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An Analysis of The Evolution of Sound Within the Horror Genre

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This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: _Alu Belon_

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__Introduction__

The film experience as a whole can be considered a form of manipulation. Audiences pay to have filmmakers shape their emotions through imagery and sound to tell a story that makes them feel a certain way. As the protagonist bursts into tears in a romantic film, the filmmaker is willing the audience to feel empathy. For horror, when we see something lurking in the shadows, we should feel fear. This is a manipulation inherent in the overall linear story of the film. However, if we dig a little deeper, we can see that it boils down to the manipulating of two particular aspects; manipulation through imagery and manipulation through sound. The latter of the two will be the focus of my dissertation.

In the documentary '*Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound*' directed by Midge Costin in 2019, sound design is broken into three sub-categories: music, dialogue and ambience.[1] All of these work hand in hand to direct the audience towards what we want them to hear and not hear, to see and not see. When all three work together they dictate the importance of key elements within the scene, and when used correctly, can break hearts with a simple recurring motif, creating chilling atmospheres from diegetic sound, and make sure the most memorable of

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[1] *Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound,* Dir. Midge Costin, Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet, GoodMovies Entertainment, Busterfilms, United States, 2019

lines sit on the foreground of the mix. I will go on to look more closely at sound under these three subheadings.

In my first chapter, I will be looking into a brief history of the horror genre. I think it's essential to see the whole picture when analysing the current stature of a genre. Every film is influenced by the filmmakers that came before it: being either their own spin on established techniques, or recognising these techniques and subverting them. I found Wheeler Winston Dixon's book '*A History of Horror*' instrumental to my research for this chapter. He breaks down the entire history of the genre in depth from its origins to present day.

I will then analyse the subversion of expectations. Horror films over any other genre need to surprise the audience. That's not to say that surprises are the only scare tactic used in horror or that other genres do not benefit from surprising the audience. Rather, it is just to say that if a horror film attempts to strike fear into the hearts of viewers through surprise and that surprise is expected, then the fear is at a loss and the genre isn't fulfilling its intended purpose. This is where I will look at the subversion of expectations, particularly through sound, and how it has evolved over the years to keep audiences on their toes. Firstly, looking at some films in particular that have shaped certain tropes within the genre. It is impossible

to look at subversion of expectations without first looking at what put these expectations in place to begin with. Secondly, I will analyse some films that have utilised a technique of soundlessness. After years of filmmakers building different techniques to scare audiences through sound, it is interesting to see how these films do the opposite and utilise the lack of sound to build tension and fear. Lastly, I will briefly focus on '*The Haunting of Hill House*' and how it uses both sound, and a lack thereof, to develop an atmosphere of tension.

In my final chapter, I will be analysing Mike Flanagan's "*The Haunting of Hill House*" from 2018. I chose this piece because, as I will later show, it implements techniques passed down from the history of horror films, while also establishing its own approach to these techniques. Taking the format of a series rather than a film, the runtime surpasses that of over six standard feature films. With this extended runtime, it was capable of cementing its own rules throughout the show, only to purposefully break them in order to shock its viewership. I will analyse the sound of the show under three separate sub headings. Firstly the score, how it implements the use of drama techniques like *leitmotif*, and how it builds the atmosphere of the show. Secondly through diegetic sound and the use of on-screen audio to create an unsettling mood in scenes. Lastly through sound effects, how

they implement the tropes of past horror films, while also breaking those tropes to

great success.

A Brief History of Horror

1880s to 1950s

Film as a whole has evolved over the years following several influences, including contemporary trends, the world stage, technological advancements, and current events. Genres and subgenres of horror primarily arise from a film coming out of the blue and terrifying audiences, followed by filmmakers and studios alike jumping on the commercial value of the trend and flocking to the profitability of this sub-genre or theme. Eventually, film-goers grow tired of the stale predictability of the trend. As the seemingly endless well of money grows dry (and audiences crave something new and surprising) a new direction will arise, shocking audiences. Horror is especially susceptible to the boom and fade cycle of a sub-genre due to the fact that as a trend grows more predictable, it tends to become less frightening, thus defeating the purpose of the genre as a whole.

The silent horror film era was influenced mainly by the literature of that time, gothic horror. It made sense for the genre to take inspiration from these types of novels, as they were popular at the time. This literary genre has come to be exemplified by the work of writers such as Bram Stoker and Edgar Allan Poe. A setting of a medieval castle, with dungeons and secret passages, laying in gloomy

forests and featuring an evil within that has left the place deserted or feared have come to exemplify this definition of 'gothic horror'. In 1896, Georges Méliès created what would be considered the first horror film ever made titled '*The House of the Devil*' in which numerous identifying elements of gothic horror can be observed. In the 1910s and 1920s, the genre was still finding its feet, but gothic horror was still implanted in the minds of the filmmakers with the release of such works as '*Frankenstein*' in 1910 by J. Searle Dawley and '*L'Inferno*' in 1911 by Giuseppe de Liguoro, Francesco Bertolini, and Adolfo Padovan. Wheeler Winston Dixon speaks of '*Frankenstein*' in his book *A History of Horror*, writing: "Although the film's length allowed for only the briefest sketch of Mary Shelley's novel, the sequence in which Frankenstein brings his creation to life still exudes an eerie sense of the unknown"[2].

Still during the silent era and near the start of the 1920s, German expressionism was firmly on its feet and was about to play its role in developing the horror genre. Without diving into the whole history of German expressionism, it crucially emphasised expression over a realistic depiction of events. It's clear to see how this technique would be favourable for horror filmmakers, and the first film to come from this would be '*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*' in 1920 by Robert

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[2] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, United States, 2010, p. 4.

Wiene, "a masterpiece of German Expressionist horror and paranoia"[3], now considered the grandfather of all horror. Another notable film to come from this era would be 1922's '*Nosfaratu*' directed by F.W. Murnau, which demonstrated that the genre at this point was still taking major influence from the gothic horror trend of the time. However, in the period after the First World War, Germany was not exactly financially stable. The UFA, the Berlin-based production company behind these films, bartered a deal with MGA and Paramount for collaborative rights over their content - effectively moving German expressionism into Hollywood.

The introduction of sound to cinema was revolutionary, opening doors to filmmakers that had hitherto seemed firmly shut. Sound was universally a radical artistic leap towards the cinema we know today, however this is perhaps more true for horror than for any other genre. In the 1930s, Universal kick-started what would later be known as 'The Universal Gothic Horror Cycle', starting with Tod Browning's '*Dracula*' in 1931 and also James Whale's '*Frankenstein*' the same year. Throughout the 1930s Universal would release some of the most influential and memorable horror movies of the time, but come the 1940s the gothic horror sub-genre was beginning to lose its traction. With these types of stories being constantly told and re-told, parodies of the genre started to rise and even crossovers

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[3] Ibid, p. 8.

and spin-offs began to appear. Dixon wrote: "It is at this juncture that Universal began "teaming up" its monsters to boost box-office receipts in what was rapidly becoming a less lucrative Enterprise."[4] This was something like today when we see characters of the Marvel Cinematic Universe crossing into each other's films. Movies like Erle C. Kenton's '*House of Frankenstein*' in 1944, and '*House of Dracula*' in 1945, were released, replacing the dried out techniques that began with the cycle and leaving in its place a cinematic spectacle for audiences to root for their favourite of these villains. By the end of the 1940s, Universal had begun to retire their gothic horror cycle. Dixon describes the end of the era as follows:

> "The classic monsters were truly dead. They had been recycled, teamed with other of their brethren, and finally relegated to foils for burlesque comedians, and no one seemed to have any idea of how to restore them to "life."[5]

Around the same time, a smaller company began to lay stylistic foundations for low budget horror. Val Lewton was employed by the RKO Radio Pictures to start developing their low budget horror films with the catch being, the studio would provide the title, and Lewton would develop the story around it. The first film to come from this collaboration would be 1942's '*Cat People*' directed by Jacques Tourneur, which I will mention several more times throughout this essay due to its groundbreaking transformation of the jump scare. Scares were delivered

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[4] Ibid, p. 36.
[5] Ibid, pp. 63-64.

using mood and atmosphere rather than makeup and monsters, giving us a true

glimpse of the more psychological horror films that it would go on to inspire.

Dixon describes the venture, writing:

> "Lewton created—in sharp contrast to Universal's Carpathian
> never-never land—a modern world with people who had passions,
> loves, hates, jobs, hobbies, and sometimes fatal character flaws, and
> he set his films in locales that audiences could identify with."[6]

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[6] Ibid, p. 44.

1950s to 1970s

In the 1950s the world was in a liminal space in the wake of the Second World War, and at the beginning of the Soviet and United States arms race. People were in fear of the constant threat of both invasion and nuclear fallout, and the horror genre took advantage of this with the birth of invasion based horror. The end of the world could come from both the sky or the sea, which was reflected in the release of films such as Robert Wise's '*The Day The Earth Stood Still*' in 1951 and Eugène Lourié's '*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*' in 1953. Although favoring large monsters, the fear was not from *what* is coming, but rather that something *is* coming to invade your homeland. In his book '*On Stories*', Richard Kearney articulately describes the 'alien' as a metaphor for the 'other', a person outside the American norms attempting to gain access.

> "Creatures which hang around borders, and disrespect their integrity, are traditionally known as 'monsters.' They comprise a species of sinister miscreants exiled from the normative categories of the established system. A species of non-species as it were. Alien monsters represent the 'unthought' of any given point of knowledge and representation, the unfamiliar spectre which returns to haunt the secure citadel of consciousness."[7]

Japan, however, was in fear of something much greater. In the wake of the mass destruction wrought by nuclear weapons on their land, the Japanese people had no reason to fear invasion, for they had already experienced the greatest possible

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[7] Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, Taylor & Francis Ltd, London, United Kingdom, 2002, p. 119.

devastation that invasion horror could convey. Under American occupation they were not even allowed to speak of the atrocity they as a nation had just experienced, and so in an experimental form of horror film therapy, and in the absence of being allowed to speak of what they truly feared, '*Godzilla*' was created in 1954 directed by Ishirō Honda. A nuclear monster then came from the depths to demolish their homeland. In an act of utter ignorance, Hollywood loved Godzilla and snatched the rights to make its own invasion based epics.

Half way through the 1950s the pulp sci-fi horror cycle was on its way out, as most of these trends died, and instead was replaced with what I believe is the cheapest time in horror history, the era of the gimmick. Viewers of '*Macabre*' in 1958 were promised a $1000 life insurance settlement in case they died of fright during the screening. '*House on Haunted Hill*' in 1959 featured an immersion technique in which a skeleton was triggered to fly around the theatre, while '*The Tingler*' in 1959 featured a buzzer in participants' seats and they were encouraged to scream to calm down the monster. All of these films were directed by William Castle. "Castle dubbed the process "Emergo," promising that a "ghost would actually emerge right off the screen.""[8]

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[8] William Castle as found in Wheeler Winston Dixon*, A History of Horror*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, United States, 2010, p. 83.

In the 1960s psychological horror would begin to see a rise in popularity, stemming from two key factors. Firstly the restrictive censorship of the production code was abandoned in 1964, and secondly one of the founding fathers of horror, Alfred Hitchcock, made his mark on the genre. '*Psycho*' in 1960 and '*The Birds*' in 1963, conjured a kind of horror from more realistic elements. Dixon describes '*Psycho*' as "a surprisingly brutal film with significant horror elements (violent death, an old dark house) from a filmmaker best known as a purveyor of sleek suspense."[9] Monsters didn't have to be invaders or something from the supernatural, monsters could now be day to day creatures or people themselves rooting horror into a pedestrian life. He also left his mark on the technical side of sound horror, with the infamous screeching of strings that we have all grown to recognise

> "It is present also when there is a need to sustain suspense in parallel editing - helping us accept the unreality of the dagger that waits to plunge into the body of the victim, or of the train that is forever approaching the unfortunate girl tied to the tracks".[10]

On the other side of the Atlantic, the United Kingdom was about to re-boot Universals gothic horror cycle, revisiting old classics but this time with the added benefit of new technological advancements in film, in particular colour and

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[9] Wheeler Winston Dixon*, A History of Horror*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, United States, 2010, p. 75.
[10] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, P. 409.

featuring more sex and gore now that the censorship of production code was gone. Between 1957 and 1974, Hammer Film Productions would release seven Frankenstein films, six Draculas, and three Mummy movies, as well as countless other gothic horrors.

1970s to Present

The occult would be the next subgenre of horror, focusing on satanism and the supernatural near the end of the 1960s. People had always been afraid of demons and satanism and now that fear would make its way onto the big screen. Roman Polanski's '*Rosemary's Baby*' shook audiences in 1968, followed by what many consider the greatest entry into the occult genre, 1976's '*The Exorcist*' directed by William Friedkin. Dixon describes it as "that rare horror film that, for once, was taken seriously by the industry and critics."[11] Demons were something that could possess anyone, even an innocent young girl. '*The Omen*' hit theaters in 1976 Directed by Richard Donner and Stuart Rosenberg's '*Amityville Horror*' in 1979. The market would be opened out to young adults with Brian De Palma's 1976 film '*Carrie*', which also initiated the trend of adapting Stephen King novels which would continue to the present day. "The film is now considered a classic of the genre and brought instant stardom to Spacek, who has arguably never had a better role for her considerable talents."[12] Also in the 1970s, Steven Spielberg released his 1975 creature horror '*Jaws*', spawning a cycle of shark horror films which has continued up to this day with movies like 2016's '*The Shallows*' by Jaume Collet-Serra and 2018's 'The Meg' by by Jon Turteltaub. Ridley Scott would then combine creature horror with science fiction bringing 1979's '*Alien*'

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[11] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *A History of Horror* p. 148.
[12] Ibid, p. 151.

into theatres. The next subgenre cycle to come to fruition would be that of the slasher, beginning with 1974's '*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*' by Toby Hooper and John Carpenters '*Halloween*' in 1978. With some of the most iconic horror films ever made, the 1970s solidified the horror genre into something more than just a medium of scaring people, but into a true cinematic artform in its own right.

The 1980s would be filled with slasher films, now bringing the idea that horror could take place in suburbia, and anyone could be the villain as long as they have a knife and a mask. Low budget horror was on the rise especially with the introduction of the relatively new but affordable home video tape market. Dixon had this to say about the slasher cycle:

> "Taken as a group, these films indicated a radical shift in horror iconography. No longer was it enough to depict a world of undead vampires, shuffling mummies, or lumbering Frankenstein monsters; now, the horror had come home to us, showing us that the real horror of life is everywhere."[13]

The 1980s can't be mentioned without the inclusion of Stanley Kubricks '*The Shining*' in 1980. With another Stephen King adaptation Kubrick combined both psychological horror and the occult. "Kubrick, who worked in a variety of genres, had one overarching theme in all his films: "the mind breaks down.""[14] Although '*The Shining*' was not appreciated at the time (earning Kubrick a Razzie for worst

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[13] Ibid, p. 121.
[14] Ibid, p. 160.

director), the film has gone on to become an absolute classic and a must watch for any horror fanatic.

By the time the 1990s came around the slasher cycle had run its course and even started to become parodied. Wes Craven made '*Scream*' in 1996, re-booting teen horror while also remaining self-aware, thus parodying the absurdity of the slasher film itself. Teen horror was on the rise, a sub-genre in which films were cast with a group of highschoolers ill-equipped to deal with whatever supernatural or slasher villain preyed on them. 1997's '*I Know What You Did Last Summer*' by Jim Gillespie and 2000's '*Final Destination*' by James Wong are distinct examples of this sub-genre. Creature horror began to rely more and more on CGI scares with films such as 1997's '*Anaconda*' directed by Luis Llosa. On the contrary, taking influence from the 1960s, psychological horror was flourishing with releases like Jonathan Demme's '*Silence of The Lambs*' in 1991 and David Fincher's 'Seven' in 1995. "Silence of the Lambs touched such a chord with the public that it became one of the few horror films to win almost universal critical acclaim."[15] One new sub-genre would emerge at the very end of the 1990s. In 1999 Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick would release '*The Blair Witch Project*' shaking audiences with the new 'found footage' genre that immediately grew in popularity. Although

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[15] Ibid, p. 142.

disclosed that it is a fictional work, audiences had never seen this style of self-aware filming done before, and were terrified by the shooting style, thinking it couldn't be anything other than true events. This would go on to inspire Matt Reeves' '*Cloverfield*' in 2008, blending found footage with science fiction invasion horror, and the infamous '*Paranormal Activity*', directed by Oren Peli in 2007, that although almost a decade after '*The Blair Witch Project*', would go on to astonish audiences in the same way. I agree with Dixon when he describes '*The Blair Witch Project*' saying:

> "In short, the film showed some respect for its audience and made the viewers think about what they were seeing on the screen. The filmmakers refused to settle for simple shock moments, obvious genre tropes, or a tired, recycled narrative structure."[16]

Come the 2000s, the slasher genre would take its own spin off into the sub genre now known as 'Torture Porn', emphasising intense on screen gore and human torture, starting with James Wan's '*Saw*' in 2004. The last sub genre on the list would be that of the Zombie cycle, although beginning all the way back in 1968 with George A. Romero's '*Night of The Living Dead*', it wouldn't grow into the widely popular modern zombie apocalypse genre until Danny Boyle released '*28 Days Later*' in 2002, breathing new life (and perhaps a more tangible fear) into the genre. The cycle seems now to be at its end with audiences tired of the genre

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[16] A History of Horror, Wheeler Winston Dixon, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, United States, 2010, p204.

with AMC's '*The Walking Dead*' on its 11th season and parodies already appearing, such as 2010s 'Zombieland'.

It is evident that the horror genre and its subsequent sub-genres have consistently built upon the films and popular trends that came before them. While this generally follows a sort of 'bandwagon' cycle of filmmaking, it could be said that the horror filmmakers of today have to carefully navigate a landscape of film production dotted with tropes, stereotypes, and clichés.

<u>Subversion of Expectation</u>

<u>History</u>

The horror genre as a whole, of course, takes influences from the entirety of film history. However, there are two films in particular whose techniques have solidified their place in the horror genre forever. These films are '*Psycho*' and '*Cat People*'.

'*Psycho*' was the first film to implement the use of dissonant high-pitched strings played sharply as an element of horror. The stabbing scene in the bathroom features, what is at this point, the iconic motif of high strings to aid the build of tension, followed by low to release it. At the time this was groundbreaking and had audiences terrified, but since then has grown to be a common trope of the horror genre. A swelling of strings in a speedy tremolo, followed by a slow release, can be seen not only in almost every horror film score, but specifically in their pivotal moments and jump scares. Michel Chion describes a perfect comparison in when he says:

> "Try accompanying an image first with a prolonged steady note on the violin, and then with the same note played with a tremolo made by

rapidly moving the bow. The second sound will cause a more tense
and immediate focusing of attention on the image."[17]

Hitchcock, although not being alive for the foundation of the horror genre as we know it today, definitely planted his roots deep within what we consider to be the canon of the contemporary genre.

The second film, '*Cat People*', was the first film to feature a jump scare. Today this technique is a main feature of the genre, however it is perhaps a dying trope within it. As the name might suggest, a jump scare is when something in the screen 'jumps out' at the audience. Since the technique's conception, it has been used so widely that at this point it's expected by audiences, and has led to film makers, or rather sound designers, having to subvert the expectations of audiences to achieve the same surprising effect.

This brings me to my second point of sound design, the subversion of expectations. The jump scare in '*Cat People*' was the first of its kind to rely on a scare on a sound based principal, whereas previously the likes of '*The House of the Devil*' or '*The Phantom of the Opera*' relied solely on visual stimuli. Since then filmmakers have repeatedly tried to find new ways of jump-scaring the

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[17] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, Second Edition,* Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Foreword by Walter Murch, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2019, p. 14.

audience, and the easiest way to do so has proven to be to subvert the audiences' expectations. For example Ben Burtt, the sound designer of George Lucas's science fiction spectacle '*Star Wars*' in 1977, designed the explosion of the death star using the sound of several different explosions.[18] By combining the sound of all these different types of explosions, he created a sound greater than that possible on Earth, bigger than anything any human could have heard before (disregarding the fact that sound doesn't travel through space.) The several films to follow followed the same principle. More death stars, exploding planets, all greater than life explosions. Audiences had grown tired of the spectacle greater than life explosions provided in the past, and so in '*The Last Jedi*' directed by Rian Johnson in 2017, the exact opposite was provided. As one ship travels through another at light speed and tears it apart, the audience is greeted with nothing but silence, and in addition to this, rather than a glorious inferno of yellow to red gradients, the audience is presented with a contrasted black and white, eventually followed by a shock wave (again, disregarding the fact that sound doesn't travel through space). "It could even be said that sound film has been built out of its failures, if by failure we understand the fact of not becoming what someone had planned but something else"[19]

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[18] *Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound,* Dir. Midge Costin, Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet, GoodMovies Entertainment, Busterfilms, United States, 2019
[19] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, p. 203.

Although the exact opposite of what someone expects, after conditioning the audience over literal decades to expect a particular type of explosion, this version is far more impactful as it is much less anticipated by the audience. The same applies to the horror genre.

After both '*Cat People*' and '*Psycho*', audiences grew to expect a jump scare featuring the sound of high strings. Horror filmmakers managed to challenge this trope by using high strings first, hollowed by ambience or immediate silence, and then implementing the scare afterwards, thus giving audiences sustained tension, brief release, followed by a sudden scare. In modern horror both are to be expected, and so the unexpected option is to provide neither. Films like Ari Aster's '*Hereditary*' in 2018 or '*Midsommar*' 2019, provide horror without implementing either jump scares or the sound that follows them, but rather allow horrific scenes to play out as they are and let that carry the momentum of horror. Films like these have given the genre a breath of fresh air, allowing for horrifying ideas to take forefront against the idea of simply scaring audiences.

Soundlessness

Three films in particular that have shaped my vision of the horror genre, or the new sound era of the genre, are Scott Derrickson's '*Sinister*' in 2012, Bryan Bertino's '*The Strangers*' in 2008, and William Friedkin's '*The Exorcist*' in 1973. Although not the first uses of these techniques, these three films shaped my views of the genre as a whole, and in my opinion, used these techniques to perfection.

Upon my re-watching of '*Sinister*', it is nothing particularly special at all; a run of the mill horror film featuring all of the genre's clichés. There is a typical demonic villain that our protagonist comes to realise, run of the mill jump scares, and honestly, characters anyone would likely be happy to see defeated due to their lack of development. However, one scene in particular stood out from the rest and solidified itself in my mind growing up. The scene in question is that within which the ghosts of children lurk around our protagonist. It was the best example in my memory of a film not using a jump scare or sound to drive fear into its audience, but rather used the on screen presence of its ghost to signify that our protagonist was in the genre. Its subversion of expectation stood out to me. I was tired of seeing a ghost jump out from the shadows just to scream at a character and disappear. In this instance the ghosts follow and chase our protagonist around the

house, strengthening the idea for the viewer that they are always following our protagonist, not simply lurking in the shadows, but watching their every move.

Secondly, '*The Strangers*' implemented two separate techniques that struck fear into my young mind and kept me awake at night. I have always found the performance of Liv Tyler and Glenn Howerton particularly unsettling, and it wasn't until I began my film studies that I realised exactly why. Although contrary to the usual order of filming (and definitely to the detriment of the film's budget), the entire film was shot in chronological order, so as fear grew in the heart of the audience, so too did it in the actors, in turn impacting their performance. It also featured my favourite technique of the horror genre, the use of on screen but background villains, noticeable to the audience but not to the characters. Throughout the entirety of the film, if you were to pause at any scene, the people hunting down our protagonist can be seen in the background. This separates from the idea of something popping out from the background because what we fear is already on screen and stalking our characters. We are constantly afraid that they will attack. It removes the possibility of a jump scare, but in its wake leaves an unsettling sensation because we know exactly where our fear is, but afraid of what it might do. Chion describes this building of soundless tension as follows:

> "As we saw with Hitchcock, however, not only did the silent film remain alive beneath the sound film, but sound operated on the image

like a pressure cooker lid. Smothered, emitted by the image but not heard, sound boiled and whistled under the pressure of the sounds that actually were heard."[20]

It lies in the same vein of Shakespeare telling us what happens at the end of Romeo and Juliet. We can visually see what is after the characters we've learned to love, we just live in hope that that reality won't come to fruition.

Lastly we come to '*The Exorcist*'. Although a classic for obvious reasons, it sticks out to me for one reason in particular. We are introduced to the character who gets possessed, Regan, and after that matter she is treated as such, a character within the film. In modern demonic related horror such as James Wan's '*The Conjuring*' in 2013, or David F. Sandberg's '*Lights Off*' in 2016, after the point in which a character is possessed they are treated as the villain or another scare tactic. In 'The Exorcist', however, the character is viewed as just another character with its horror element overlaid upon the fact. Dialogue can still take place with Regan, soundlessly, and blatantly. The film is not afraid to allow its horror trope to also be a character that we should be afraid of, entitled to characteristic elements and development.

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[20] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, P. 206.

Learning From Your Predecessors

This leads me to '*The Haunting of Hill House*' directed and created by Mike Flanagan in 2018, and more specifically the directors ability to learn from his predecessors. With its runtime exceeding that of six average horror films, there is no doubt that it can include several techniques of the genre, but to do so successfully required precision on the part of the film makers. Featuring a score that establishes atmosphere, introduces future concepts, and also takes its place in the background when necessary.

> "In contrast, music in sound films is generally discontinuous; music cues are dispersed throughout, and they are interwoven with other sound elements. These factors allow music to play a more significant structural role and to create "zones" of segments with music and segments without"[21]

Between episode one and five, ghosts within the genre are something to be feared. With a constant blend between the past and present, the ghosts are solidified as the remnants of those who have died and are dread inducing entities that could jump out at any moment. They both submit to the trope of jump scares but also, especially in the case of the newly deceased family member Nelly, are ever present, constantly traveling with our characters, like that of 'Sinister'.

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[21] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, P. 407.

Secondly throughout the series, in particular with the past elements, ghosts can be seen lurking in the background of most shots, watching the characters, but this time with a greater implication; the fear not of what is in the background, but what it might do. As we delve deeper into the characters and develop with them, the ghosts in the present of the series literally follow the family on screen, they are visible to both us and the protagonists striking fear into both.

Similarly to that of '*The Exorcist*', in the final episodes of the series, the ghosts are given characterisation. They were the element that haunted the series, but also fell victim to the real villain of the series, the house. The series is not afraid to embrace ghosts as exactly what they are, deceased people, and although some have villainous intent, they are not the true villain of the series. They are capable of dialogue with the family, and not just dialogue, some are out to hurt them, others to help, they are simply living an unfortunate afterlife that they are pre-destined to live. Even in the end, although the house proves to be the main villain, for the case of some who wish to stay with their family, the house proves to be a method of enabling that. Neither villain nor protagonist exist at the end of the series.Simply put, "Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and those who walked there, walked together."[22]

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[22] *The Haunting of Hill House*, Mike Flanagan, FlanaganFilm, Amblin Television, Paramount Pictures, United States, Season One, Episode Ten.

Case Study: The Haunting of Hill House

Score

"It is surprising to see in the sound film how music, which, after all, is made of the same stuff as other sounds, can function as the narrative element that restores elasticity and stylization to the film's temporality"[23]

The score behind '*The Haunting of Hill House*' comprises twenty seven tracks including a '*Main theme*' and a four piece movement titled '*The Beginning of the End*'. The Newton Brothers original score favours the string section of the orchestra. Staying almost entirely away from both brass and percussion. The strings carry the overall atmosphere of the scene as they happen. For emotional sections, softly played mid to high notes take the lead, however strings have always had their place in horror. When tension is building a fast vibrato of low key strings violently rises as higher notes are brought in leading to a rapid build in tension. Using strings and trembolo to create a whirlwind of suspense has and I feel always will exist in the horror genre, from '*Psycho*' to '*Hereditary*'. A notable addition introduced since '*Hereditary*' has been the addition of sporadic plucking of the strings to emphasise an unsettling feeling.

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[23] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, P. 265.

While the strings carry the overall atmosphere of each scene, the piano definitely focuses the viewer's attention on the characters. There is one particular progression that is repeated over the score, but changes in both key and pitch depending on the track or who the track is focused on, a leitmotif that carries the family to their destination. Michel Chion describes leitmotif as "Each main character or key thematic idea of the narrative is assigned a musical theme, which characterizes the character or idea and acts as its musical guardian angel[24]." This leitmotif in particular follows the characters as they deal with death. The theme is first introduced as the youngest of all the siblings Nelly dies. Over the course of the show they are all exposed to her death, be it seeing her as a ghost or as a family member *tells* them of her death. As such, the theme follows them in attempting to deal with Nelly's death. The house too has its own musical theme, and as the show jumps forward and back between the family as adults and children, the two themes become interwoven, emphasising that the family is forever connected to the house. Andy Newton stated in an interview **"**The piano is so classic and timeless and when you're scoring a story you have to be super aware that it doesn't get too dressed up with the sound of it. We're there to gently support the story and journey."[25]

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[24] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, Second Edition*,, Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman,, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2019, p. 50.
[25] Michelle Hannett, "The Newton Brothers Talk Netflix's THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE From Director Mike Flanagan", *We Are Movie Geeks,* available at http://www.wearemoviegeeks.com/2018/10/newton-brothers-talk-netflixs-haunting-hill-house-director-mike

All truths are revealed during episode six, where the family find themselves at each other's throats. Whether this animosity is motivated by money or romantic betrayal, the family unit portrayed is certainly disjointed. This is where a broken form of the leitmotif plays. It is the same progression but missing some notes, just as the family are missing each other's points of view and are failing to see eye to eye. Luke slowly leans into Nell, the only character both clean from his addiction and separated from the conflict, as the progression fades from its broken structure into its full form. This emphasises that the two are still connected, and Nell is still with them.

A track I find particularly interesting is *'Whatever Walked There, Walked Alone'*, because it emphasises two separate points. Firstly, it carries the main theme, but behind it in the bass portion of the keys, it carries a repetition back and forth of two notes. This mixed with the main theme playing in the higher notes creates a loop around the main theme, literally trapping the main theme of the house in a loop. This is very interesting and incredibly well thought out after the revelation of episode five comes to light. It is revealed that the ghost who has been

-flanagan/#:~:text=Between%20the%20two%2C%20they%20play,organ%2c%20kazoo%2C%20and%20cello, [last accessed at 14:45 on 01/03/2021]

haunting Nelly her whole life is actually herself after she dies. She is stuck in a

loop of inescapable torment, which is highlighted in this track. As Chion put it:

> "Before providing emotional resonance for a film, music is first and
> foremost a machine for manipulating space and time, which it helps to
> expand, contract, freeze, and thaw at will."[26]

Secondly, the line that this track is named after is in the opening scene of the film.

Over this scene, the main motif is played, but played by the strings portion rather

than the keys, which usually carry the atmosphere of the show rather than the

characters, but plays over the house as if the house is its own character in the show,

which essentially it turns out to be. Andy Newton said "We composed 7 1/2 hours

of music and it's a big part of the story. And audiences will find out what it'll mean

in hour nine."[27]

Leitmotif is nothing new to cinema or television, but has never had a

concrete place in horror. '*The Haunting of Hill House's*' blending of genre allowed

it to slip between the cracks of horror and other genres, which is why I believe this

original soundtrack works more effectively and is more memorable than that of

standard horror. As Andy Newton says:

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[26] Film, A Sound Art, Michel Chion, Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, p409.

[27] Hannett, "The Newton Brothers Talk…" , *We Are Movie Geeks,* available at http://www.wearemoviegeeks.com/2018/10/newton-brothers-talk-netflixs-haunting-hill-house-director-mike-flanagan/#:~:text=Between%20the%20two%2C%20they%20play,organ%2c%20kazoo%2C%20and%20cello, [last accessed at 14:45 on 01/03/2021]

"It's such a unique and beautiful story, while being terrifying at the same time. We tried to stay away from those scary moments and play on the emotion and sentiment. In a film you have 90 to 120 minutes and here we had ten hours of music to tell the story,"[28]

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[28]Ibid.

Diegetic Sound

The diegetic sound in *'The Haunting of Hill House'* plays two significant roles in particular. Firstly, to play with the horror element of the show, bring the scarier parts to the foreground. Secondly, and more significantly, to enable transitions within the show, which I will elaborate on in just a bit.

I began my study on the sound of '*The Haunting of Hill House*' where anyone else would, in bed on my laptop with headphones equipped and my volume up full. However, I was surprised by one of the first things that I noticed. During episode one, while Steve is interviewing someone for his upcoming book and they are telling their 'scary story', the background is as it is for most of the show. Crickets chirp as they do during most of the show's sunny days. When a cricket chirps it is called stridulation, and the noise comes from rubbing their wings together to attract females. Each stridulation is called a pulse and the pulses speed is usually determined by temperature, but no matter what, each pulse is on a beat just like the pulse of a heart. The beat can speed up, or slow down, but it follows a rhythmic beat.[29] During episode one as the story reaches its climax, the crickets' chirping begins to syncopate with each other. Syncopation is a musical term that

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[29] Stephanie L. Richards, "Cricket Sounds: Why Do Crickets Chirp?", *Terminix,* available at http://www.terminix.com/blog/science-nature/why-crickets-chirp/, [last accessed at 15:20 on 01/03/2021].

refers to accenting or stressing beats that are not typically emphasised. For instance, this can be easily demonstrated by counting "one and two and three and four", and placing emphasis on the up-beat, "and", rather than the downbeat, "number".

This syncopation of diegetic sound here is used brilliantly to emphasise a sense of unease within the scene. This technique is used commonly in horror scores. For example, the main theme of '*Hereditary*' makes use of the syncopated plucking of strings, and is highly representative of how this technique is used within the horror genre. However, to make use of this musical trope within the diegetic sound of a scene is revolutionary.

In his book '*In The Blink of an Eye*' Walter Murch describes how cutting to an angle not entirely different from the one prior, one that is "neither subtle nor total[30]" can be quite jarring and upsetting to the immersion of the film.

> "The displacement of the image is neither motion nor change of context, and the collision of these two ideas produces a mental jarring-a jump- that is comparatively disturbing."[31]

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[30] Walter Murch, *In The Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing, Second Edition*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, CA, United States, 2005, p. 7.
[31] Ibid, p. 7.

While I completely agree with Murch on this analysis of cutting, I think it is interesting to view this analogy from an audio perspective. Where the visual element would be entirely off putting and distracting from the scene, the same method applied to audio is subtle enough to not disrupt immersion, but also off putting and can be used for emphasis on something being eerie within the scene.

The second way in which diegetic sound is effectively used in '*The Haunting of Hill House*' can be seen in the transitions within the show. Up until episode six '*Two Storms*' the show transitions frequently between the past and the present fluidly. Some examples are as a phone rings it might transition to another phone in a different timeline, a child crying transitions to another time where another child is crying, dogs barking (indicating danger in the Hill House) but transitioning from dogs barking in the present, and the sound of banging nails transitioning to the sound of cleaning the chimney in the past.

Transitioning between the past and present is done seamlessly to indicate they are one and the same. The past and present are in a state of constant flux between each other back and forth throughout the show up until episode six when they visually blend between one another happening within the same space. As Nell puts it in the show:

"I feel a bit clearer now. Everything's been out of order. Time, I mean.
I thought for so long that time was like a line, that... that our moments
were laid out like dominoes, and that they... fell, one into another and
on it went, just days tipping, one into the next, into the next, in a long
line between the beginning... and the end. But I was wrong. It's not
like that at all. Our moments fall around us like rain. Or... snow. Or
confetti[32]."

This notion is preempted by the diegetic sound transitions throughout the show,

and lead to the most unexpected of plot twists and satisfying releases of tension.

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[32]The Haunting of Hill House, Mike Flanagan, FlanaganFilm, Amblin Television, Paramount Pictures,
United States, Season One, Episode Ten.

Effects

'*The Haunting of Hill House*' is neither afraid to join its contemporary horror elements while joining both the old and new influences of horror with its sound. To explain, the show has its typical jump scares, while also embracing the seen horror of '*The Exorcist*' or '*Midsommar*'. Throughout, a ghost might jump out, or a character's frame might distort etc. featuring a loud string of violins and cello to surprise the audience. Jump scares have solidified their place in horror ever since '*Cat People*' in 1945, and while they have entertained audiences ever since, I feel their place in narrative, or rather emotionally narrative media, has grown quite tiresome. Certainly not the first film to utilise this following technique, but definitely the one I find most memorable is '*The Strangers*'. Although utilising jump scares, the film has its horror 'villains' constantly lurking in the background of the shots. If you pause on most frames, you will see our protagonist being watched by her lurkers, which is something much scarier than simply popping out from the shadows, the fear of being watched or followed.

'*The Haunting of Hill House*' is not afraid to utilise this, with ghosts soundlessly lurking in the background, watching the family and their every move, but rather the ghosts manage to soundlessly play their own character. This leads back to the subversion of expectations. As I mentioned earlier, episode six plays a

distinct transition in the series. Up until this episode, jump scares are not frequent, but utilised tastefully. However during and after this episode, it flips from following ghosts through jump scares, to following ghosts soundlessly as if they were always there, which they were! "Only then do you notice that through various means sound ceaselessly influences what you see".[33]

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[33] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen, Second Edition*,, Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman,, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2019, p. 213

<u>Conclusion</u>

Film, much like every other artform, is in a constant state of evolution. With each new technique and era filmmakers build upon the foundations set by those before them, learning from both their success and failures. This stands true for the horror genre more so than others. Genres like drama or romance require only a good narrative to fulfil the audience's desires. Charismatic characters, a beginning, middle and end, a generally uplifting conclusion after a pragmatic second act, all follow formula for a satisfying end to a romance or drama. Horror differs as we are always entering the unknown and relying on the presumption that nothing on screen will be predictable. A genre whose entire purpose depends on fear and surprise cannot last long in a cycle of sub-genres as shown throughout my discussion of the history of horror. As the cycle becomes more predictable, the cycle dissolves, devoid of having fulfilled its intended purpose. Therefore, the horror genre is in a constant state of re-imagining itself, and revolutionising how we perceive on-screen fear. This is not to say that particular 'sub-genres' cease to exist, but rather their individual cycles of popularity wither. In contemporary horror the goal to make the audience afraid is no longer sufficient and audiences are left craving more. Viewers crave three dimensional characters and psychologically credible situations.

The current direction the horror genre is going in, is satisfying audiences expectations, leaning towards character driven stories, such as '*Get Out*' directed by Jordan Peele in 2017, which not only offers three dimensional characters but also focuses on socially relevant themes of ethnicity and race. Horror is evolving a bold new sub genre that blends credible psychological horror, realism and drama. Rather than attempting to directly scare the audience, films like '*MidSommar*' and shows like '*The Haunting of Hill House*', focus on the broader cinematic experience. With well developed characters, who are more engaging and relatable to an audience, viewers become anxious of what might happen to a beloved protagonist, rather than simply enjoying the thrill of being scared for the sake of being scared. The five living members of the Crain family all represent one of the five stages of grief after their sister's passing. As grief is undeniably one of the most ubiquitous human emotions, it is easy to relate with the family and experience horror both with them and in their shoes. I hope to have shown how this new sub-genre succeeds in hitting much closer to home.

Sound design within horror has evolved from a purely cinematic tool into something with endless possibility - with no right or wrong way of implementing it. Rather, the creative use of sound in film challenges sound designers to know

when and where to implement a preferred technique. I enjoyed my exploration of all of these great artists and their work to build the foundation of what horror is today, and it will be interesting to see what further rules artists will break to amaze, astonish and astound future audiences.

"The history of sound film is, like all true stories, a history of

events not occuring as expected".[34]

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[34] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art,* Translated by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, United States, 2009, P. 203.

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