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The Affect of Music in Television and Film

In film and television, music and sound have a very important role in how the audience interprets the narrative and how they emotionally react to it. Sound has the ability to actively shape how we perceive the image, it can direct our attention to certain aspects and make us wait in anticipation while it creates expectations. This essay will focus on the psychological effect of film and television music. This essay will be using examples from the Netflix animated adult comedy show *BoJack Horseman* to explore various different ways in which music may be used to affect the audience. *BoJack Horseman* was selected as a case study because of its many sudden shifts in tone from comedy to tragic drama and back again. Because of this, it needs to utilise music to strengthen these shifts in tone and make them effective.

The show has a short run time of a little above twenty minutes, therefore, it has to be concise. In some regards, the show is a stripped down version of cinema. Visually the show, as a cartoon, has no unnecessary detail. The show has a long average shot length, with many scenes running uninterrupted with few cuts. Often entire scenes are shown from a single camera angle.

BoJack Horseman uses subtle sound design and has a fairly simplified score. The show does not contain an orchestral score, and instead uses small simple musical cues, leaving large sections of the show without music. This essay will have a focus on the use of subtle music that plays against dialogue or images without being a focal point, as I feel that study on this subject has been overlooked.

It is interesting to consider the historical reasons in which we first put music to film. In the silent era, live music accompanied the picture for a number of reasons. The first reason was practical, the sound of early projectors were very loud and the use of music helped mask this. Another reason was cultural, as films drew on the traditions of opera and live theatre, which accompanied a story with live music. Once music was seen accompanying film, people immediately saw the aesthetic advantages. Music gave rhythm to editing, made up for the lack of speech, and normalised the experience to early viewers, who might have been initially disconcerted by the dead images. It could also be seen that with music people kept interest for much longer. It soon became apparent that the music was highly important for the various interpretations of sequences, therefore different showings of the same film could yield wildly different emotional responses. To fight this scores began to be written for live performance, however, this did not become very

popular because not too long after sound cinema arrived. The first film with synchronised sound was *The Jazz Singer* (1927) After *The Jazz Singer* a few films attempted to remove music from films, believing that with dialogue it would no longer be necessary. This did not last long. Music is extremely important in ways in which the audience interprets the emotions of cinema.

There are three forms of sound in a film. First, there is dialogue. dialogue is not always recorded with the picture and can be heavily edited during post-production. When dialogue is recorded in post it is called Audio Dialog Replacement or ADR.

Second, there is sound design and foley. This is the sound effects and ambience of the film. Sound played at various levels of amplitude (volume) have strikingly different results in their effectiveness in conveying meaning or emotion to the audience. (Tan, Spackman, & Wakefield. pp.518) This does not just relate to overall amplitude but also amplitude in relation to other parts. Therefore if the sound effects overpower the music, it is likely that the music will cease to be effective. Exterior sound is also important, for example, if the show is watched near a busy road this will make the sound less effective.

Sound also has pitch and timbre, which relate to how many harmonic overtones they possess and if these overtones are random noise or if they possess clear pitch. In music, a collection of discernible pitches together create harmony. Different pitches are more piercing. Humans generally pay more attention to higher sounds but construct harmony by the relation to the lowest audible note.

The third type of sound, music, is the focus of this essay. Music that is played below dialogue is referred as underscore. Music may be chosen from preexisting pieces, or it may be composed for the film. Film music has many different aspects that are of importance to us. As music takes places over the dimension of time it has rhythm. Most commonly it will possess a pulse or a beat. When the rhythm of a piece of music perfectly fits actions taking place on screen it is called Mickey Mousing.

The fidelity of a sound is its sense of verisimilitude to its perceived origin point. Like any sense of authenticity, this aspect is ultimately in the minds of the audience. Sometimes realistic sound is replaced with authentic sounding sound, as the realistic sound would not seem realistic to the audience.

Sound also exists in space of the narrative, this is generally called the diegesis. If a sound is diegetic, the source of the sound must seem to come from within the environment of where the story is taking place. It is irrelevant if the sound source is off screen, as long as it is from the same environment. Non-diegetic sound is sound from outside the story world, this is where the majority of the film's music takes place. Internally diegetic or meta-diegetic sound is music that a character imagines or hears which is not part of the story world. When the diegesis is unclear, or a sound moves from one state of diegesis to another, Stilwell refers to this as the "fantastical gap." He uses this phrase because it "seemed particularly apt for this liminal space because it captured both its magic and its danger, [and it's] the sense of unreality." (pp. 187)

Various academics have attempted to list the different functions music can possess in cinema. Probably the most influential of these is Claudia Gorbman, who wrote out this list in 1988.

Invisibility: The technical apparatus of non-diegetic music must not be visible.

Inaudibility: Music is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate itself to dialogue, to visuals – i.e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative.

Signifier of emotion: Soundtrack music may set specific moods and emphasise particular emotions suggested in the narrative, but first and foremost, it is a signifier of emotion itself.

Narrative cueing: referential/narrative: Music gives referential and narrative cues, e.g., indicating point of view, supplying formal demarcations and establishing setting and characters; connotative: Music ‘interprets’ and ‘illustrates’ narrative events.

Continuity: Music provides formal and rhythmic continuity – between shots, in transitions between scenes, by filling ‘gaps’.

Unity: Via repetition and variation of musical material and instrumentation, music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity.

Any given score may violate any of the principles above, providing that violation is at the service of the other principles.

(Gorbman. pp.73)

In this list, she seems to list the ways in which she believes music “should” be used, rather than the ways in which it can be used. In many ways, it would seem that this list would be of most use to a film score composer rather than film analysts. The idea that film music “is not meant to be heard consciously” is widespread but still controversial.

In Gorbard’s section on narrative cueing she talks about how music is import to demonstrate from which character’s point of view the narrative is taking place. She writes

that music can be used “to create or emphasise a particular character’s subjectivity.” (Gorbman, pp. 83) Winter affirms this claim by saying that music is crucial “for identifying who is narrating” (pp. 42) In the episode loving that cali lifestyle!! BoJack suffers from a panic attack. Dissonant piano chords and muffled sound design illuminate characters’ emotions and help viewers know what they are thinking. Without the music and the sound design, the extent of BoJack’s distress would not be clear. The music puts us into BoJack’s headspace during this traumatic moment.

Although Gorbman’s list is probably the most well-known explanation of the roles of music can have in cinema, various academics have created alternate schemes. Annabel J Cohen described her own list of ways in which music may be used in cinema. It is interesting to compare his list to that of Claudia Gorbman’s. Cohen’s list was created after that of Gorbman’s, in 1999 and was certainly influenced by Gorbman’s list. Cohen described eight different functions instead of the seven described by Gorbman. Cohen’s list is also structured less like a guide to creating film music, like that of Gorbman, but rather an explanation of the typical effects of music in film. Firstly he removes Gorbman’s point of music being invisible and inaudible, he replaces this with the simple statement that it must “direct attention to important features of the screen” (Cohen. pp. 16) Cohen’s seventh point is also noteworthy, she writes that “music heightens absorption in film, perhaps by augmenting arousal, and increasing attention to the entire film context and inattention to everything else.” (Cohen. pp. 16) Arousal in this context refers to the stimulation of the audience. These places of difference are areas where there is contention within academia.

Silence can also be used to dramatic effect in cinema. Here we must present two different versions of silence. There is the unexpected or the unnatural silence or pause, which could be called a ‘loud rest’. Then there is quiet, the silence between pieces of music, the silence that naturally follows sound. These have vastly different roles, while the ‘loud rest’ may create anticipation, the natural silence can create calm. In terms of music, the ‘loud rest’ is often considered a part of the score while natural silence is usually the space between cues. In film, there is also different degrees of silence. The score may fade to silence, but often there is still ambience. Often there are no true moments of silence anywhere to be found in a film. An example of this is in the *BoJack Horseman* episode *That’s Too Much, Man!* when the music cuts out at the end of the episode. Soft calming orchestral music is playing softly while BoJack and Sarah Lynn are staring up at the stars, Bojack speaks, “The only thing that matters is right now. This moment. This one spectacular moment we are sharing together. Right, Sarah Lynn? Sarah Lynn?” The music cuts to silence, and the screen goes to black while BoJack says, “Sarah Lynn?” one more time, realising that Sarah Lynn has passed away during the conversation. The sudden cut of the music confirms to the audience that Sarah Lynn has died, without any need to show it onscreen.

Often music is used to establish a particular period or location. Various different eras and cultures have musical signifiers. Often popular music of the era can help to assert which era the show takes place in. *BoJack Horseman* parodies this by creating music in the style of the era they are introducing, with lyrics literally telling the audience what year it is. In the episode *The BoJack Horseman Show*, during a flashback to 2007, Princess Carolyn is heard singing along to a song on her car radio. The lyrics are, “Generic 2007 pop song! Autotune so all the voices sound weird!” This sequence serves a few different purposes. It acts to clue the audience into the fact that this is a flashback, as well as situating the audience in the culture of the era, by literally reminding them what the popular music sounded like back then, as well as acting as a joke and deconstructing the way in which music is used to establish a particular period in other films and shows.

An example of music being used to establish a location is in the episode *Best Thing That Ever Happened*. Over screen-black, light jazz can be heard. Then the scene begins in a mid shot, without the use of an establishing shot, and the music has already established the setting as a fancy restaurant before the location is seen.

Often music is reused and becomes associated with a particular subject. When a motif is associated with a subject it becomes a leitmotif. Leitmotifs are effective as they create associations within the audience and act as a symbol for their intended subject whether or not the subject is physically present or not. Saint-Saens writes that “psychological principles must be responsible for the effectiveness of leitmotif. Mood-dependent memories can also be cued with the emotions established by music.” (Cohen, pp. 16) As the score in *BoJack Horseman* is fairly stripped back there are few uses of leitmotifs. In the episode *Stupid Piece of Shit*, the opening palm-muted guitar riff from the song *Blood In The Cut* by K. Flay becomes associated with BoJack’s self-loathing and depression. Throughout the episode, we hear BoJack’s internal monologue to himself about how he is useless and undeserving of love, and underneath this, we keep returning to the same guitar riff. Then this guitar riff returns at the end of the episode when Hollyhock asks BoJack, “That voice, the one that tells you, your worthless and stupid and ugly... It goes away right? ...It’s just like a dumb teenage girl thing, and then it goes away?” By reusing the same leitmotif for BoJack’s depression the audience relates the experience of the two characters together. Another example of repetition in the music is BoJack’s ringtone. His ringtone is the theme song of the sitcom he starred in, during the 90’s. Although not technically a leitmotif as it is diegetic, his ringtone constantly reminds the audience that BoJack is unable to let go of the past. In the finale of season four BoJack’s ringtone is shown to have changed, symbolically suggesting to the audience that BoJack is finally letting go of the past. This sequence is the product of the “development of specific leitmotifs, themes, and cues” over the course of the film. (Green, pp. 82) It is through this “calculated use of film music in conjunction with the other channels of information helps to

create the narrative and control the way that the audience interprets a film.” (Green, pp. 82)

Music can have many narrative uses in film and television. In the episode *Hurray! Todd Episode!* the use of mysterious chimes draw the attention of the audience to the mysterious figure in the lower righthand corner of the screen. The music signifies to the audience that the figure is important and will return later. In the episode *BoJack Hates the Troops* the score uses strings and chimes to show to foreshadow that Neal McBeal the Navy Seal will return and make BoJack regret taking the muffins he had dips on. In the episode *loving that cali lifestyle!!* the mysterious and ominous chimes return when Princess Carolyn forages BoJack’s signatures on a contract, this helps to clarify matters of plot and narrative progression for the audience, by telling them that this decision is important for the plot moving forward. Music can also be used to create unity between sequences. Green writes that an “important function of film music is its ability to suspend reality for the audience.” (pp. 95) A common version of this is called a sound bridge. A sound bridge is when the sound or music from one scene spread to another scene or location. Music is also often used to denote a flashback or fantasy. Music can also be used to infer meaning across a series of shots that might seem disconnected on their own. An example of this is in the episode *Time’s Arrow* where BoJack’s birth, Hollyhock’s birth and people burnings young Beatrice’s belongings because of her scarlet fever are connected through montage, with the music creating unity between the sequences.

The most important role of music in television and film is to influence the audience emotionally. However, it is important to consider what exactly emotions are. Schmitz attempts a definition by writing that, “emotions are atmospheres poured out spatially that move the felt (not the material) body.” (Grant, pp. 19) However, this definition does not help us with understanding, by stating that emotions are feelings that are felt is little better saying that emotions are emotions. Aaron Ben-Ze’ev is quoted as saying that “although emotions punctuate almost all the significant events in our lives, the nature, causes and consequences of the emotions are among the least understood aspects of human experience.” (Nagari, pp. 31) It is difficult to clearly explain what exactly emotions are. It would seem that emotion is any cognisant experience described by a high level of dismay or delight. Emotion is connected with mindset, demeanour, identity, mood, and most types of intense mental activity. But why does music affect the audience emotionally? Benjamin Nagari argues that music does not create emotions by themselves but rather makes us more perceptible to emotions. He writes that the audience responses emotionally to an ‘object’ while the music heightens the sense of emotion. He relates the affect of music to the effects of hormonal levels. He uses the example of sadness, and writes that “the hormonal change causes you to be sad, and explains why you are sad, but it is not what you are sad about.” (Nagari, pp. 33) The thing you are sad about is the object. “While

affect may be triggered by any object, its outcome may be rejected – as emotion – on an object, which in the above case becomes ‘something to be sad about’.” (Nagari, pp. 32) For example in the *Bojack Horseman* episode *The Old Sugerman Place* sombre piano chords help create the emotion of sadness, but the object of the sadness is the young Beatrice meeting her mother after she has had a lobotomy. “Why I have half a mind...”, she begins before trailing off. The music makes the audience become more perceptible to the innate saddens in this tragic situation. Psychoacoustics is the study of how sound affects people in a psychological way. Benjamin Nagari writes that music usually triggers emotions subconsciously and that different people, with different cultural, social and personal experience will be triggered at different times. “The conscious, unconscious, personal, collective or cultural ‘bias’ of this trigger is as multifaceted as the output of these trends in other triggers, whether sensory or directly psychological.” (Nagari, pp. 32) However, there is a level of consistency amongst emotive responses to make generalisations like “this music helps to create a feeling of sadness” even if our individual experiences of this sadness are different. Music does not inherently contain any true emotion, it may only trigger emotion. Because of this, we must place the role of music in human psychology as a sensory trigger.

In the schema of the different functions, music can possess in cinema that Gorbman created, the role of creating mood is under the same category of signifying emotion. This begs an interesting question, are emotion and mood the same things, or are they separate? Mood shares a lot in common with emotion. Music in a film could express a melancholy mood, and melancholia is an emotion. (Tan, Spackman, & Wakefield. pp.519) In the *BoJack Horseman* episode *Brand New Couch*, the opening shot shows a glimpse into the BoJack’s unhappy upbringing and his childhood as an unloved child to two abusive parents. The score uses held high strings contrasted with a low note played on the piano and dissonant saxophone to give a dark grimy atmosphere. This is a clear example of using of music to create a mood. But is this mood an emotion? Annabel J Cohen offers a distinction, she writes that “whereas both moods and emotions may be regarded as dispositions toward appraising emotional meaning structures and a readiness to respond in a certain manner, moods do not have objects; emotions do. (Cohen pp.3) However, this simple distinction causes complications to the theories of Benjamin Nagari who argued that music did not create emotions by themselves but rather makes us more perceptible to emotions in objects. If moods are essentially emotions that are unfocused by objects, then does music have the ability to create moods by itself without context? The aspect that might reconcile this two apparently conflicting arguments is the difference between “felt” emotion and “understood” emotion. When Nagari writes that “if angry music does make one angry it is not because it is angry! ...Having to listen to any music that is inflicted on me may make me angry”, he has hit upon this difference. (Nagari, pp.32) The audience can understand that the music is angry without literally getting angry themselves. One might come to the conclusion that music can create understood emotion (or moods) but requires

an object to create felt emotion. “Several recent studies have shown that feeling emotion and the judgement of expressed emotion are different parts of emotions and are evaluated differently in music listening.” (Eschrich, Münte & Altenmüller. pp.2) This is an important distinction when considering how music may affect our emotions.

In film and television, the score has a very important role in how the audience interprets the narrative and how they emotionally react to it. Sound effectively shapes the way in which the audience see the picture. Green writes that “music does often fulfil the basic roles of conveying emotion and suggesting connections or themes in the film.” (pp.82) The Netflix animated show *BoJack Horseman* utilises various different ways in which music may be used to affect the audience. Sound has the ability to direct the audience attention to certain aspects and make us wait in anticipation while it creates expectations, and trigger emotional responses.

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