

“SOUND-CONSCIOUS” SCREENWRITING: CONSIDERING SOUND AS STORYTELLING TOOL IN THE SCREENPLAY

BEN ALEXANDER SLATER
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
(SINGAPORE)

Ben Slater's many writings on film include *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore* (Marshall Cavendish: 2006). He's been a script editor for several acclaimed films and written two produced feature films *Camera* (2014) and *Malam* (2021). He's taught screenwriting at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore since 2010. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9679-9838>

Corresponding Author

Ben Alexander Slater

BASlater@ntu.edu.sg

Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

Schedule for publication

Published online: 29th December 2023

Abstract

This essay considers issues relating to how sound has been treated historically by screenwriters, and advocates for a more “sound-conscious” screenwriting practice. From my own position as a screenwriter and educator of student screenwriters I begin by looking at common assumptions about the use of sound in screenplays and explore the challenges of including sound as part of a screenwriting practice; then I develop a framework by which screenwriters can identify different categories of sound in order to recognise potential for using sound as a storytelling tool within screenplays. This leads to an analysis of two examples of what could be defined as sound-conscious screenwriting, *The Conversation* (1974) and *A Quiet Place* (2018) and the framework is also applied to a sample of recent unproduced screenplays. I conclude with thoughts about how ‘sound-consciousness’ can be encouraged through the pedagogy of screenwriting.

Keywords: Sound, screenwriting, narrative, creative writing, sound design, screenwriting history

Assumptions About Sound and Screenwriting

As I start this paper it is important to locate my own position in relation to the subject matter. I have written about film (mostly as a journalist and film history) and at the same time I’m also a screenwriting practitioner¹ who teaches screenwriting and narrative. Because of this I am approaching these topics with an interest in improving screenwriting practice, both for myself and for students. This subject highlights limitations in how screenplays are perceived – particularly by non-screenwriters. The notion, that I’ll be discussing, that sound is not an important element in screenplays, is part of a larger assumption that screenplays are for dialogue and the ordering of scenes. It is also assumed that the conceiving of filmic imagery or sound is the job of the director (assisted by their technical-creative team) and not the writer. On Andrew Kenneth Gay’s website *Screenplayology*², a resource for screenwriting teachers, he observes that “the average screenplay expends a vast majority of its page space on dialogue, often with little attention devoted to visual detail” and “a careful survey of the uses of sound elements in both filmmaking and screenwriting will actually draw attention to the limitations of the screenplay text where sound is concerned³”. This last point refers to the linearity of screenplays, which makes it difficult for the writer to convey the simultaneity characteristic of sound in relation to images or other activities on-screen. In Selma Purac’s essay on *A Quiet Place* (2018), a film I will explore in detail later, she positions the original screenplay as “a departure from the convention of dialogue-driven scripts which contain minimal details, very few sound cues, and no images” (Purac, 2021, p. 57), a statement that reveals a misconception of the scope of the screenwriter. Given that film as a medium began primarily

as a visual medium in the ‘Silent’ era, the original scenarists were required to write visually. When sound film became widely introduced in the late 1920s, there was an interest in deploying sound in expressive ways, not just through spoken dialogue and music. This is evinced in Helen Hanson’s study of the early period of sound in Hollywood, where she quotes from screenwriting ‘manuals’ that promoted the inclusion of sound as a dramatic element in scripts. Tamar Lane, for instance, in *The New Technique of Screen Writing* published in 1936, urged writers to “be ever alert to the possibilities and enhancement values of sound. If concentrated upon, the setting, locale, or action itself will always suggest sound effects that might otherwise be overlooked.” (Lane, 2019) Lane also pointed out that that writers could use “atmospheric noises” whose “source need not be shown” (*ibidem*). Another manual recognised the challenges of the “infinite possibilities” of sound (*ibidem*). However, this enthusiasm for ‘writing sound’ did not last, even as the technologies of sound recording, design, mixing and theatrical presentation became ever more sophisticated. A quick search through some of the best-known screenwriting manuals of the 1970s and 1980s, including Syd Field’s *Screenplay* or Robert McKee’s *Story*, reveals no significant references to sound at all. The screenwriter’s primary job – according to these books, is to create a compelling dramatic story structure rather than to think visually or sonically. A more recent book on screenwriting practice from 2008 recovers some of that original interest in sound for screenwriters, stating that:

some of the most powerful emotive experiences and memorable story-telling moments are enabled through the use of sound. Indeed, sound can be seen as the unconscious of cinema, whereby visuals carry

1 I have written two feature films, *Camera* (2008) co-written with James Leong, and *Malam* (2022), and script edited and consulted on several produced feature films.

2 Gay, A. K. *Screenplayology* <https://www.screenplayology.com> accessed 30/08/2023

3 Gay, A. K., *Screenplayology*, “3.7 Sound and Silence” <https://www.screenplayology.com/content-sections/screenplay-form-content/3-7/> accessed 30/08/2023

*surface meaning and content, and music and sound design create the emotional and sensory container through which that content can be mediated... though it is difficult to replicate on the page, a skilled writer can suggest evocative sounds at key moments to provide subtle, sophisticated storytelling.*⁴

(Batty & Waldeback, 2008, p. 157)

This sensitivity to sound is unusual. I've yet to see a screenwriting 'how to' guide devote a chapter solely on how sound can function in a screenplay, whereas many manuals have a substantial chapter on the best techniques for writing dialogue. This may be a symptom of a larger malaise in film production – that sound is generally not given full and proper consideration as a creative aspect of filmmaking until post-production, by which time it is too late to be truly creative. This is the view taken by sound designer Randy Thom, who, in one of the few articles to specifically tackle the issue of sound and screenwriting⁵, describes the marginalisation of sound in film generally. He proposes that sound deserves to be included at the very start of the filmmaking process – when the screenplay is written. For too long, Thom argues, sound in films has been thought of simplistically, connected directly to the visual events of a scene or story, without considering that characters in a filmic narrative are themselves listening and the sounds they hear may well reflect who they are. "The doors to successful sound design need to be opened in the script", Thom states. Therefore, the screenwriter:

*needs to create a pair of ears for the character, or for the camera, and give the character opportunities to use them, or fail to use them, and thereby tell us something interesting and useful about him/herself.*⁶

(Thom, 2019)

Thom calls for screenwriting that allows the reader to enter the character's interior soundscape and not just the 'direct' sounds of their reality. Whereas readers are more accepting of visual subjectivities in screenplays – characters 'seeing things', for instance – we are less used to aural subjectivities whereby we 'hear' sound (as described on the page) in the specific ways a character might hear them, heightened by emotions, adrenaline, paranoia or other extreme states. Thom goes on to list some of the ways sound can be used in a screenplay (and a finished film) as part of storytelling: to convey pace, space, character and atmosphere. Deploying these is a "skill-set most writers don't possess"⁷, and it is not enough to write about direct sound for a screenplay to be, as Thom says, "sound conscious", the writer has to experiment creatively with the sounds in the scene and those that the characters' hear. Following on from this I would like to expand upon this notion of *sound-consciousness* in the screenplay and for the screenwriter. This is harder than it sounds, because there are differences in writing sound, compared to writing images. In screenwriting, prose can convey the framing of specific shots, movement and rhythm. "Close on a hand", for instance, implies to the reader a close-up on a single hand, while "A vast cityscape", refers to a wide shot revealing a city viewed from a distance; phrases like "we move through" or "we head towards" infer camera movement; terms such as "beat", "moment", "pause" offer units of time; and line breaks

4 Batty, C., & Waldeback, Z. (2008). *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education, 157

5 Thom, R. (2019) *Screenwriting for Sound A Sound Effect* <https://www.asoundeffect.com/andy-thom-screenwriting-for-sound/> , accessed 30/08/2023

6 Thom, R. (2019) *Screenwriting for Sound A Sound Effect*, accessed 29 July 2022 <https://www.asoundeffect.com/andy-thom-screenwriting-for-sound/>

7 Thom, R. (2019) *Screenwriting for Sound A Sound Effect*, accessed 29 July 2022 <https://www.asoundeffect.com/andy-thom-screenwriting-for-sound/>

between scene descriptions function as implied edit-points, articulating sections of on-screen action have started and ended. This familiar and clear shorthand makes sense to a reader. When we write about sound things become complicated.

Michel Chion's influential writings on sound in cinema don't specifically address screenwriting, but much of what he discusses is relevant to understanding the challenge of 'screenwriting sound'. He provocatively asserts that there "is no soundtrack" (Chion, 1999, p. 1), by which he means that unlike images, sound in cinema is not experienced as a singular 'track'. Nor does sound have a 'frame' – it goes beyond the limits of the visual. Chion describes highly complex sets of "distinctly different triages of sound" (Chion, 1999, p. 3), triangulations occurring between the speakers in the cinema, the images on screen and the listening/spectating audience. Soundtracks (plural) consist of multiple sonic layers and elements, even at their most basic – music, background sound, voice and sound effects, are all potentially experienced instantaneously, fading in and out at different volumes and ranges, and placed alongside images that they may or may not relate to, which "are ceaselessly moving and changing" (Chion, 1999, p. 4). Not only is it often hard to define when a sound begins and ends in time, it may also be difficult to identify when a sound is real or unreal and/or diegetic or extra-diegetic. The ambiguity of sound is both the source of its power as a storytelling tool and precisely what makes it so challenging to write.

A screenplay is a resolutely linear document with a single textual 'track'. Even if a page can be divided into two columns for simultaneous dialogue (which screenwriting formatting software allows for), the reader has to decide for themselves what to read first, and the ability of the screenwriter to control the experience of reading a screenplay – through the specific ordering of events – is lost. Space on the page is at a premium; screenwriting is all about economy: picking

out key details of costume, setting, character behaviour, to stand in for the fuller, cinematic experience that is unwieldy to describe at length. So, it becomes a further creative task for the screenwriter to decide when and where to include sound-related information. We can posit that this difficulty in articulating clear ways to write about sound may well be a key reason for the lack of sound-consciousness in screenwriting.

Towards a categorisation of sound in Film for screenwriters

One step towards more sound-consciousness from screenwriters, which can also be applied pedagogically, is to identify categories of film sound. The objective is twofold: for writers to know the variety of sound-types that they can deploy in a screenplay, and also to gain a framework through which they can reflect on how they use sound and acknowledge 'gaps' in their writing practice. On his website *Screenplayology*, Andrew Kenneth Gay identifies an opposition between 'Situational' sound, which arises from events on screen versus 'Expressive' sound, which is more atmospheric and less tied to concrete reality⁸. And yet, as we know, the Situational can become Expressive and vice versa. Helen Hanson identifies four "principles" of sound as deployed in early Sound film. Sound to "narrate" (dialogue and literal, direct sound effects), to "situate" (create atmosphere through background sound), to "Locate" (sound emanating from places, locations) and sound to "characterize the agents of the film", which is related to character and less clearly defined (Hanson, 2019, p. 50). Chion (1999) has written about specific kinds of sound, locating that one of the most important distinctions in film sound is between sounds that emit from a source that is seen on-screen ("Visualized") versus sound from unseen sources, for which he uses the word "Acousmatic", a term taken from Musique Concrète composer Pierre Schaeffer. What's crucial

8 Gay, A. K. *Screenplayology*, "3.7 Sound and Silence" <https://www.screenplayology.com/content-sections/screenplay-form-content/3-7/> accessed 30/08/2023

is that both types of sound are always in relation to the image, what is seen and what is not-seen.

The framework I propose comes from my perspective as a writer rather than as a specialist in sound in cinema. I've no doubt a sound designer would develop a different and far more precisely detailed set of categories. The following framework is based on simple binary oppositions, illustrated in the table below:

Category A	Category B
Present Sound(s)	Absent Sound(s)
Visualised (Seen Source)	Acousmatic (Unseen Source)
Synchronous	Asynchronous
Objective/Concrete	Subjective/Emotional
Known/Familiar	Constructed/Imaginative

Table 1 Framework for categorising sounds to be used in screenplays for writers.

To clarify the terms: Present/Absent refers to sounds that 'should' naturally belong to scene or environment, i.e. the sound of passing cars if the scene takes place beside a road; Visualised/Acousmatic refers to whether or not we can see the source of the sound at the moment at which we hear it – which for Chion is the heart of the matter in his discourse on film sound; Synchronous/Asynchronous refers to whether the sounds are heard when we 'should' be hearing them, for instance a character 'remembering' the sound of telephone ringing heard on the soundtrack would be Asynchronous. Objective/Subjective refers to 'realistic' sounds versus sounds that are augmented, changed or introduced because of a character's emotional state; Known/Constructed refers to sounds that we are likely to be familiar with as opposed to sounds that didn't previously exist, for instance the sounds of future technologies or the creature in a horror film.

A sound can belong to multiple categories and this may be open to interpretation. Famously, the slowing and breaking train sound we hear when Michael meets and then murders Sollozzo at the restaurant in *The Godfather* (1972) is Acousmatic (we never see the source) and may even be Asynchronous and Subjective. It could be Michael's memory of a train sound (Asynchronous) or a completely imagined train sound (Subjective), either way it functions as a sonic expression of Michael's state-of-mind as he contemplates taking another man's life. I've shown this scene to students many times over the years and a significant amount are not even aware of the train sound existing in the scene until it is pointed out to them, confirming that sound often creates emotional or atmospheric effects unconsciously.

Sometimes the audience has to actively reclassify or aurally 'reframe' what they hear as they gain new information about its source. This is something that can occur more frequently with sound than it does with images. An example is the telephone ringing sound heard persistently (rising and falling in volume) in *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984) during a long sequence of scenes (nearly five minutes of screen time) which are worth recounting to track the likely audience understanding of sound in this sequence. The sound starts in the opium den where the protagonist Noodles (Robert De Niro) is smoking an opium pipe. It seems unlikely there is a telephone in the den (but not impossible). We then shift to a scene on a rainy street at night in the aftermath of the death of Noodle's friends (definitely no telephone there). Then we transition to what's clearly a flashback in the gang's club where, in the back office we finally see a telephone – an image that instantly re-frames the sound as coming from that source, but we soon discover – when the phone is picked up by Noodles to make a call – that this is a misdirection. The telephone continues to ring even as Noodles dials on-screen. We cut to the police sergeant's office and *another* on-screen telephone, which is then picked up. We are denied the satisfaction of ever knowing if

this telephone was the source, as the ringing sound switches into a high pitched quasi-electronic frequency that ‘plays’ in Noodle’s drug addled mind as he sits up from his stupor in the opium den. In an undated draft of the script available online⁹, this key sonic idea, of the recurring telephone ring, is written into the screenplay, which was not the case for *The Godfather* (Jarrett & Murch, 2000, p. 8). The telephone sound is stated as being in Noodle’s “mind’s ear” and “continues to echo in NOODLE’s head” and is described as “constant, nagging, surrealistic”, and even “swells” at certain points in the sequence, before going to “silence” at the end. The intention of this use of sound remained during the shoot and in post-production. In terms of the proposed categories of sound it makes the most use of sound types from Category B, even if the sounds change and evolve throughout the sequence. In the end, we never entirely know what category the telephone ring belongs to. We’re back to the ambiguity of sound.

One quick conclusion to draw is that while the framework is limited in trying to pin labels on ambiguous, unclassifiable sounds, the types of sound in Category B represent more creative and imaginative uses of sound in relation to story, whereas Category A are the expected sounds that directly support what’s happening visually on screen. As per Thom, the screenwriter who is sound-conscious will need to be working with Category B as much as Category A. So, with this in mind we can look at examples of sound-conscious screenwriting.

Exemplars of sound-consciousness: *The Conversation* (1974) and *A Quiet Place* (2018)

There are films in the history of cinema that are well-known for their use of sound, not just in one or two key or

famous scenes (as I’ve discussed above), but throughout their running time. These films exemplify ‘hyper-amplified’ sound-consciousness, placing sound at the centre of their narrative and formal constructions. Their protagonists are listeners and what they hear and how they hear is the primary driver of the narrative. The relationship between genre and sound cannot be overlooked. *The Conversation* (1974) written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, is part of a sub-genre of ‘Paranoid Thrillers’ that feature aural surveillance and secret audio recordings. They usually feature a protagonist, a professional listener (who is obsessive about sound and audio technology) who hears something they shouldn’t and is placed in danger, while also taking on the role of the detective, trying to comprehend what the recording signifies. *The Conversation* defined this sub-genre¹⁰, leading to *Blow Out* (1981) – in which a film sound recordist accidentally records the sound of a murder; *Diva* (1981) – the protagonist’s secret recording of an opera recital is swapped for a secret recording of police corruption; *The Lives of Others* (2006) – about a surveillance expert working for the Stasi in East Germany, which pays explicit homage to Coppola’s film in its obsessively listening protagonist; and more recently *Kimi* (2022), where the professional listener-protagonist is a tech-company worker, stuck at home during COVID, checking audio recordings made by an Amazon Alexa-type device and inevitably hearing a violent crime being committed. Beyond the surface details of the plotting – in which sound recordings are clues to be interpreted and Hitchcockian MacGuffins to be sought after – these are films about characters who have a fundamentally obsessive relationship with sound, it is a key part of their identity, and the way these characters in the films hear or mis-hear will be crucial to the narrative.

9 This uncredited, undated “early” draft of the *Once Upon A Time In America* screenplay is available to download (for education purposes) from Cinephilia And Beyond, <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/once-upon-a-time-in-america/> accessed on 30/08/2023

10 It has an antecedent in *Klute* (1971), written by Andy Lewis & David E. Lewis which also focusses on secret audio recordings (of a murder), and a protagonist who listens, but these elements aren’t as central to the plot. I suspect that Coppola’s bigger influence was Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), a film about a voyeuristic serial killer who bugs all the rooms in the building where he seems to be a tenant, but which he secretly owns – an idea that haunts *The Conversation*.

The screenplay for *The Conversation* has considerable changes from the finished film, as Walter Murch, the film's editor and sound designer has reported in interviews (Ondaatje, 2002). Several important scenes were not filmed, and some shot scenes were discarded, but much of the narrative, mood and texture, as well as many of the most important sequences remain close to how they were originally written.

The film begins with a sequence in which we observe a team of surveillance recordists, led by Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), attempt to (in his words) "get a big fat recording" of a couple in their 30s, Ann (Cindy Williams) and Mark (Frederic Forrest) as they walk around a busy civic square (Union Square in San Francisco), having a conversation that reveals they are having an affair and that they are aware they are under threat. Harry assumes they are afraid of his client, the 'Director' of a nameless company (in the screenplay he is called "Mr C"), who we later learn is married to Ann. After the recording, Harry proceeds to his warehouse-studio-office space to create the best possible 'mix' from the multiple microphones that he used to capture 'The Conversation'. When Harry goes to deliver the completed mix to the Director an underling (a young Harrison Ford) attempts to take it from him against the Director's supposed wishes. Perturbed, Harry returns to the recording to re-listen and to see if he missed anything important and begins a descent into aural paranoia. The script is – as expected – highly conscious of sound, referring to sounds and music frequently¹¹. Everyone Harry encounters has a relationship to sound, whether it's two characters with hearing aids, Harry's mistress Amy waiting for the sound of his arrival, a rival audio surveillance specialist, or Harry playing saxophone. Also, Harry hears (or we hear) many sounds, including construction, the cage elevator at

his warehouse, echoing footsteps, a distorted Latin American song, loud TV sounds and the muffled sounds of the murder that are only heard before we see the murder as silent images. Many of these sounds are Category B – Acoustic, Asynchronous, and as we will learn Subjective, there's also another type of sound that occurs during the opening of the film:

Some people block OUR VIEW temporarily; her voice cuts out. Now we SEE them again, but we HEAR only static and then TOTAL SILENCE, as though something has gone wrong with the sound track. Then it is corrected...

Coppola, F. F. (1974), *The Conversation* screenplay, 9

The static and silence become via Walter Murch's sound design a digitally distorted effect representing what Harry (and we) hear when the recording isn't clear or complete¹². This is a Constructed sound, and becomes a crucial motif, a sonic detritus that Harry has to clean up in the process of layering and – in one scene – filtering – the recordings to reveal what lies beneath.

It's clear from the screenplay that Coppola intended to return repeatedly to the scene of 'The Conversation' multiple times throughout the film, often as Harry's Asynchronous aural memories that are non-diegetic, and sometimes he's literally playing it again diegetically. Often we see as well as hear it, and sometimes we just hear it, as it 'plays' over events in Harry's life, such as when he's seduced by Meredith (a sequence that's very accurate to the script), or when he's forced to hear it again in the Director's office, and yet again in the hotel (again, the film version is very close to the screenplay).

11 This "final draft" of *The Conversation* screenplay was provided/corrected by Walter Murch and is available to download (for education purposes) from Cinephilia And Beyond <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/the-conversation/> accessed on 30/08/2023

12 "In fact, the only way he would be able to do what he does - remove an overlay of drums and reveal a voice behind - is by some kind of digital subtraction. If he's recording and the signal goes off, it would be interesting if, when it went off, the digital algorithm that underlays it is revealed" Walter Murch quoted in Jarrett, M. and Murch, W. (Spring, 2000) Sound Doctrine: An Interview with Walter Murch, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 9-10

Sound and image, often disconnected one from the other, are in a constant state of potential disruption, never allowing the audience to be comfortable with what they see and hear. Almost a year was spent editing *The Conversation*, re-arranging the scenes, solving narrative problems that arose from the missing scenes, and Murch and Coppola used sound, in the form of Additional Dialogue Recording (ADR), to add narrative information they felt was necessary for the audience to understand Harry's motivations. For instance, a new line is included during the Catholic confessional scene about an element of Harry's backstory that isn't revealed until later in the screenplay.

The most important difference between screenplay and film concerns the ultimate sonic clue that leads to its most dramatic 'reveal', the line "He'd kill us if he got the chance." When we first hear Ann and Mark speaking, as they are being secretly recorded, we don't hear this line – it is drowned out by loud music. When Harry makes his first 'mix' and in many subsequent playbacks, we only hear (and see) a fragment of it, as per the screenplay. The character Mark says "He'd", then subsequent words are drowned out or distorted, followed by "chance." In the screenplay, as in the film, Harry uses a device – "a little box; something unimpressive, and obviously homemade. A filter of some sort" (Coppola, 1974, p. 38) – to isolate the voice track until it yields the missing words/sounds "kill us". It isn't until sixty pages later, during Meredith's seduction, that Harry comprehends what this means, and says (to himself), "He'd kill them if he got the chance" (Coppola, 1974, p. 38). The complete version of the recorded line is not in the screenplay (at least not in the available draft). In the script the line that prompts Harry to realise that Ann and Mark are perpetrators rather than victims is "Do you think we can do it?" According to Murch, the importance

of the "kill us" line only became apparent in post-production, when Murch realised he had a recording of Frederic Forrest performing it with subtly different emphasis (Ondaatje, 2002, p. 406). The first version has emphasis on "kill", implicating the Director as a threat to their lives, but the second reading places the emphasis on "us", which – for the careful listeners in audience – reverses its meaning¹³. Mark is justifying their plan to murder the Director. This narrative device, of changing a sound/word that the audience had heard and trusted to be real (it's a recording on tape, rather than a memory or a flashback), and transforming its meaning in the process, is completely unique (as far as I know) in the history of cinema¹⁴. As Murch explains:

(...) we discover that Harry has—all along—mentally altered the cadence of the line, which is hypersubjectivity, because of what happened in the past... A line that has an innocent meaning at one time has a non-innocent meaning at the end. Harry has used all his technical filters to clarify the line. What sabotages him is the mental filter, the subjective filter that chooses to hear an inflection that isn't really there (...)
(Ondaatje, 2002, p. 385)

Vera Tobin, in her analysis of the film, considers the change in the sound of the line as a storytelling tool that forces us to "... understand (that) all the clips as having been, at least in part, instances of represented thought and perception---dramatizations of Caul's own mental soundscape" (Tobin, 2017, p. 26). She also connects it to Randy Thom's notion that what we, the audience, hear is filtered through the listening consciousness of the characters. This is the reason why *The Conversation* is worth dwelling on. While the 'changed line' conceit did not exist in the screenplay – we can still learn a lot from it as writers.

13 I'll confess that when I first watched the film on television in the 1980s I did not 'hear' the changed line.

14 Similar techniques have been used in films and television regarding misremembered scenes that are seen once then revisited in flashback to reveal what 'really' happened, for instance Leland Palmer replacing the demon Bob in David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks* (1989-90) but these are primarily visual changes, *The Conversation* is the only example I know of where it is the sound changes.

Of all genres, it is horror that arguably has the most consistent and productive relationship to sound. Horror films use sound (and silence) to create atmospheres, build suspense and also to shock and disgust the viewer. The genre is known for all manner of sonic effects and aural strategies, designed to immerse and distress viewers in ways that might be seen as avant-garde or experimental in any other genre, but are deemed acceptable in horror (Whittington, 2014, p. 168-185). One might argue that the use of Acoustic sound (sounds from unknown sources beyond the frame) as well as Constructed sound (the sound of uncanny or supernatural forces) is a result of the limitations of the visible, both in terms of budget and creativity. Sound is able to disorientate the viewer's imagination and effectively imply terrifying, unseen horrors. As a result of this, I'd argue that horror screenwriters are often more sound-conscious than their non-horror counterparts.

A Quiet Place was first written as a speculative screenplay in 2016 by Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, before being rewritten by director John Krasinski prior to production the following year. The original draft and the rewritten version (both of which are available online) are examples of extremely sound-conscious screenwriting. The original script is an interesting text in itself, because in the absence of dialogue (for the most part) the writers deliberately break many of the formatting conventions of professional screenwriting in order to convey the action of their narrative – which includes key sound effects. However, I will be referring to Krasinski's rewritten draft, as this is closer in intention to the produced film.

A Quiet Place takes a familiar horror or suspense trope: characters who have to stay silent in order to hide from a murderous figure, and extrapolates an entire story around it. In the near-future America has been invaded by a race of fast-moving human-devouring aliens, and as a result society has collapsed. The "creatures" are unable to see but are highly sensitive to sound – if they hear sudden noise,

they will attack the source within seconds. The film is set on an isolated rural farm where a family (mother, father, son, daughter) have survived by living as quietly as possible, and we quickly get to see the various methods by which they reduce or dampen sound, including covering walkways with sand, walking barefoot, using sign-language, and wearing headphones to listen to music. Every quotidian action from cooking to playing monopoly has to be made 'sound-proof' or they risk being attacked and killed. Whereas in the thriller sub-genre described in relation to *The Conversation* it's the protagonist (the professional listener) who has the primary obsession with sound, in *A Quiet Place* all the characters have to be intensely focussed on sound, because it is so important to their survival. The 'ticking clock' that builds tension is the mother's pregnancy and the imminent arrival of a baby – and all the potential sonic hazards this presents. One of the children Regan is hearing impaired and without her hearing aid 'hears' silence (Absent sound). This aural point-of-view is shared with the audience at several key moments, most memorably in the opening scene, when the family are walking home after a scavenger hunt in a nearby abandoned town.

HEAD ON, walking with the daughter... we now suddenly hear nothing. As she looks to be in her own world... So we are in hers. A smile breaks on her face as she walks and breathes in total silence. We walk with her for a long moment, when suddenly behind her (...)

(Beck & Woods, 2018, p. 10)

In this moment Regan is unaware that her younger brother has turned on a battery-powered rocket he took from a shop, which makes a bleeping sound. As her parents react to the noise with panic, terror and desperation (and of course they cannot yell out or scream), Regan can only watch "confused" in a silence that is shared with the audience. The sound only "rushes in" after the father has begun to run towards the boy to save him, and then:

THE MOST IMMEDIATE AND TERRIFYING COMBINATION OF SOUND ONE COULD EVER IMAGINE.

... A SHRIEK?... A SCREAM? ... A CRUNCH?

As written the sequence effectively has two sections – one silent (from Regan's perspective), then the sound returns as the father runs to try and save the son, and then we return to a state of 'natural' silence after the boy has been taken by the creature and is gone. In the finished film the script isn't closely followed. We hear a fragment of the rocket's electronic noise before we are plunged into Regan's silence – presumably so viewers wouldn't be confused by what follows. The silence in the film seems shorter than intended in the screenplay – it's only a moment in the film before some musical score is added and we hear the rocket bleeping, both musical score and sound gathering in volume and intensity before the boy is attacked. In the script the idea was to *not* show the creature at this point, but only hear it (which would be completely coherent in this sound-conscious world, as well as genre conventions), but in the film there is a brief shot of the (CGI-created) creature running out of the words to grab the boy, with fairly generic creature 'sounds' to accompany it. In the screenplay this sequence seems to be a perfect example of what Randy Thom means by the reader/audience being placed in the ears of a character, but while these ideas (cutting out sound, not seeing the source of the sound) are present in the film, they are compromised and made more conventional.

Nevertheless both script and film are at pains to explore all the sonic possibilities of the premise – using sounds and the suppression of sounds to create tension, much of it Acoustic, Constructed (all the creature sounds), Absent (Regan's hearing of silence) and introducing multiple props related to listening such as headphones, radios, microphones, hearing

aids and stethoscopes, and in the film's climax it's inevitable that the listening creature will be vanquished by a sonic weapon fashioned from these objects. Thematically, the film is about the primal need for human communication through speech and the emotional resonance of sound. The family's narrative 'problem' is not that they are under attack by alien creatures, but that the father is unable to tell his daughter that he loves her because of the trauma of losing his young son. In *A Quiet Place* sound has been made dangerous, but is inherently beautiful, natural and demands to be heard (a baby's heartbeat and Neil Young's song *Harvest Moon* for instance), and it will conquer both past trauma and the creature (the latter being a metaphor for the former). This is quite the opposite to *The Conversation*, where sound is unstable, untrustworthy and always echoes the listeners paranoia, trauma and neuroses. Both screenplays are not only sound-conscious but are about sound itself, and have radically opposing approaches to it.

Listening for sound in contemporary (unproduced) screenplays

The two screenplays discussed above are very specifically sound-conscious from their conception, but in order to test the framework's usefulness it would seem useful to examine screenplays that are not specifically sound-conscious in terms of narrative, and to find evidence of Thom's assertion that "(m)ost writers simply don't think about" using sound creatively¹⁵. I took a sample of six screenplays from the 2021 'Black List', the annual list of 'most liked' unproduced screenplays circulating around Hollywood studios, voted on by development executives¹⁶. The reason to focus on unproduced scripts was so that we can get a sample purely of screenwriting intention, and not then need to compare with the produced

15 Thom, R. (2019) *Screenwriting for Sound A Sound Effect*, <https://www.asoundeffect.com/randy-thom-screenwriting-for-sound/> accessed 30/08/2023

16 The official website of The Black List is <http://blacklist.com/lists/>. The screenplays are generally not published although circulated unofficially online. For this reason, I have paraphrased and kept quotations as brief as possible.

film. Each screenplay in this small sample was checked for the use of sound, the frequency of key words ('hear', 'listen', 'noise', 'silence', 'quiet', 'loud', etc.) and particular scenes in which sound is used as a key storytelling device, as opposed to supporting events and images on screen.

If sound was mentioned at all in the six screenplays then it was mostly from Category A. There are sequences that would, in production, require distinctive sounds, but are described on the page with scant reference to sound: a helicopter landing, a long set of scenes in a busy hospital, a house burning down, the testing of a plane engine, an extended scene in which five people are tied up and beaten, and several robbery set-pieces. Once you are reading a screenplay with a sensitivity for sound the lack attention given to it by writers can be surprising. In these screenplays, sound is used occasionally to introduce a new environment, i.e. the sound of rain, and off-screen sounds are used to build tension in a fairly simple way, i.e. the footsteps of an approaching assassin.

The exceptions are a handful of 'sound-led' sequences, which are worth some examination. In *False Truth*, a based-on-a-true-story drama, there is a key flashback to a scene when a mother accidentally drops her baby and is concerned about the state of its injuries. The baby cries – which causes relief, but then "goes limp again", implying, but not stating, that the crying stops. Later when the paramedics arrive the baby "cries out" again to the relief of those around.¹⁷ While the writers don't highlight the baby's silence, the tension in this set of scenes hinges on whether the baby is crying or not, and therefore sound (or absence of sound) is performing an important dramatic function. In *The Family Plan*, an action comedy, there is a sequence (Coggeshall, 2021, p. 33-34) where the protagonist, Dan, is driving a minivan at night with his wife and three children as passengers, all of whom are apparently asleep. When the van is attacked by

a pair of hitmen on motorcycles, Dan hopes to defend the family without disturbing them. Two of his children are wearing noise-cancelling headphones (thus blocking sound), so he puts a pair on his sleeping wife, so the ensuing mayhem can occur without waking her. Meanwhile, the baby of the family wakes up giggling, and Dan silences him with a pacifier. Sound and hearing are used here for comic effect, as Dan needs to defeat the hitmen and protect his family as quietly as possible. Given that Dan attaches a silencer to his gun, the sequence is a play on the double-meaning of what it means to 'silence' another person. In *Killers & Diplomats*, a political-historical drama set in El Salvador (McClain & Nourse, 2021), an underground anti-government radio station (which actually existed), Radio Venceremos, is a major plot element. A number of scenes take place within the building used for broadcasting, and there are descriptions of the radio equipment, the use of voice-distortion to hide a broadcaster's identity, as well as the sound of the radio being heard by people in the community, sometimes at risk to themselves. The radio's volume becomes a source of tension in some scenes and the broadcasts are a tool for revealing narrative information. Unsurprisingly, this is one of the more sound-conscious scripts in the sample, additionally using sound to evoke environments, create transitions, and deriving suspense from off-screen sound.

The only script from the sample that demonstrates Thom's ideal of the "pair of ears for the character" is *An Ideal Woman*, a psychological drama set during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The writer, Laura Kosann, is (based on this example) a sound-conscious writer, repeatedly using the phrase 'we hear' to bring sounds to the readers' attention¹⁸. In one scene an explosion goes off outside the protagonist's, Ann's home, and "we hear only her ears ringing and her heavy breathing". Moments later, her husband makes her wear a gas mask and "We are now inside the gas mask..." (Kosann, 2021, p. 30-32).

17 Berry, T.P and Gabaeff, I. & N. (2021), *False Truth*, unpublished screenplay, 34-37

18 It's far more common for screenwriters to use 'we see', to direct readers' eyes to visual elements.

The Acousmatic explosion gives way to the Subjective, interior sound of her injured ears and breathing while other sounds are excluded by the word "only". Later, "(w)e" hear the sound of the gas mask and voices become sounds, creating a subjective sound-led experience, contrary to a more expected technique – describing the visual viewpoint of Ann wearing the gas mask (and what she sees). The explosion episode turns out to be Ann's dream. She is awakened by the sound of a telephone ringing, and the caller is her mother complaining that she can't hear the radio. Sound continues to inform and be an integral part of the storytelling.

There are some basic observations that can be made from this small sample. Most of the writers don't feel the need to draw special attention to sound, or do so sparingly. They rely on the readers' familiarity with the sound of things (vehicles, guns, phones) and rarely feel the need to add to that. Only one script (Kosann's) explicitly uses Subjective sound, which I would argue is the key category in terms of demonstrating the expanded, embodied storytelling potential of sound. The vast possibilities of sound – to create tension, to disorient the viewer, to place us into the subjectivity of a character, remain very much under-utilised. What the sample demonstrates is that unlike the description of visual events – the appearance and movement of characters, environments and objects – sound is not a compulsory ingredient in a screenplay. As Thom states, this leads to less interesting or creative sound all the way through the filmmaking workflow, and this is evident in completed films.

Some ideas towards sound-conscious screenwriting

I'd like to conclude by proposing two areas for exploration related to this consideration of sound and screenwriting. Firstly, more investigation is needed into how screenwriters

currently use sound in their writing, not only to widen the sample of screenplays and notate how sound is treated, but also to explore different techniques of conveying sound in screenwriting prose and how effective they can be. The latter may be served by studying produced films to note the journey of sound from the page to the final result. If writers were more familiar with ways to express aural ideas on the page, and the possibilities for being more creative with sound, then this could lead to more sound-conscious screenplays.

The second area relates to the teaching of screenwriting at undergraduate level. One potential method for creating sound-conscious screenwriters is to have them write scripts and then produce them in audio form¹⁹. The objective is not for them to write 'radio plays' – they would still be creating cinematic scripts (which could later be filmed), but their writing would be influenced by the process of audio production for which they would have to consider specific sound effects, environmental and ambient sounds, music, qualities of voice, and how these categories of sound have the potential to be an integral part of storytelling.

While I do not expect a revolution in sound becoming a major component in screenwriting, I think it's clear that more can be done to encourage younger writers to know that it can be included (and how to do it) and that it has a vital role to play in telling cinematic stories.

REFERENCES

- Batty, C., & Waldeback, Z. (2008). *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education
- Chion, M. (1999). *The Voice In Cinema*, Gorbman, C. (Trans, Ed) New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁹ This idea should be credited to my colleague Dr. Ross A. Williams although I have since learned it is practiced in some Masters-level programmes for screenwriting.

Hanson, H (2019). *Hollywood Soundscapes*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Jarrett, M. and Murch, W. (2000) *Sound Doctrine: An Interview with Walter Murch*, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 9-10

Lane, T. (1936). *The New Technique of Screen Writing*. In Hanson, H. (2019). *Hollywood Soundscapes*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 53.

Ondaatje, M (2002). *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Toronto :Vintage Canada.

Purac, S. A. (2021). Selling "Silence" in Contemporary Horror: Krasinski's Quiet Consumers. In K. Woofter (Ed) *MONSTRUM 4*, Montréal: Montréal Monstrum Society, 49-81

Tobin, V. (2017). Viewpoint, misdirection, and sound design in film: *The Conversation*". In *Journal of Pragmatics*. Volume 122, 24-34

Thom, R. (2019). *Screenwriting for Sound A Sound Effect*. <https://www.asoundeffect.com/randy-thom-screenwriting-for-sound/> accessed 29 July 2022

Whittington, W. (2014). *Horror Sound Design*. In Benschoff, H. M. (Ed.) (2014) *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Wiley Blackwell.

Screenplays Referenced

Beck, S & Woods, B (2016). *A Quiet Place*

Beck, S & Woods, B and Krasinski, J (2018). *A Quiet Place*

Berry, T.P and Gabaeff, I. & N. (2021). *False Truth*, unpublished screenplay

Coggeshall, D. (2021). *The Family Plan*, unpublished screenplay

Coppola, F. F (1974). *The Conversation*

Kosann, L. (2021). *An Ideal Woman*, unpublished screenplay

McClain, J.T, Nourse, M. (2021). *Killers and Diplomats*, unpublished screenplay

Uncredited, undated screenplay, *Once Upon A Time In America*