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Sound's Role in Film Narration and 'Sonic' Storyboard.

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ABSTRACT :

This research aims to explore the role of sound in film narration and studies its influence on film's narrative as well as this study also delves into 'Sonic' storyboarding and how it distinguishes from traditional storyboard. Using a qualitative approach of data collection to obtain brief and personal data in an objective manner, we analyzed appropriate literature available on "sound's influence on film's narrative" and "sonic storyboarding" for a deeper understanding on the subject and we studied insights and personal experiences by professional sound artists, filmmakers and film scholars who have worked in industry with sound and understands the importance of the subject. This study led to three major findings about the subject: Sound's ability to drive narrative and enrich the overall experience of storytelling in a film, Sonic storyboard being able to create an emotional blueprint for a script in the pre-production phase itself, which could be helpful to understand and set a mood or ambiance of an emotion for audience to feel in particular scenes and sequences & Sound's contribution in conjuring visuals and acting as a previsualization tool. These findings contributes to the existing literature by highlighting importance of role in sound providing a deeper understanding on its certain amount of influence over narrative of a film and how it can maneuver or drive it as well, Additionally, this study also covers a fresh technique of creating a storyboard for sound or 'sonic storyboard' and its contribution in pre-production to create an emotional outline of the script or the story of a film, challenging conventional practices of incorporating sound in post-production instead.

Keywords: Sound Design, Audio Storyboard, Sound Storyboard.

Introduction :

Close your eyes and imagine listening- crashing of waves to a shore, screeching of seagulls near you, a loud blaring horn of a ship yelling in distant, sounds of heavy machinery, men working and shouting directions of loading and unloading containers surrounding you. Before any image flickers into the view, the visuals are already alive in your mind and a composition has been made. As it has been stated by Larsson, P., Västfjäll, D., & Kleiner, M. that sound has the extraordinary ability in creating an immersive experience that captivates audience and enhance storytelling (Larsson, P. 2004). Therefore, sound's ability to shape visuals can help improve the experience of storytelling of a film all in all.

'Story boarding' has been proven as a crucial tool for filmmaker to construct a visual blueprint of a script and its various sequences. However, in recent years, a new tool has emerged to provide a deeper emotional understanding among filmmakers and professional artist involved in the process of production of a film project. 'Sound Storyboard' or as Film Director and Screenwriter Joanna Hogg and Sound Designer Jonathan Webb (2018) coined the term 'Sonic Storyboard', is a relatively new method that has already showcased a significant impact on some recent projects, earning accolades and appreciation from critics and audiences alike. Despite its notable influence and traction in filmmaking and recognition from esteemed institutions and artists, a dedicated study on this technique has not been conducted yet. Ergo, this study aims to explore and analyze 'Sonic Storyboarding' and examine how sound can influence a film's narrative.

It is hypothesized that sound plays a crucial role and this technique can be very effective on the narrative and helpful to set order in emotional tonalities of film's storytelling.

This paper had been structured as follows: the next section reviewed available literature on 'sound's influence on narrative of a film', 'traditional storyboarding technique' and 'sonic storyboarding', discussing statements from professional artists based on their experiences in related fields. The third section presented the research methodology, followed by the fourth section, which discussed the findings, The study concludes with the final section.

Literature Review.

The use of sound in film has been evolved from being just a tool for enhancing realism in films with the help of voiced dialogues, background score, foley, SFX (sound effects) and so on; into a much more participating role on the narrative of film, its emotional engagement and to discover new possibilities in the realm of film production. This Literature Review focuses on the 'role of sound in films', elaborating on 'traditional storyboard' and emergence of 'sonic story boarding' while examining professional's insights from industry's well known names of sound design and film production.

Sound and its Influence on Film Narration.

A Significant amount of importance has been given to sound and the art of sound designing in visual narration of a story after a certain period, *Gustavo Costantini* (2018) elaborates a very fitting example of *'Walter Murch'* and his definitive work of sound design in Francis F. Coppola's *"The Godfather (1972)"* in which there is a crucial scene where *'Michael Corleone'* played by Al Pacino, is about to kill *'Sollozo'* (Al Lettieri) and *'McClusky'* (Sterling Hayden). During their meeting about *Don Corleone's* situation with other crime families, Michael asks to use the toilet and McClusky frisks him but finds no weapon, unaware that a gun is hidden in toilet. Using that gun Michael will be marked as a killer and a member of mafia. As Michael heads to the bathroom, Murch subtly introduces a train sound, suggesting trains nearby the restaurant. When Michael finds the gun, a louder, more metallic train sound is heard. Returning to the table, Michael waits for the right moment, and the loudest, most piercing train sound can be heard which reflects his inner turmoil and impending violence. This ascending progression in train sounds, a train which is not even in the frame, symbolizes Michael's escalating tension, demonstrating how appropriate sound application intensifies narrative tension and the character's emotional state (Costantini, G., 2018). This speaks a lot about sound's significant influence over cinematic narrative as it sparks details that lies beyond the frame, details which can be unreachable to audience visually but through sound they can experience that.

Noel Burch (1981) in his *"Theory of Film Practice"* explores cinematic space as a constitute of two different space: the space that lies within the frame and the space that lies outside the frame (Burch, N.,1981). Sharon L. McDonagah (2024) explains Burch's theory in her blog highlighting how Burch suggests that the film frame should not be considered as a limited boundary but rather a window to a larger world. Beyond every frame there lies a vast number of potential narratives, emotions and meanings waiting for the viewer's imagination to bring them to life (McDonagah, S.L., 2024). Sound can be one of the tools which can be used to activate audience's imagination and experience that unseen world of potential narratives. *Jonathan Glazer's* 2023 Historical – drama *"Zone of Interest"* perfectly instantiate this theory, the film deals with a heavy topic of Second-World War's Holocaust and real life events of *'Auschwitz Camp'*, film focuses on *'Rudolf Höss'* who was the 'Commandant' of the camp and his family leading simple and peaceful domestic life beside the infamous camp. Visually camera and film only follows the German family and its members going through their normal daily routines, which can be perceived as very ordinary on surface level but the audience is constantly reminded of the horrific acts of violence taking place in the camp by the sounds of suffering, gunshots, screams of agony filled in the ambiance around the family and their 'dream' home. "Audience's imagination is constantly invoked and provoked by what they hear throughout the movie and it remains horrifyingly ever present." comments Thomas Flight (2024) in his video essay on the movie (Flight, T., 2024). 'Zone of Interest' perfectly exemplify how sound can give a much deeper look emotionally and mentally in a story, the visuals of this film tells a story and the audio showcases a totally different narrative of that story, viewer can experience the atrocious acts of violence on innocent people without camera being ever panned towards any sort of violent act or even presenting any frame of violence in the entire movie whatsoever. Here sound not just influence the narrative of a film but creates images in audience's imagination that has not even been shown in the film, almost projecting another film which is taking place outside the frame or screen. Even Jonathan Glazer and the production team of 'Zone of Interest' addresses the visuals as "Film 1" which is in front of your eyes and the sound & audio of film as "Film 2" which is in front of your conscious.

Traditional Storyboarding.

A Storyboard is a sequence of illustrations or images that acts as a tool to per-visualize a script of a feature film before its production begins (Price, S., Pallant, C., 2015). Story-boarding has been developed as an essential technique in film-making to avoid clashes and ensuring a unified understanding of the story across different departments (Simon, M., 2006). Story-boarding aids filmmakers in creating a clear visual outline of the script which makes executing the production process much easier (Mou, T.Y, 2013). English Filmmaker *Sir Ridley Scott* (2014) who is well known around the globe for his works like *"Gladiator"* and *"The Blade Runner"*, has described storyboard as the first look at the film and what will eventually end up in the screen as the final results (Scott, Ridley., 2014). South Korean Writer and Director *Park Chan Wook* (2016) who has been recognized and celebrated universally by his masterpieces like *"The Handmaiden", "Decision to Leave"* and the famous *"Vengeance Trilogy"*, gives storyboard a lot of importance in his filmmaking process, as he states that it does not matter what happens on set, but what happens in pre-production is crucial, having a well ordered and detailed storyboard during the pre-production stage helps actors to understand what to expect for the scene and the visual guide helps them to prepare mentally in advance (Park., 2016). Storyboard can conceptualize how a scene or sequence would take place, minute details like camera angle or movement, light projections, location and sometimes even the color representations can be shown but it still will not be able to capture and present the emotional essence, variation, mood and tonal ambiance of the scene or sequence.

'Sonic' Storyboarding.

'Sonic Storyboard' in words of Sound Designer Jonathan Webb (2018) is a fresh approach towards sound designing as it constitutes an audio and sound-centric research in the pre-production stage of film production to clearly define the film's ambiance of storytelling, its narrative and explore its different emotional tonal and stylistic variations (Webb, J., 2018).

Here we are using the term "Sonic Storyboard" because one of the primary inspiration and example of this study was the work of Sound Designer *Jonathan Webb* and filmmaker *Joanna Hogg's* 2019 feature film *"The Souvenir"* and its following sequel *"The Souvenir Part 2"* 2021, pioneering the industry in this unique sound design technique and Film Scholar and Video Essayist *Thomas Flight*.

Sonic Storyboard is not supposed to replace traditional storyboards as they have two very different purposes in itself, A Sonic storyboard provides director a blueprint of emotional structure of the film, what moods and tones scenes and sequences must ooze to audience and overall emotional arc of the film and its characters will end up like, just how a traditional storyboard gives a visual guide for film's final visual structure. Jonathan Webb (2024) describes it in his own words "Its all about trying to encourage visuals as well as sound in the mind of director, sort of stimulating his or her imagination with

sound." in a conversation with Thomas Flight (Webb, J., Flight, T., 2024). G. Albert (2012) explains that Sound Design has been the key component in films to evoke emotional responses from the audience and enhance their viewing experience by increasing the emotional involvement with the story creating an immersive experience (Albert, G., 2012). BAFTA and Academy Award Winner sound artist *Randy Thom* have always been vocal about an idea of a sound storyboard he states that its been a tradition of sound to follow and visuals to lead, which is unusual because sound is as capable to suggest images as capable images are to suggest sounds. Therefore, a sound ideaboard/storyboard can be very helpful in film production (Thom, R., 2014). Instead of "Souvenir" and its predecessor "Souvenir Part 2" this technique of using sound to lead image can also be seen in production of Denis Villeneuve's 2021 "Dune" which is an adaption of David Lynch's 1984's similarly titled sci-fi, action-adventure "Dune". Mark Mangini(2021) the Emmy and Academy Award winner shares his experience, As the preparation of Dune's sound production were taking place in fall of 2019, after some creative meetings COVID forced Sound artist Mark Mangini and Theo Green to continue rest of the work from their home, initially they had to wait for working on certain scenes as the VFX team was yet to build mock ups for "Sand worm" (a giant Sand worm like creature present in the film's fictional world of "Arrakis") and "Ornithopters" (a sort of flying vehicle prop used for traveling in film's fictional world "Arrakis"), as traditionally sound is designed based on the visual result of a prop or an animated character, but creative freedom from director Denis Villeneuve allowed sound artists Mangini and Green to build those sound drafts earlier and preview them in the context of VFX, acting as a previsualization tool for VFX. This led to a collaboration with Sound Department, Hans Zimmer who produced the background score for the film and the VFX team, where sound influenced the visuals and the visuals influenced the sound, breaking the traditional norms of sound design being a 'post-production' process (Mangini, M., 2021).

Methodology.

This study focuses on exploring sound's influence over narrative in film, how sound can enhance film's meaning and overall experience with setting up a mood and appropriate emotional tonality in scenes and sequences. It also delves into 'Sonic story boarding' as a tool and probe over the assets it can bring in the process of film production. A Qualitative approach was decided upon to gain extensive data from archives, personal experiences and perceptions, which may not be possible with a quantitative method as good as a qualitative.

An elaborative case study design was adopted for a detailed examination of sound as a tool in film narration and it's power to drive visuals. Certain first-hand experiences were also noted, This design of approach gave us a brief understanding in terms of process of filmmaking. Expert sampling were used to study professional artists, filmmakers and scholars who have worked intrinsically in relation with our topic. Their publicly shared insights and experience related to the subject were taken on record. Public interviews and conversation were observed and analyzed to collect data regarding the subject. Relevant documents and literature was also reviewed thoroughly, and their work and films was also analyzed for relatable information.

All this data were analyzed in a thematic manner, distinguishing collected data to themes, further on reviewing each theme and defining them under a headline, describing it's relevancy to the research. Data from interviews and documents were cross-checked to validate the findings. All the data we collected is clearly cited with it's address of source to maintain a transparent and ethical research. While the study faced limitations such as lack of availability of data on the topic and reliance only on publicly available information by handful of experts, this study still managed to explore sonic 'story boarding and sound's influence on film narration'.

Result and Findings.

Findings after a brief analysis of the data presented on the respective topic unveiled three major themes:

1. **THEME 1:** Sound driven narrative.
    There is been very clear and prominent examples of sound's power to dominate the narrative in place of visuals, *"Audience's imagination is constantly invoked and provoked by what they hear throughout the movie and it remains horrifyingly ever present." comments Thomas Flight (2024) in his video essay on the movie" (Flight, T., 2024).* Observations and analysis of Jonathan Glazer's 'Zone of Interest' and Thomas Flight's video essay states concretely sound's influence over narrative.
2. **THEME 2:** Creation of Emotional Structure.
    Sonic Storyboard established its use as a device to explore and define the emotional arc or mood of the film. It has been mentioned and discussed very briefly, how sonic storyboard can explore the variations and create a structure of emotions which can resonate to audience with the film, delivering meanings and details which could not be delivered by any other medium.
3. **THEME 3:** Pre-visualization Tool.
    This outcome of sound as a "Previsualization tool" came in a form of byproduct of sound's ability to lead visuals and narrative. As we studied sonic storyboard's role in pre-production phase, we learned how it can help drive visuals for VFX process as a previsualization tool. *"This led to a collaboration with Sound Department, Hans Zimmer who produced the background score for the film and the VFX team, where sound influenced the visuals and the visuals influenced the sound, breaking the traditional norms of sound design being a 'post-production' process" (Mangini, M., 2021).*

Conclusion.

This paper aimed to explore sound's impact on a film's narrative and its ability to enrich the storytelling overall with and analysis of 'Sonic' Storyboard as a tool in film production. Results and findings stated sound's influence on a narrative of a film and how with creative and powerful use of sound can significantly improve a film's overall experience. Sonic Storyboard's ability to create an emotional blueprint of a film in pre-production stage of film and how sound can also play a major role in pre-visualization stage of VFX production as well.

These findings can play an important role in art of filmmaking as it explores sonic storyboard which is relatively a very fresh addition to the film industry in terms of techniques traditionally used in filmmaking. The methods of using sound effectively and even lead the story at times can aware budding filmmakers, scholars, film students, audience and other film enthusiasts on importance of role of sound which may help improve the art of filmmaking. This study brings attention to an important topic but not without limitations. The sample size was relatively very small as technique like 'Sonic Storyboard' is still a very new concept to have a certain amount of data or knowledge even among experts, Therefore, the reliance of on data from limited sources and professionals may lead to a lack of objectivity. Future study should consider a larger and much more diverse pool of samples and adopt more data collection methods for a more objective study. Further studies can explore more deeper about 'Sonic Storyboard', whether about its limitations or success rate of achieving pragmatical applications. One topic which arises is sound's influence over narrative among various genres of film or Application of Sonic Storyboard in different genres of films.

In conclusion, this research showcases that sound possesses a significant ability to shape and drive visuals while it can also improve narrative structure of a film if sound is used creatively also film can be provided with an emotional structure in pre-production phase itself with the emergence of sonic storyboard. Art of Filmmaking is older than a century itself, there has been a number of innovations in technology, techniques and methods throughout the decades. Many great filmmakers and film movements has revolutionized the whole globe with their breakthroughs in this art for years and it is absolutely astonishing how this art is still evolving and meliorating till this date, and with time it will continue to do so.

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