mystery.

Perhaps the most interesting use of sound in a movie is the very absence of it: silence. At key points in a film, directors may use silence in much the same way that they would use a freeze frame. Both tend to arrest the audience’s attention to highlight some action or change in story direction. Silence can be used to build up a scene’s intensity or to foreshadow impending doom.

In recent years, special sound effects have been added to movies in order to heighten the film experience. Many of these sound effects, including explosions, phaser blasts, wind, and animal sounds are drawn from computer sound effects libraries and are added to a film after the movie has been shot. Besides creating louder and more dramatic movies, these effects have tended to draw more attention to movie sound. With advancements in surround sound, sound effects have developed a more “directional” element, appearing to come from a specific place or direction. This directional quality of sound (alongside elements such as echoes) enhances a three-dimensional sense of space in the movie.

How Does Music Help to Shape a Film?

If we step back and think about it, music is one of the most peculiar conventions in movies. No one questions that music should be a part of movies because we've all grown used to the idea that, in a movie, when two people kiss, we should hear music in the background. Or when the platoon attacks the beach, a symphony should provide the inspiration behind their assault. Of course, no one has a soundtrack accompanying their real lives. But in movies we not only accept this convention, we demand it.

Music can be used for a number of effects in a movie. The most obvious way music scores are used is to guide the emotional response of the audience. They provide clues, or, in most cases, huge signposts, that tell audiences how the filmmaker wants them to react to a given scene.

Some directors play against our expectations and use music in ways we might not expect. Stanley Kubrick shocked audiences when he used "Singin' in the Rain" as the backdrop to a horrible rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

Music can also provide an overture for a movie when it's used as the backdrop for the opening credits. The brassy theme music composed by John Williams for *Star Wars* is one famous and often-parodied example.

In some instances, directors use music to foreshadow upcoming events. In horror movies, for example, the score is often used to build up tension and suspense just before the monster attacks one of its victims.

Finally, music can be used to shape the ethnic or cultural context of a film.

How Does the Spoken Word Help to Shape a Film?

In addition to giving voice to the characters in a movie, two of the more interesting ways the spoken word can shape a movie are through voice-overs and by providing subtext to a scene.

Voice-overs are typically used in documentary films, although they occasionally turn up in fiction films such as the original *Blade Runner* (1982), to provide background to a story or to help move a story from one set of events to another.

Used well, voice-overs can be unobtrusive. Used poorly, voice-overs can often seem like “the voice of god”, bringing forth wisdom audiences are supposed to accept unquestioningly. For this reason, some filmmakers refuse to use voice-overs in their films to let audiences have more freedom in determining what the meaning of the film is.

We all know from our own personal conversations that there is often a subtext to the words we hear. Subtext means there is an implicit meaning standing behind the language we actually hear. In film, actors use this element of language to shape a scene without actually saying what they mean.

Similarly, some actors are known for their distinctive voices which have helped define the characters they play. Marilyn Monroe is remembered for her high-pitched breathy voice, which gave a slightly ditzy feel to many of her characters, while John Malkovich has a distant, aloof, and direct manner of speech which helps to give a sinister edge to many of his best on-screen performances.