

# Filmic Silence

*An analytic framework*

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## Table of contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I.WHAT IS SILENCE?.....</b>	<b>10</b>
SILENCE IN REALITY: THE ORDERS OF SILENCE.....	11
<i>Metaphorical silence.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Silence by negation.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Actual silence.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Virtual silence.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Absolute silence.....</i>	<i>15</i>
SILENCE IN FILM.....	15
<i>From the silent film to the soundtrack.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Theoretical approaches to silence in the soundtrack.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Bloustien's modes of silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Théberge's forms of silence.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>II.SILENCE AND SOUNDTRACK ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
CLAUDIA GORBMAN AND MICHEL CHION ON FILM MUSIC .....	33
SILENCE AND SUTURE.....	38
TRANSPOSING GORBMAN.....	43
TRANSLATING CHION.....	46
ALTMAN'S SOUND ADVANCE.....	52
<b>III.SEMIOTICS OF SILENCE.....</b>	<b>55</b>
SYMBOLIC SILENCE.....	59
ICONIC SILENCE.....	64
INDEXICAL SILENCE.....	69
<i>A special case: Breaking the fourth wall.....</i>	<i>74</i>
CONCLUDING.....	76
<b>IV.IN CONCLUSION: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>87</b>

## Introduction

Imagine a film scene with a child running through a field of barley on a sunny day. The image is underscored with a string quartet playing a soothing homophonic melody in 4/4 time. A sense of peace and calm is suggested. Perhaps the film is a period piece, perhaps just a family or adventure film. Now imagine the child running through a field of barley on a sunny day with a pulsating bass underscoring the image. In mainstream cinema low pulsating bass figures have come to suggest danger. We interpret the same image now as the child being in a dangerous situation and probably running away. This example is similar to many others found in texts on the interplay between sound and image and the importance of sound therein (cf. Gorbman 1987, Tagg 2006, Binns 2009). An image is described and the difference sound can make in the interpretation of that image is shown. I would like to add to this rather standard example by continuing it with a dramatic effect rarely discussed. Imagine the same scene. The soothing homophonic melody fades out and silence remains while the child is still running through the field. The image does not cut away, but stays with the child. The feeling of peace now fades away with the music. At first, a spectator might expect the image to cut to another image soon. The longer the image stays with the child running through the field of barley in silence, the more a sense of restlessness comes about and questions arise. We find ourselves wondering what will happen. In the same scene, but with the pulsating bass underscoring it, this dramatic effect is more immediate and present. A sense of danger is suggested by the underscore and when the sound is subsequently cut off and silence remains, we expect this danger to present itself. The silence presented in these examples is not a mere gap between sounds, however. It is filled with meaning. The semantic content of the silence is ambiguous, however. There are no clear-cut applications of meaning through silence. Although it is used to great effect in suspenseful genres and silence has become a horror trope, this does not mean

that the meaning of silence is standardised. Even in horror or thriller films silence fulfils an ambiguous role, as I will show. More often than not silence functions in these genres as a device to bring about expectation. During the sustained silence and before its resolution our engaged minds fill in the rather literal blank with suspicions, guided therein by contextual information derived from the accompanying imagery and soundtrack. It is often only in the resolution of silence that the suspected meaning is consolidated. The monster shows itself, or someone dies. Each genre has its own musical and sonorous tropes that a spectator has grown accustomed to. In a way a spectator expects these tropes to present themselves when appropriate. In a romantic film a kiss can be just a kiss, but a kiss underscored with a violin melody has meaning for those competent in decoding the audiovisual relation (cf. Kassabian 2001, 20). The people kissing are bound to end up together, or have finally overcome the obstacles that make for a great love story. A punch in real life will definitely not sound as loud as in action films, but a punch in an action film that is not represented through its iconic sound is not a real punch. Silence is a more ambiguous auditory device, however. Usually this silence is evoked by lowering ambient volumes and creating a feeling of silence rather than a complete disappearance of sound. The evocation of a sudden complete silence can puzzle spectators because it is a rather direct confrontation with the film and its artificiality. Without the guiding hand of the soundtrack spectators are left with two options. A spectator can invest in the film and interpret the image accompanied by silence in a meaningful way, or the spectator can become alienated. The sudden lack of auditory atmosphere can break the cinematic illusion by taking away the immersive cocoon of sound that separates the cinema from the real world. Reality sneaks back in the experience of what then becomes watching a mime show in the dark surrounded by strangers and strange sounds. A spectator does not usually want to hear other people during the cinematic experience. Think of the aggravation that is brought about by people talking or all the little noises of crisp bags and soda cans being

opened. These noises remind us that we are not alone in the theatre and distort the imagined reality of the filmic experience; that we give meaning to the film, and the film gives meaning to us. This bidirectional relationship of confirmed existence becomes a pressurized environment by the intruding presence of third parties, i.e., other people.

This paper will deal with the first kind of silence. Silence that is interpreted by a spectator and for which subsequently a meaning is created. The different questions relating to this kind of meaningful silence all stem from the interaction between spectator, image, soundtrack, and narrative. The director's intentions show themselves in the use of silence in contextual relation to imagery and soundtrack, but the meaningful interpretation of this silence lies with the spectator. Complete silence, where all the volume faders have been brought down to zero to bring about a complete absence of cinematic sound, is rarely encountered in mainstream cinema. Different kinds of silence have come into existence with the development of the multi-track soundtrack. The multi-track soundtrack has made it possible for different sounds to sound together. Speech, ambient sounds and music can all be balanced against each other at the same time. This means that one element in the mix can be silenced with intention, contrasted against the dominance of the other still sounding elements. It is certainly not the case that the absence of one element in the presence of others always means something. But it *can* mean something. I believe that the balance in meaning creation lies more with the spectator than with the film's creators. It is this question that will be my main focus: what can silence mean? Furthermore, how does it bring about meaning? In order to answer this question I will not focus on explaining different silences with different meanings in different situations. Music can mean different things to different people. Think of how *A whiter shade of pale* is a ceremonial song in weddings for some and an intensely tragic and sad song for others. The same is true for film. *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) is a thrilling action film for some people, while others see it more as a futuristic commentary on

the contemporary technological dependence of humanity. Both interpretations are perfectly valid and not mutually exclusive, nor does it matter for the satisfactory enjoyment of the interpreting spectator what James Cameron's intentions were in creating this film. This is akin to what Roland Barthes calls the "death of the author", where meaning is eternally created in every here and now of every enunciation (Barthes 1977, 154). A spectator watching *The Terminator* for the second time will notice other things or be in a different state of mind and consequently the interpretative process of the film will be altered. A better question, then, is how we can analyse different meanings of silence. The goal of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of silence in film. The question of what silence *is*, is the foundation whereupon such an analysis necessarily has to be built. As long as silence itself remains ambiguous, so will its analysis remain incomplete.

The first part of this paper addresses the different forms of silence, where I first distinguish between silence in reality and filmic silence. Complete silence in film is not, and can never be, the same as complete silence in reality. There are different kinds of silence in our perception of the world, but a total silence is impossible to perceive since our own bodies produce sound, however minimal. Filmic silence exists in more forms than complete silence. It merits historical and categorical differentiation. True filmic silence only comes into existence with the advent of the sound film (Richie 2002, 7). The silent film was hardly ever silent, more often than not a musical accompaniment was provided in the cinema (Altman, Jones, and Tatroe, 2000, 346; Buhler and Neumeyer 2014, 19-20). The music accompanying the silent film was not inherent to the film, however, which gave rise to many different performance practices (Buhler and Neumeyer 2014, 19-20). The lack of sufficient source material for this period of time also means any analysis of the experience of silent film music can only ever be incomplete. The advent of the sound film makes a homogenous performance possible, giving the filmmakers more control over the filmic experience they want to put

forward. The synchronisation of sound and image is what makes silence a semantic possibility. With the development of the multi-track recorder the semantic possibilities for sound, and thus for silence, increase (cf. Altman, Jones, and Tatroe, 2000) . The framework for analysing sounds in the multi-track era already exists (diegetic and non-diegetic music, sound, and speech) and it is this framework I will use when discussing silence in the multi-track soundtrack. Transposing, as it were, these different concepts into their equivalent silent counterparts will allow me to develop different forms of silence. Paul Théberge (2008) and Gerry Bloustien (2010) put forward different forms of silence based on their narrative function. Both primarily deal with silence in a narrative context and confine their forms of silence to the artefact of the film. They lack an analysis of the underlying mechanisms of how meaning in these silences come to be, which is the spectator interpretation.

A more complete analysis of silence in its narrative context requires an investigation of its functionality, how silence works. The next part of this paper deals with the interplay between narrative function and perception of silence in the soundtrack. Although film analysis tended to prioritise the imagery over the auditory for a long time (emphasising the spectator, the gaze, and the mirror-stage, cf. Dickinson 2003, 1), analysis of sound and its function in film has a rich psychoanalytical history as well (cf. Altman 1980, Doane 1980, Jean-Louis Baudry and the commentary thereon by Noël Carroll in Braudy and Cohen 2009). I do not confine myself to a psychoanalytical approach, however. Rather, I derive the concepts to analyse silence from the many traditions of soundtrack analysis in traditional film theory. These theories and their concepts already cover part of the psychological and psychoanalytical workings of the soundtrack. Connecting these concepts to their counterparts in silence provides additional analytical tools that can be used in analysis. Specifically, I will continue the work by Bloustien and Théberge by adding concepts I develop primarily from Claudia Gorbman (1987) and Michel Chion (1994). The seminal work by Gorbman and

Chion serves as the basis on which I build my theoretical approach of filmic silence. In this part I chiefly discuss relational and functional aspects of silence in order to complete the conceptualisation of what silence is and how it can be analysed in itself and in relation to context. The next part will then shift the focus from the ways silence relates to its context (cf. the modes of silence by Théberge and Bloustien) and how silence functions in this relation (derived from Gorbman and Chion) to this relation itself.

In the third chapter I discuss the relation of silence to the object it represents through an extensive discussion of the ways the Peircian sign-object trichotomy (icon, index, symbol) is applicable to silence. The ambiguity of silence creates a complex sign-object relation due to silence's empty form; silence is a zero-form signifier (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994). This means that silence derives its content from contextual use. The relation of silence to its context has been discussed in the previous two chapters. The relation of sign to object will, in the peculiar case of silence, come to mean a relation of sign to context. This chapter also deepens the understanding of the way information is decoded through the interpretation of silence. Moreover, it is the interpreting subject's competence in decoding silence which matters most in the filmic experience of silence. This means two modes of analysis can be developed from my theorisation of silence. The first approach is a more objective mode of analysis that discusses, in line with Bloustien and Théberge the ways silence relates to its context. The second approach adds to this mode of analysis with a more subjective aspect, namely the ways an analysis of the possible experience of filmic silence, i.e., the ways filmic silence can be decoded by a spectator. There are of course myriad different film making traditions with equally as many different uses of sound in the soundtrack. It is necessary to confine myself to one tradition therefore. I discuss mainstream Hollywood films first and foremost. Films from non-Western or avant-garde traditions of filmmaking have a rich history of using silence and can be objectively analysed with the same concepts in most cases. A discussion of subjective



sign decoding is only possible if the analyst is versed in the particular cinematic tradition. Moreover, not all non-mainstream films are concerned with a narrative or spectator immersion per se, however, and these would require a different approach. The framework I provide is based on the experience of silence as a narrative device in feature films. Many examples found in articles and books discussing silence already deal with avant-garde films, moreover, for they do provide excellent case studies, albeit of a more individual nature and less applicable on the generic cinematic experience.

## I. WHAT IS SILENCE?

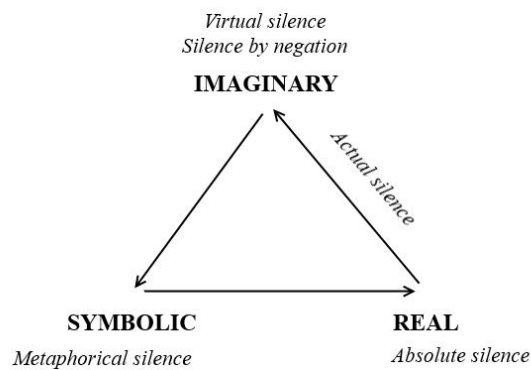
An attempt to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of silence in film would best start by defining its research subject. The problem with studying silence is that a single definition does not do this subject justice. Strictly speaking silence might be defined as the absence of sound. This in turn raises another problem, for in a physical sense silence as the absence of sound is impossible for us to experience. Any living being's body produces noise, however minimal. In an anechoic chamber it can be so quiet you can hear your own blood pumping. A definition of silence as the physical absence of sound would produce a rather short analysis of filmic silence and its experience, then: it is impossible, there is none. The experience of silence is a phenomenological reality, nonetheless. We can easily imagine ourselves in a silent place where silence reigns despite our possible presence. The symbolic one minute of silence that is held in remembrance of the deceased is a case in point: despite the presence of perhaps thousands of people the experience of silence is no less real. This one minute of silence is a request for the attending public to be silent, but the sounds of birds, wind, airplanes, and crying babies can all penetrate this silence easily. The case of a crying baby during a minute of silence is interesting, for it forces us to acknowledge that we cannot expect an infant that is not yet in control of its body to be subject to the same rules as the rest of society. Silence in this case is a social construction, asking to control one's self for one minute. It is an opportunity for reflection and a sign of respect. It also a request to submit one's self. "Confronting silence by uttering a sound is nothing but verifying one's own existence", wrote Toru Takemitsu (1995, 17), a Japanese composer who engaged with the tension between sound and silence in his writings, compositions and film scores. For one minute, then, we submit our foremost way of confirming our existence to the memory of those who have died. In this case silence is a sign of respect for the dead, but silence signifies

respect in other situations as well. Think of silence in libraries, or the silence that imposing surroundings strikes us with. Standing in awe of something usually also means standing in silence. Silence is doubly ambiguous, then. Not only can it be different things in itself (absence of sound and perceived absence of sound), and it can have different meanings in different situations (control, submission, respect). An analysis of silence needs to unravel the complex interactions between these two factors. My goal of providing a framework for the experience of filmic silence introduces another element in this relation, namely our experience and interpretation of this complex ambiguous concept as it is represented through film. Rather than diving in the maelstrom of interwoven connotations and meanings and struggling to stay afloat I approach this wobbly tripod of interrelations by each of its legs. The first leg deals with what constitutes silence in – for lack of a better word and in contradistinction to film – reality. In earlier work I have theorised the existence and categorisation of different forms of silence in collaboration with Isabella van Elferen. We developed five orders of silence that can be distinguished as answer to the question of what silence is, or what kind of silence is present. In referring to these different silences in reality I shall use the designation of “orders of silence” throughout this paper to avoid confusion with the mediated “modes of silence” I discuss in film and to keep with the terminology used by van Elferen and myself.

#### **SILENCE IN REALITY: THE ORDERS OF SILENCE**

The five orders of silence in reality that can be distinguished are metaphorical silence, silence by negation, actual silence, virtual silence, and absolute silence. Each of these forms has a different theoretical background, although they interlock and complement each other. Silence by negation and virtual silence are phenomenological forms of silence, actual silence is ontological, and absolute silence is metaphysical. Yet each of these forms coexist, which serves to illustrate the ambiguous nature of the concept. Moreover, these forms often derive

their interpreted meaning from each other. A Lacanian perspective on these relations elucidates their connections. Seen through a Lacanian lense, metaphorical silence is connected to the order of the symbolic, silence by negation and virtual silence are connected to order of the imaginary, absolute silence is connected to the order of the real, and actual silence negotiates between the imaginary and the real:



### ***Metaphorical silence***

The most common conception of silence is metaphorical silence, which also makes this the most ambiguous order of silence. It is silence as auditory metaphor, representing absence and abstinence in their broadest cultural applications. Silence is a hollow symbolic without fixed meaning (cf. Lacan's concept of the pure signifier in Lacan 1993, 185). This lack of inherent meaning makes it a vessel for projection of meaning, reflecting our own interpretation in which we are guided by context. As such, metaphorical silence has become a genre-specific trope of horror and Gothic (cf. van Elferen 2012), but can be found outside these genres in similar applications as well. In horror and Gothic silence can be absence of a connection to reality or life, conjuring up otherworldly places and extraordinary events. In our projection of these meanings we are unconsciously guided by contextual literary descriptions or auditory

ambience. The role of context is especially telling in horror films and television, where turning off the volume and thus rendering the whole film silent disables its power to make specific silences threatening (often rendering the whole film comical rather than frightening). In the example of the memorial service silence is absence of human-produced sounds (speech, mobile phones) as a sign of respect, self-control, and reflection. Silence as abstinence can be found in monastic orders, where silence represents serenity and calm and deters sin (Gehl 2008, 136-137). In the visual arts silence is the stasis of sculptures and images. The sculpted figures are depicted in a frozen moment in time, they have been silenced throughout the ages. The void represented by sculptures and paintings forces either an alienated disinterest or an empathic personal interpretation of the visual stimuli presented. This makes silence such an interesting concept in film where silence is interpreted through both contextual sounds and visuals, creating a very personal and direct cinematic experience.

### ***Silence by negation***

Silence by negation is the silence we think of when imagining what the absence of sound could be like. It is silence we can imagine experiencing. The silent places we might imagine ourselves in are nonetheless never silent. They are merely very quiet, and yet we speak of silence being present there. We ignore the sounds present (even in the quietest of rooms you can hear your own blood pumping) and perceive our surroundings to be silent. This is what John Cage meant in stating that “there is no such thing as silence” (Cage 1968, 8). Silence by negation is the form of silence that negotiates between the complete absence of sound and our perception thereof. It is a phenomenological form of silence. Silence by negation is the silence in film evoked by sound engineers who do not wish to confront the audiences with the complete absence of sound but rather create moments of very low volume ambient sounds.

### ***Actual silence***

Although we can never experience silence, but this does not mean that extracorporeal silence does not exist. Actual silence is silence in its physical form as the limit of sound. A sound wave is a propagating vibration which originates at some point in time and space. Each sound is delineated by silence, from whence it is born. In a physical sense this silence can be seen as the rest state of the sound source. Silence is sound's limit and sound is in the same way the acoustic limit of silence. Actual silence is an ontological form of silence. It describes the existence of silence and sound, how they can Be. One important consequence of this is that when sound *is*, ontologically speaking, silence *is* as well. Silence exists through sound's existence. Sound and silence are defined by each other. This also elucidates why we, as corporeal source of vibration, cannot experience silence unless in rest state, i.e., dead.

### ***Virtual silence***

Virtual silence is a result of the existence of the previous forms of silence. If actual silence is the physical limit of sound and explains how silence exists through the existence of sound, virtual silence explains how silence exists *in* sound. Virtual silence occurs when a new sound is created amidst existing sound. This new sound is defined by its previous absence. Despite the fact that a sound is already present, the creation of an additional sound means that there is a silence as limit of the newly added sound. The sound already present is necessarily negated to present the silence broken by the newly added sound. Virtual silence constitutes a specific combination of silence by negation and actual silence. It is the phenomenological making the experience of actual silence possible. Virtual silence is the silence that exists in the infinite space next to perceptible sounds. An important consequence hereof is that the other forms of silence can be present in virtual silence. Almost every cinematic experience of silence will be

virtual silence. It is the experience of silence when perceptible sound is present, as opposed to silence by negation where the sounds present are unconsciously ignored, made imperceptible.

### ***Absolute silence***

Absolute silence is the silence beyond sound. It is not sound's limit or horizon but rather its impossibility. As a sound wave is a vibration, absolute silence can be found where the propagation of this vibration is impossible due to lack of atomic proximity, like in a vacuum (e.g., outer space). Absolute silence is not limited to the physical reality of sound or its temporality, but rather inhabits a space and place of its own. It is a metaphysical silence, a place of nothing. It is a powerful manifestation of the real. This order of silence also elucidates the different connotations of silence with the uncanny, the absence of reality, the great unknown. These meanings resonate through all orders of silence. It also elucidates the power and ubiquity of silence as representation of the fears and anxieties brought about by the possibility of an encounter with absolute silence. Silence as an authorial device plays with these relations between the subject and the unknown.

These five orders of silence can be used to analyse filmic silence, the authorial device I am concerned with here. These orders only elucidate the kind of perceptible silence that is presented. In the representation of reality that is film we can find different representations of silence. Most of these silences will be metaphorical and virtual silence in different combinations. A complete analysis of filmic silence incorporates the relation of these silences to the image, the narrative, and the spectator experience thereof.

### **SILENCE IN FILM**

Filmic silence encompasses what silence is (the five orders of silence) and adds a filmic layer of representation. It would do the art form of film no justice to approach filmic silence as a

mere representation of 'real' silence, however. An analysis of filmic silence necessarily encompasses more than a simple categorisation of the silence presented to us in a film in the five orders of silence. Such a clear-cut categorisation of silence omits the relation to the narrative, the image, the whole soundtrack and the spectator experience. Moreover, the orders of silence tend to combine in complex ways in their filmic representation. Not all orders of silence can be recognised in the experience of film, however. The cinematic experience I am concerned with focuses on the experience of filmic silence by living spectators, making actual silence impossible. Absolute silence is impossible to experience as well, but rather resonates through the other orders. If the volume of the film soundtrack is completely turned down we might experience silence. This is silence by negation, where we ignore the sounds made by ourselves and the other spectators. If a film presents a silent moment with low volume ambient noise, however, we experience silence by negation as well. We ignore the sounds of the spectators as well as the ambient sound presented in the film. We create a silence by negation in the virtual silence present in the film. While it is possible to categorise silence in this way many of the semantic possibilities of silence in film are ignored. The spectator is guided in the interpretation of semantic content by the relation of the currently presented silence to the corresponding images and the rest of the soundtrack. The relation between silence, sound, image, and the spectator is completed by the inclusion of narrative, which is more than simply the sum of sound and image. It is through the combination of these factors that the semantic possibilities for silence are created. A framework for analysing filmic silence needs to take these semantic possibilities into account, for it is through an analysis thereof that the underlying mechanics of filmic silence can be laid bare. One requirement for such a framework and analysis, then, is the presence of a narrative. Although avant-garde films use silence in a variety of interesting ways, these films are not always concerned with a narrative or the effacement of confrontation with the film spectator. Alienation of the spectator might be



an intended goal of the avant-garde film. Conversely, mainstream Hollywood films are concerned with narrative and a silence in these film can be analysed in light of this narrative. The primary role of narrative in films has not always been dominant, however. Although the dramatic possibilities of film were recognized from its earliest invention, most early films are more of a documentary nature. These films offer fragmentary glimpses of the everyday world. Between 1895 and 1907 a mere hundred films by the Lumière brothers were truly staged for the camera, while their total body of work in those years amounts to a staggering 1424 titles in total (Wierzbicki 2009, 25). This rapidly changed from 1906 onwards, and by 1908 no less than 96 percent of the American films contain a dramatic narrative (Belton 1994, quoted in Wierzbicki 2009, 27). Early cinema began to gain an institutional unity and this, coupled with the development of a consensus on the use of music among producers and exhibitors, consolidated early film's technology and presentation (ibid.). These early films are commonly known as silent films, or "mute" films in some languages (e.g., French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian), although the cinematic experience thereof was hardly silent. "Mute" is a more apt description because the sounds and music accompanying early film were not part of the film itself but were provided by other means, whether it be musicians present at the film screening or the attempted accompaniment of the film by gramophone records. The presence of music and sound brings about the presence of silence as well, both as its limit and as virtual silence. As it is the narrative film I am concerned with, I limit myself to discussing the experience of film from its consolidation as a conveyor of stories onward.

### ***From the silent film to the soundtrack***

Sound and music in the early film have been ascribed many different functions. The noise of the projector needed to be masked, the images needed to be lend warmth lest they be interpreted as ghostly or disembodied, and many others (see, e.g., Gorbman 1987, 53, and

Wierzbicki 2009, 13). All these functions are concomitant, however. They were not part of the film itself. Music and sound could not be structural, because sound “belonged to performance rather than the film per se” (Buhler and Neumeyer, 2014, 19-20). The role of music in silent film was soon recognized, but the filmmakers could not exercise control over its execution. The control over the performance of film and sound remained with the exhibitor rather than with the filmmakers, which produced a widely varied performance practice. The development of the cue sheet was an attempt by filmmakers to prescribe the way music should coincide with the image. The first cue sheets were published as soon as 1909 (Wierzbicki 2009, 36). These cue sheets merely prescribed the kind of music in general, e.g., “Scene 3 – Begin with andante, finish with allegro” or “Scene 5 – Andante to plaintive. Changing to march movement at end” (ibid., 36-37). It was up to the performing musicians in each film screening to interpret and follow these cue sheets to their own possibilities. An analysis of filmic silence in this era can only ever be incomplete due to the widely varied performance practice which lay in the hands of individual exhibitors, the lack of sound synchronisation, rather general accompaniment prescriptions which makes music an accompaniment but not a narrative component, and last but not least the lack of surviving source material. The silent film era is important nonetheless to understand the evolution of filmic silence and the experience thereof. The development of cue sheets and musical scores specifically composed for film expressed a desire for control over this experience. With the arrival of synchronised sound at sufficient volume levels during the twenties, this control was asserted. Edison had screened films with synchronised phonograph sound before this, but his phonograph was never able to deliver sufficient volume for screenings in large cinema halls (ibid., 83-87). Although the sound film became very popular very quickly, it elicited national and international critique as well. One famous parody of film sound is Charlie Chaplin’s scene in *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936) where the voice of the Tramp (Chaplin’s character) is heard for

the first time in its cinematic history. The words the Tramp is singing are, however, completely made-up. The scene is perfectly intelligible nonetheless. Chaplin “satirizes the new technique by turning its own devices against itself” (Bourget 1991, 3). Chaplin’s pantomime is all that is needed to convey the emotions of the scene and the addition of synchronised sound is rendered superfluous. The silent film was never to recover from the integration of sound, however. Sound and speech were “plebiscited as *the ‘truth’ which was lacking* in the silent film” (Comolli 2005, 44, emphasis in original). The advent of the integrated sound film created the possibility of silence as an integrated authorial device. The first synchronous sound films reacted against their non-synchronous, mute history by filling itself with sound, especially dialogue (hence the denomination ‘talkies’). Silence was “the foremost casualty of the great leap forward into (synchronous) film sound and the institutionalization of narrative realism” (O’Rawe 2009, 88). William Alwyn, who composed over seventy film scores, described the importance of silence and the danger of overlooking it in 1954: “Sound can only make its effect by contrast with silence. [...] This most important paradox seems to be in danger of being forgotten in the very medium where it is all important” (Alwyn 1954, cited in Johnson 2005, 4-5). Silence has always been present in the sound film. Any sound film encompasses virtual silence and silence as authorial device has been used on and off throughout the synchronous sound film’s history. The narrative possibilities for silence were multiplied with the development of the multi-track recorder in the fifties, which allowed for the simultaneous recording and adjustment of multiple sounds. Music, sounds, speech, and silence became interlocking parts of the narrative soundtrack. By the end of the 1960s Noël Burch praises the way some European filmmakers separated “the ‘colours’ of silence (a complete dead space on the soundtrack, studio silence, silence in the country, and so forth)” (O’Rawe 2009, 94). Although critics recognised the way these filmmakers discovered the structural roles silence can play in film, a theoretical approach to

silence similar to soundtrack analysis was not undertaken. Writing some forty years later Des O’Rawe posits that silence

still tends to be more of a historical issue rather than a theoretical one, invoked in relation to the birth and early life of the cinematograph rather than in terms of its range of expressive properties and possibilities within the sound film (O’Rawe 2009, 87)

Although indeed not as numerous as traditional soundtrack analysis or historical approaches, there are some theoretical approaches to silence. Moreover, the “birth and early life of the cinematograph” are important to understand the reactionary use of sound, especially dialogue, in the sound film.

### ***Theoretical approaches to silence in the soundtrack***

It was in reaction to the early “mute” period that sound asserted its dominance over silence. With the establishment of sound’s dominance the cinematic experience was enriched by enabling spectators to completely undergo the narrative by both seeing and hearing the filmic world presented to them. The structural role of silence is dependent on this dominance of sound. Although there were filmmakers who rather not partook in the evolution to sound, this persistent use of silence was but a short-lived aesthetic ideology (Van Houten 1992, 13). Some modern critics, like Des O’Rawe, also seem disappointed in the dominance of sound in modern cinema, calling it a “dead cinema of visual gimmicks and noise and of banality and repetition” (O’Rawe 2009, 92). In conclusion of his article, O’Rawe then states that

if we are to explore and develop more fully our understanding of filmic silence, its forms, variations, and interpretive implications, then maybe we should look not to traditional film theory and criticism but rather to the body of critical work on silence that exists in the field of music and sonic arts. (O’Rawe 2009, 97)

While the incorporation of critical work on silence in other fields may deepen our understanding of filmic silence, not incorporating traditional film theory and criticism will render this understanding severely handicapped. Silence and its role in film cannot be analysed solely through its juxtaposition against the sounding soundtrack, but rather needs to incorporate its relation to the image and the spectator as well. It is through adding the necessary analytical tools to traditional film theory that our understanding of filmic silence can be fully developed. This does not mean that critical work on silence outside film studies need not be taken into account for that would ignore the cultural connotations of silence that echo through its filmic counterpart. O’Rawe’s criticism of approaches to silence being historical rather than theoretical is true nonetheless. The few existing analyses of silence tend to discuss the meaning of silence on an individual basis, often discussing the semantic content of silence in particular scenes without discussing the underlying mechanisms that make the interpretation and function of silence possible. Interestingly enough these analyses usually deal with films outside the mainstream Hollywood tradition (cf. Belton’s (2008) analysis of Robert Bresson’s *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé* (1956), Laing’s analysis (in Mera and Burnand 2006) of Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail* (1999)). More often than not, avant-garde and European films are positioned against mainstream cinema traditions. Mera and Burnand point out that the means of valorising these traditions are often high-art aesthetics and that Hollywood filmmaking is depicted as threatening to this elevated culture (Mera and Burnand 2006, 3). Recent years have seen two publications that discuss silence in mainstream film and television, however. Similar to the earlier developed orders of silence, Gerry Bloustien (2010) discusses modes of silence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Paul Théberge (2008) puts forward different forms of silence.

### ***Bloustien's modes of silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

Bloustien's analysis of silence in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is interesting for two reasons. First, she discusses silence in a mainstream television show that ran for seven years and was quite successful. As I am concerned with mainstream cinema this makes for an interesting comparison, although the function of sound in television is different from its function in film (cf. Altman 1986) and each merits its own framework. Bloustien's analysis of silence deals with silence and sound on a narrative level and ignores the different modes and circumstances of reception with the television spectator. While this can be a point of critique on Bloustien's analysis, it also means that her modes of silence are more easily applicable on film. Second, Bloustien's analysis is interesting because her approach to silence is general rather than individual. She develops four "modes of silence" that can be found throughout the show, rather than discussing individual occurrences. These modes of silence represent "the protagonists' fears along a continuum of unease" (Bloustien 2010, 93).

The first mode of silence Bloustien describes is "interrupted speech flow", occurring as "pauses, stuttering, and faltering dialogue" (ibid.). These "mini-silences" as she calls them are part of endearing or humorous characterisation, but also signify loss of self-control and self-possession. This is a metaphorical use of silence representing the human struggle with self-representation and the anxieties that go with it. It functions as contrast to perfect speech or representation so often seen in American television (and in other characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Too perfect protagonists are dream-like, distanced from our own everyday reality. Faltering characters bring a television show to a level the everyday spectator can understand and identify with. This, in turn, makes the protagonists even more perfect and ideal, but also believable and accessible because they present themselves in a world similar to the one we live in and more or less comprehend. Bloustien posits this mode of silence as expressing the most personal doubts and anxieties. It is fear in its most understandable and

graspable form. This use of silence is a humanisation of the universe presented to us rather than an alienation through representation of the unknown. Although signifying loss of self-control or self-possession, it is, paradoxically, also a silence we know, for we all have our little fears and anxieties.

Bloustien's second mode of silence is what she calls "wordless silence, [...] when all dialogue is removed, replaced by diegetic and non-diegetic sounds" (Bloustien 2010, 94). These moments of silence "create a hiatus in the pace of the story and aim to increase the pathos and tension for the audience" (ibid., 95). This mode of silence can "reveal unconscious desires", express a "genuine interpersonal connection", and "hide something too frightening to articulate: that which has been 'silenced'" (ibid., 101-102). As a single mode of silence this once again shows silence's ambiguous semantic possibilities. Although there are other sounds present, this mode of silence cannot be omitted and exemplifies the necessity of integrating the narrative in the analysis of silence. The orders of silence in reality can account for the type of silence this "wordless silence" might be categorised as, but it cannot solely account for its ambiguity. This mode of silence is a virtual metaphorical silence which gives "wordless silence" a phenomenological justification and places it in relation to the other sounds present and the context wherein it is being used. The ambiguity presented by this silence can only be resolved by relating it to the images, the rest of the soundtrack, and the spectator's interpretation.

The third mode of silence is "empty silence, when the sequence is completely devoid of sound" (Bloustien 2010, 95). Bloustien does not discuss this mode in much detail, but gives some examples of what this mode can mean, because it is a silence that is hardly tenable in television. With this mode of silence we encounter one of the important differences between television sound and cinematic sound. In cinema this kind of silence would be more tenable than in television, where sound needs to grasp and keep the attention of the audience (cf. Rick

Altman's discussion of Raymond Williams's notion of "flow" in Altman 1986). Even in cinema a complete absence of sound tends to confront and discomfort the spectator, but the cinematic screening of a film does not need to compete with other distractions in the way television does. Seen through the orders of silence this is a peculiar case. It is a metaphorical silence by negation and perhaps the only possible occurrence of its kind. We ignore the sounds surrounding us and interpret the silence of the television set in relation to the corresponding images and the sounds present before this empty silence. It is not actual silence because a television set showing a scene with empty silence placed in an anechoic chamber with no spectator present would still produce sound through the hum of its electrical wiring. This is what sets it apart from paintings and sculptures, although it is metaphorical in the same way as paintings and sculptures. This empty silence has a meaning other than the absence of sound, which is dependent on the context wherein this mode of silence is used. Considering the sonorous universe presented to us, empty silence is also not virtual silence as there are no sounds present when this silence will be penetrated. It is silence that touches our reality, which is why it is not tenable for a sustained period of time as this would force us back into our own reality rather than being captured by the experience of television or cinema. A point of critique on Bloustien's mode of empty silence is that it is in dire need of a different name. This mode of silence, and any silence we can experience, is never empty but always filled with meaning and connotation. "Complete" silence would more fully cover the overtones.

Bloustien's last mode of silence is a "reflexive mode, when that which has been silenced or that which cannot be spoken, such as taboo, is made overt and forced into articulation through a more foregrounded and reflective thematic device" (Bloustien 2010, 96). It is a mode where silence is made explicit through sound. The more foregrounded and reflective thematic devices in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Bloustien describes are all sonorous instances. This reflexive mode is not so much silence as a reflection on what has been kept



silent, such as taboo. It is the resolution of silence for what was unknown now becomes known. This resolution delineates the previous silence of the unknown or hidden. Although it is silence that becomes known through its disappearance, its meaning reflexively revealed, it is not virtual silence for the observer has no active role in the experience thereof. Its revelation is dependent on the spectator reading into it metaphorically.

The four modes of silence Bloustien proposes are analysed through their role in the narrative. Although the cinematic experience of sound is different from that of television, these modes can be used to analyse silence in film narrative as well. The modes of “wordless silence” and “empty silence” are of special interest as they are phenomenological silences, whereas “reflexive silence” is of a metaphorical nature, i.e., “wordless silence” and “empty silence” can be *heard*, whereas reflexive silence cannot. Bloustien’s “interrupted speech flow” is an audible form of silence, but it is metaphorical silence rather than phenomenological. We do not truly experience the interrupted speech flow as silence. It can be of interest when discussing characterisation, but is of less interest when discussing the structural functions of silence. Bloustien’s modes are a discussion of what can constitute filmic silence, but lacks the relation to the spectator.

### ***Théberge’s forms of silence***

In “Almost Silent” (2008) Paul Théberge also puts forward different kinds of silence based on their narrative function. His analyses of silence offer an interesting counterpoint to Bloustien’s modes of silence for Théberge incorporates both television and film in his exploration of the functions of silence. Théberge does not speak of “modes” of silence but rather of uses, types, or just “different silences”. I describe them as modes, however, to keep with the terminology used by Bloustien. This makes comparison easier and helps to avoid confusion with the orders of silence.

The first mode Théberge discusses is what he calls absolute, total, or complete silence (Théberge 2008, 53). He uses these terms interchangeably and does not describe this mode in detail. It is from his description of absolute silence as “it risks being interpreted, by audiences, as a technical breakdown” that it is deducible that what Théberge means here is the complete absence of filmic sound. This is the same as Bloustien’s empty silence. It is the phenomenological absence of sound in the film, experienced by the spectator as silence by negation. To avoid confusion with the order of absolute silence I refer to this mode of silence as complete silence. Théberge describes this kind of silence as invoking extremely powerful audience discomfort, exploited by filmmakers “usually in instances where intensely dramatic or violent acts are depicted” (ibid.) Théberge traces the effect of this kind of silence to its ambiguous cultural understanding where silence is on the one hand “valued as a form of tranquillity, and on the other, it is often the sign of abnormality, something to be feared” (ibid., 52). It is the cultural conceptualisation of the order of absolute silence, the place of Nothing, that echoes through in these connotations. Théberge adds that complete silence is not used much by filmmakers because it can place the audience in a form of direct confrontation with both the film and other members of the theatre audience (ibid., 53). I would add that this complete silence also confronts us with ourselves as interpreting subject, not just with the film and other members of the theatre audience. In interpreting this mode of silence and its relation to the narrative we are forced to find meaning for this silence within our own psyches. It is a silence that forces us to confront ourselves, and with us our cultural connotations, in the present moment of the narrative. This is also a critique on Théberge’s discussion of this mode of silence. Although Théberge adds that complete silence is a direct confrontation and discusses the cultural connotations of silence, he does not address the way they are linked. His discussion of complete silence omits the underlying mechanisms that power it. The same critique is true for the other modes of silence Théberge discusses.

Théberge follows his discussion of complete silence by stating all other modes of silence are “always relative, and relational to sounds heard in the context of the film itself” (Théberge 2008, 53). He then distinguishes between relative and relational silence. Relative silence is created through “the possibility of reducing the soundtrack to near silence” (ibid., 54). Relative silence is closely connected to complete silence and often sound engineers prefer to use relative silence to achieve a feeling of complete silence without the confrontation complete silence would effectuate (cf. Figgis 2003, 1). Analysed through the orders of silence, this would be virtual silence by negation. Relative silence can consist of an attenuation of ambient sounds and focusing on a particular sound, or the suppression of ambient sounds entirely (Théberge 2008, 54). The latter is also a kind of relational silence, wherein one part of the soundtrack is silenced (ibid.). All relational silences are relative silences, but Théberge differentiates between the two. Relational silence is a kind of further developed relative silence that needs “recognition and analysis of the relationships that exist *between* the various elements of the soundtrack and not simply the relationships of sounds to images” (ibid., 55). This means that relative silence is the silence by negation of the whole soundtrack volume, while relational silence is one part of the soundtrack silenced against the dominance of other parts. Théberge expresses it as the balance of sounding parts against each other, which produces “various relationships of presence and absence [...] and the contrasts thus produced are a powerful tool for creating meaning within film narrative” (ibid., 56). Relational silence is then always virtual metaphorical silence. It is silence while other parts of the soundtrack can still be heard, laden with connotation.

The first of these relational silences is “diegetic silence” (Théberge 2008, 57). This silence is the absence of noise from the diegetic world; a silence of the sounds perceivable in the world inhabited by the characters. Théberge calls this silence one of the clichés in Hollywood cinema, often used in “the depiction of dream sequences, drug-induced states, and

other moments when the audience is allowed access to the mental life of a film character” (ibid.). As the absence of sounds from the world of the characters implies an escape thereof, this silence can also be used “to bridge the gap between temporal and spatial moments in film narrative” where it represents a “sense of time passing, of distances traversed” (ibid.). This escape from diegetic time and space is effectuated through the heightened dominance of the musical score. The absence of the diegetic sounds is completely filled with music and this music elucidates the narrative through its cultured meanings. The opening scene of *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) is an iconic scene showcasing this use of diegetic silence. We see Wyatt (Peter Fonda) throw away his wristwatch (a metaphorical effacement of time) and ride off in the distance with Billy (Dennis Hopper). The sound of their bikes gradually fades out and Steppenwolf’s *Born to Be Wild* (1968) kicks in over a sequence of shots showing Wyatt and Billy riding through American landscapes and towns. Time and distance is of no importance, all that matters is what Steppenwolf is telling us: “Get your motor running / head out on the highway / looking for adventure..”.

The next relational silence Théberge puts forward is “musical silence” (Théberge 2008, 58). While diegetic silence is often quite noticeable and has a more direct impact in our interpretation of the film, musical silence is less obvious. Théberge posits it can be so subtle that it “may go largely unnoticed” (ibid.). While the absence of music more often than not does not create silence in a film, it can have narrative importance depending on what happens in this absence. Musical silence is often used to depict “a kind of stark realism” (Théberge ibid., 59). Théberge gives the example of *Cast Away* (Zemeckis, 2000) where during the whole time that Chuck Noland (Tom Hanks) is stranded on the island there is no background music present, which only returns after Chuck has returned to civilisation (Théberge 2008, 59). The application of musical silence in individual scenes renders the action depicted gritty and tense (ibid.). Quentin Tarantino, despite his renown for using pop songs as ironic

distancing, uses musical silence to great effect as well. In *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) is driving his car, singing along to The Statler Brothers' *Flowers on the Wall*. Stopping before a traffic light, Butch suddenly sees Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). The next shot shows Butch hitting the gas pedal and running over Marsellus. Although the music on the radio was diegetic, it is suddenly gone and the only audible sounds remaining are Butch's car running over Marsellus. The lack of music in this act of violence creates a stark contrast against the previous shots of Butch merrily singing along to the tune.

The third and last relational silence Théberge discusses is “dialogue silence” which he takes from Elizabeth Weis's study of Hitchcock soundtracks (Théberge 2008, 59). Similar to Bloustien's wordless silence, this mode is very ambiguous in its semantic possibilities. It can at the same time depict impotence of a character in its inability to speak, terror beyond words, absolute control, vulnerability, and victimisation (ibid.). Théberge writes of this mode of silence that it “tends to be disguised” and interpreted as “function of the script or to have been produced by the actor in the context of performing a particular role or scene” (ibid.). I would add that a spectator quickly picks up on this mode of silence immediately interpreting it as its semantic content, be it fear, anxiety, or control. Théberge's assertion that dialogue silence tends to be disguised is not as true as it is for musical silence. Dialogue silence, like diegetic silence, is quickly noticed and interpreted. A spectator might not stop to think of the fact that a silence is presented but this is true for almost all silences, for this would break the immersion in the film. The power of silence is that it quite literally hides sound in plain sight.

The next form of silence Théberge discusses is Claudia Gorbman's concept of “structural silence” (Théberge 2008, 60). For Gorbman this silence occurs when a sound previously associated with an event or sequence in a film is absent when the same or similar events or sequences recur; it is a play of expectation. Théberge extends this play of expectation and puts forward a “generic silence” (ibid., 62). This is silence based on the

different internalisations of genre conventions by audiences; the ways audiences categorise films into particular styles or genres. The silence in horror films before the actual horror is displayed or before a murder occurs, for example. Théberge gives the example of the absence of music in interrogation chambers in detective films or television series. This could just as well be analysed as musical silence, however, stressing the realism of the interrogation or giving it a gritty atmosphere. Structural silence and generic silence are heavily dependent on their successful individual application in relation to the whole soundtrack of the film. The successful use of structural and generic silence makes these silences leitmotifs, evoking earlier established connotations. In their particular uses these silences can be analysed through the other modes of silence in addition to their recognition as convention, or cliché.

Théberge's categorisations of silence is "a means of arriving at a more integrated framework for the study of film sound" (ibid., 66). Although this is my goal as well, there is an important difference in our approaches. Théberge starts from "the study of sound design in cinema, the conventional analytic framework [which] divides the soundtrack into dialogue, sound effects, and music" (ibid.). He starts his analysis from the way these three elements are balanced and related to narrative and generic contexts, where "the *absence* of an individual sound, or category of sonic elements, may be as significant for our analysis of film as the actual presence of any particular sound" (ibid., emphasis in original). Théberge posits that his analysis is concerned with more than the balance in the soundtrack:

Ultimately, not only is the entire soundtrack the unit of analysis here – including dialogue, sound effects, music, *and* silence – but so is its relationship to narrative, to technology, to generic conventions, and to the culture at large. (Théberge 2008, 52, emphasis in original)

Although Théberge includes cultural connotations and technology, the modes he develops are confined to the artefact of the film. This perhaps helps categorisation, but it also lacks discussion of the underlying processes that make these modes of silence work. Stating that the

relation to “the culture at large” is also subject to analysis is rather obvious, as silence gains its connotations through our cultured interpretations. Throughout my discussion of Bloustien’s and Théberge’s modes of silence I have sporadically addressed these underlying mechanisms. A discussion of what mode of silence is being presented is incomplete without discussing the reception of this presentation. In his introduction to the translated edition of Michel Chion’s *Audio-Vision*, Walter Murch wrote how

by choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then reassociating different sounds that seem at first hearing to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the filmmaker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush. (introduction to Chion 1994, xx)

This perceptual vacuum wherein the audience rushes its mind is why an analysis of silence must incorporate the underlying mechanisms at work, for merely describing the kind of vacuum presented without discussing the way our minds rush into it is but an incomplete analysis. O’Rawe’s claim that we should look to critical work on silence in music and sonic arts would result in an equally incomplete analysis. The tools for analysing silence and the interpretation thereof by spectators can be found in traditional film theory. Soundtrack analysis has successfully incorporated the psychological workings of sound and music and it is this tradition that provides us with the first tools for the analysis of silence. Without a distinction between sound, music, speech, and narrative, Bloustien and Théberge would not have been able to develop their modes as distinctly. It is to traditional soundtrack analysis I now turn, as a starting point for discussing the interpretation of silence by spectators and the psychological mechanisms behind it.

## II. SILENCE AND SOUNDTRACK ANALYSIS

In the previous chapter I discuss modes of silence, which deal with the place silence takes in the soundtrack and narrative. In this chapter I continue this with different aspects of silence in relation to its function rather than its place, although both are connected. Some modes of silence are more suited to perform a function than other modes, e.g., diegetic silence will not convey realism as much as musical silence. I construct new concepts for the analysis of silence based on the existing concepts and theorems in traditional soundtrack analysis. Interestingly enough most approaches to soundtrack analysis deal with music. Film sound tends to receive less attention. This is perhaps because it is less direct in conveying information that is not already coded in the imagery. Some notable exceptions exist nonetheless, e.g., acousmatic sound. Soundtrack analysis has a rich history with very different approaches. Not all of these approaches are equally interesting for discussion of silence, however, nor is this paper the place to discuss all possible conceptualisations applicable to an analysis of silence. I construct this chapter mainly around the concepts put forward by Claudia Gorbman in her seminal work *Unheard Melodies* (1987), as well as those put forward by Michel Chion in his seminal work *Audio-Vision* (1994). Drawing from Gorbman's and Chion's approaches to film sound and applying these in analyses of silence allows me to build on an already rich vocabulary to discuss silence in film. Adding to Bloustien's and Théberge's modes of silence in the narrative, these additions help to discuss individual aspects of silence and functional relations of silence to the image. Gorbman and Chion's books are without a doubt landmark books in the scholarly study of film sound. There are of course a plethora of other authors who have written on the relations between image and sound, be it in film, television, or computer games. I focus specifically on building a framework to analyse silence in film soundtracks, however. While some theoretical concepts from other media are



applicable to film as well, other concepts are harder to translate. It is not that there are no other seminal publications on film sound or interesting authors. The level of applicability to silence becomes more fragmented, however, and lest this paper becomes a lucky bag of concepts I restrict myself to including concepts that are logically connected to other concepts discussed here. Altman's discussion of and expansion on Raymond Williams' notion of "flow" and the six important functions and techniques of television soundtracks, for example, are hardly applicable to film as a whole as they are truly directed more at analysis of television. One of Altman's functions of the television soundtrack, the sound advance, is of particular interest here nonetheless. It provides an interesting counterpoint to concepts put forward by Gorbman and Chion, i.e., ancrage and suspension.

#### **CLAUDIA GORBMAN AND MICHEL CHION ON FILM MUSIC**

Film music, for Gorbman, is utilitarian. Film music's function is that of background music. She likens film music to easy-listening music (whether the music is Bach or a rock ballad does not matter for its functional role as background music) and explains how through its consumption "functional music subordinates its *form* and *volume* to the context in which it is deployed" (Gorbman 1987, 56, emphasis in original). Background music is more often than not cut off before its completion. A first interesting comparison to silence can be made here, as silence behaves quite differently. The earlier discussed orders and modes of silence illustrate how silence is dependent on the context (narrative, images, sounds) wherein it is used. Silence works quite contrary to music in these aspects, however. The form of silence is perhaps even the exact inverse of the form of background music. While the overarching structure of music is indeed subjugated to its context (its form is not always allowed completion), silence is not subjugated to its context but rather defined by it. The beginning and end of silence are, in whatever context, always just that: beginning and end. Silence is

monomorphous, it has but one form in all its occurrences. This is true for every mode of silence, whether it is complete silence or only musical silence. Silence is an indivisible unit of variable length; taking a half or quarter of silence is impossible. It is always a whole. Chion contrasts the subjugation of sound with the unity of the shot. The shot is “a neutral unit, objectively defined, that everyone who has made the film as well as those who watch it can agree on” (Chion 1994, 41). The same is not true for sound or music. Music is used for specific parts and amounts of time. In contrast to the visual stability of the shot, “sound splices neither jump to our ears nor permit us to demarcate identifiable units of sound montage” (ibid.). No neutral, universally recognisable unit of sound emerged from sound editing and montage that can be likened to the stable unity of the shot. Silence, on the other hand, is always such a stable unit since its form is completely defined by its contextual use. The context of silence not only defines the form of silence, but its volume as well. However paradoxical it may seem, it would be jumping to conclusions to think silence has no volume. The volume of silence is defined by the contextual volume. Chion stresses that silence is not simply an absence of sound in films, but relies on context and preparation. “Silence is never a neutral emptiness”, Chion writes, “[i]t is the negative of sound we’ve heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of contrast” (ibid., 57). Although Chion discusses silence contrasting sound heard or imagined beforehand, the orders of silence and the modes of silence by Théberge and Bloustien demonstrate silence can exist next to and in sound as well. The contrast of silence, its role as negative of sound, can be found in sound present in silence as well. This contrast, this role as negative, is what I call the volume of silence. It is a metaphorical volume rather than a directly measurable unit of loudness, however. Because of its metaphorical nature it is worth noting that “volume” is not only a measure of loudness, but of mass or content as well. We can speak of a loud silence, a heavy silence, or a deep silence. These are terms of volume and can be contrasted against the contextual volume. In the case of

relational silence (diegetic, musical, dialogue), for example, it is the volume of the sounding parts of the soundtrack that define the loudness, or depth, of the relational silence. In an interrogation scene where the interrogating officer is yelling and banging the table, the dialogue silence of the interrogated suspect seems to be graver than when the officer is talking calmly. In contemporary war films an explosion close to a main character is often followed by a diegetic silence. This silence is quite loud for two reasons: the sound of the explosion resonates in the silence it creates, and the sounds of the diegetic world usually return very muffled at first – oppressed by the diegetic silence – and only slowly regain their normal form and volume. Silence reflects the volume of its context and has the inverse relation therewith compared to utilitarian music. Its context defines both the form and volume of silence, rather than subjugating it.

Gorbman continues her comparison of film music and easy-listening music by likening their purposes: both function “to lull the spectator into being an *untroublesome* (less critical, less wary) *viewing subject*. Utilitarian music may be seen as an ‘intellectual or cerebral anesthetic’” (Gorbman 1987, 58, emphasis in original). The absence of this cerebral anaesthetic in silence does not necessarily turn the spectator in a troubled viewing subject, but leaves this option open rather than guiding the interpretation by bathing a scene in affect, which is one of the roles of film music. Gorbman describes the two major roles of background music to be “semiotic (as *ancrage*) and psychological (as suture or bonding)” (ibid., 55). Film music interprets an image and conjures up the correct connotative values, it “supplies information to complement the potentially ambiguous diegetic images and sounds” (ibid., 58). As such, it wards off “the displeasure of uncertain signification” (ibid.). This cementing of signification through film music is what Gorbman calls *ancrage* (or anchorage), after Barthes. Conversely, silence does not interpret an image by itself. It leaves the interpretation thereof open to context and the rushing in of the spectator’s mind to fill the vacuum it presents.

Silence can conjure up affect (think of fear in horror films effectuated through silence), but even then the affect is infused with uncertainty. All modes of silence share this uncertain character, although this ambiguity can be effaced rather immediately through contextual relations. The semantic content of silence in itself is ambiguous and dependent on context, and one semiotic function of silence as opposed to anchorage is to create this ambiguity not only in itself but in the images as well. I call this semiotic function of silence “discomposure”. Discomposing silence is analeptic rather than anaesthetising. It intensifies and at the same time discomposes spectator interpretation. It breaks down the order present in the narrative, the image and the context rather than being semantically laden with meaning through context. A second manner in which film music wards off displeasure is to distract the spectator from “the technological basis of filmic articulation”, which Gorbman explains as

[g]aps, cuts, the frame itself, silences in the soundtrack – any reminders of cinema’s materiality which jeopardize the formation of subjectivity – the process whereby the viewer identifies as subject of filmic discourse. (Gorbman 1987, 58)

Film music is meant to draw in and keep the spectator immersed as the film’s subject. The gaps and cuts in narrative and images can cause a spectator to question the coherence of the film and can bring about loss of subjectivity. The presence of film music counteracts this by providing continuity in the auditory sphere. In the exemplary shot/reverse-shot, the reverse shot reveals that which could not be seen in the first shot. These shots together then constitute a whole. There are no more constraints in the spectator’s vision (Buhler 2014, 397). Music helps suturing shots together through the illusion of continuity. If music is present in a shot and continues across the cut into another shot, this new shot is psychologically linked to the previous shot through the continued presence of music. The new shot does not need to be a reverse-shot, which makes music a powerful suturing tool. Suture “provides film spectators with the illusion of an origin for what they see” (Butte 2008, 283). The spectator is immersed in a sonorous envelope. The presence of music psychologically *sutures* the shots to each other

and bonds the spectator to the film. It “draws the spectator further into the diegetic illusion” through this bonding (Gorbman 1987, 59). Gorbman draws from psychoanalytical theory to elucidate how this bonding through music works: the presence of music “breaks down normal ego defences and makes the listener more receptive to phantasy [...] It relaxes the censor and has a hypnotic effect” (ibid., 61). Music makes the spectator more receptive to the illusion of film. This has an important consequence for the workings of silence as well. Through music, a spectator is relaxed into receptiveness. This receptive relaxation is maintained by auditory information. The effect of filmic silence is intensified by this receptive relaxation. The arrival of silence while in a relaxed mode of receptiveness means there are no barriers that hold back the connotative values silence conjures up. The “broken down ego defences” can no longer intellectualise this filmic silence and give it its proper rationalised place outside our fears or anxieties. This filmic silence creates an interesting bond between spectator and film. This bond is a form of extreme nervous tension. Our projection on and interpretation of the film is no longer perceived as mediated, but becomes an immediate confrontation of ourselves in the film narrative. All the connotative values we are asked to project onto the film narrative, guided by its context, seem to affect us immediately rather than being mediated and reflected back to us through the film. As with any extreme tension, this is not tenable for a prolonged period of time, however. If this tension is maintained for too long, it simply breaks. Imagine a scene from a horror movie where the stereotypical blonde girl is home alone, probably fresh out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her, and suddenly hears something. She turns around and shows extreme fear while looking at a threat that appears off-screen. When she turns around and is frightened by the off-screen threat, the soundtrack is silenced. This brings about dreadful expectation, something bad is bound to happen. But the teenage girl just keeps looking frightened while the soundtrack is silenced for a bit more, and then some more. We would soon snap out of the filmic illusion of suspense and become disillusioned. We are let

down in our expectations. Our relaxed mode of receptiveness stops receiving input and our “ego defences” are up and watchful once more. It does not matter what happens to the girl after this, we are no longer empathically bonded to the film. This mode of bonding is akin to Gorbman’s description of “identification” as psychological bonding. Identification places us *in* the film, it overlaps with anchorage in that it helps to convey the correct meaning of a scene: “Music enters to satisfy a need to compensate for, fill in, the emotional depth not verbally representable” (Gorbman 1987, 67). It is an extra layer of meaning where necessary, convincing us of and subjecting us to the scene’s emotional value. In the same manner, discomposing silence is not only semiotic, but psychological as well. Anahid Kassabian has proposed a comparable concept: assimilating identification, which is identification through the soundtrack wherein the soundtrack rather rigidly controls this process of identification. It narrows the psychic field (Kassabian 2001, 3). If we engage in assimilating identification, we can find us anywhere in the narrative for we partake in the events (*ibid.*, 2). This psychological bonding through music and silence merits more in-depth explanation as it is crucial to a proper understanding of the relation between film sound and film silence.

## **SILENCE AND SUTURE**

Although Gorbman, a tad simplifying but not without reason, equals bonding and suture to each other and writes that silence in the soundtrack jeopardises the formation of subjectivity (Gorbman 1987, 58) silence can also create a direct identification or subjectivity, as I have shown. The problem with silence herein is that it both creates subjectivity and then threatens to destroy it because of its consciousness-raising qualities, in contrast to film music which is self-effacing. This threat of rupture is specifically prominent in complete silence. Film music “need not be consciously attended to in order to produce its distinctive effect [...] though nothing bars us from doing so either” (Buhler 2014, 404). It does not matter for the suturing effect of music whether we consciously or unconsciously internalise the background music. If

we pay attention to the music it seems “merely supplemental”, a stylish improvement on the film (ibid.). It is effectively this status as supplement that “both neutralizes the otherwise disruptive presence of music and effaces its work in producing meaning” (ibid.). Music, in other words, is self-effacing. It is the suturing glue in the process of cinematic discourse as “constant unity of the subject” (Heath 1981, 92); the identification of the empirical spectator with the cinematic subject. Complete silence, on the other hand, cannot be consciously attended to for too long as it threatens to break this constant unity. This silence can withdraw the empirical spectators from their presence as the cinematic subjects. When silence is functioning as Gorbman’s identification it builds up tension and this withdrawal as cinematic subject is the intellectualising of silence or the breaking of the prolonged tension. We are, quite literally, snapped back into reality. Michel Chion calls such an effect the “external logic” of the audiovisual flow (Chion 1994, 46). External logic “brings out effects of discontinuity and rupture as interventions external to the represented content” (ibid.). While Chion was not specifically speaking of silence and his external logic demands to be sutured over, our intellectualisation of silence is such an external logic of the audiovisual flow. A difference with Chion’s term is that Chion does not address the spectator’s psyche as a cause of external logic. His examples of external flow are of “editing that disrupts the continuity of an image or sound”, “sudden changes of tempo”, or things effectively happening during the film screening, such as breaks or interruptions (ibid.). The internal logic of the audiovisual flow, on the other hand, is born out of the narrative and “tends toward continuous and progressive modifications in the sonic flow, making sudden breaks only when the narrative so requires” (ibid.). Although all modes of silence can work both identifying and rupturing, it seems silence as identification is more sustainable in modes of silence working from internal logic. The ambiguity presented by silence working from internal logic will be able to be stretched longer before it needs to be effaced. Silence’s inherent rupturing qualities will switch this

internal logic to become external logic if given enough time. Silence can function from both the internal and external logic of the audiovisual flow. I would even posit that silence is always perceived as an internal logic at first, and that only prolonged exposure threatens to reveal its external logic. This effect of prolonged silence is the threat of recognition with the spectator “that the unified subject belongs to the imaginary at the expense of the real” (Buhler 2014, 400). Silence thus threatens to place the empirical subject rather than the cinematic subject back in relation to the real. This would break the spectator’s immersion and empathic engagement with the film and force the film to pass through the “defence mechanisms of the ego” once more, which are broken down by music’s suture (Gorbman 1987, 61). It would rupture the cinematic subject’s unity. An interesting paradox arises here, then. Gorbman’s bonding through identification is a form of suture and although silence can function in a very similar way, at the same time it threatens to destroy its own bonding qualities through its consciousness-raising qualities. The bonding qualities of silence temporarily take away the mediating role of the soundtrack and place too much pressure on our relaxed state of perceptiveness. The discomposure created by complete silence must be resolved in a timely manner before the bond created through silence self-destructs and forces us back into being a subject making sense of the world rather than a subject engaged in the filmic illusion. The art of using silence in narrative films lies, then, in understanding this temporal tension and applying it throughout suture while avoiding rupture. Suture through music, on the other hand, does not destroy itself as it is self-effacing and focuses on maintaining the unity of the cinematic subject. Chion develops a remarkably similar concept to suture, “unification”, which also elucidates the temporal relation of complete silence to rupture and how the other modes of silence would be more slowly inclined to achieve a rupturing effect. The biggest difference between suture and unification is that Chion does not develop a psychoanalytical background for his concept. One critique on Chion, then, is that he does not really include the



spectator experience in his concept of unification. Chion describes unification as a “unifying sound bath” (Chion 1994, 47) with three functions, of which the first is to unify “by bridging the visual breaks through sound overlaps” (ibid.). The spectator is clearly implied, but not addressed. Chion’s unification works the same as suturing music in its first function. Whereas visual cuts may pose a threat in rupturing the narrative continuity, unifying sound overlaps these cuts to create coherence. This is one function of suture and unification silence cannot provide. The ambiguity brought about by the cut will not be resolved by silence. Silence can create aural ambiguity across the visual cut, but the connection of the new shot to the previous shot is made uncertain by the cut. Silence only reinforces this uncertain state of coherence rather than providing a coherent ambiguity. The second function of unification is to bring unity “by establishing an atmosphere (e.g., birdsongs or traffic sounds) as a framework that seems to contain the image, a ‘heard’ space in which the ‘seen’ bathes” (Chion 1994, 47). This suggestion of atmosphere is often used to create relative silence (cf. Figgis 2003, 1). In other silences this unification is akin to the discomposing use of silence. Silence is used not only psychological, but semiotic as well. This function of unification also elucidates the discomposure created by silence. Whereas sound is the framework which seems to contain the image, the “heard” space, silence takes away this grounding of the image. In Chion’s terms this means that the image is now only defined by the frame, the pre-existing container thereof (Chion 1994, 66-67). Sound, which extends beyond the frame and allows for the possibility of the acousmatic, is not held in place by the frame but can theoretically extend infinitely beyond the screen (these extensions are not to be confused with Chion’s “null” and “vast or ambient” extensions which I will discuss later). Sound has no pre-existing frame or container and is only limited by the placement of loudspeakers in the theatre. The bonding qualities of silence can place the spectator in this silent space beyond the image, in the image’s virtual extension into infinite space, but only for a limited amount of time before the spectator is ruptured from

the image and understands the silent space of the theatre to be different from the silent space in and beyond the frame. The spectator then trades the imagined virtual space of the imagery for the real space inhabited by the audience and becomes detached from this extension of the image, understanding the filmic illusion for what it is. Chion describes the image as having a “spatial magnetization” on the sound (Chion 1994, 70). Sound thus frames the image, extending it, while the image gives the sound origin. The space beyond the frame is what Chion calls the “superfield” (ibid., 150). This space is magnetised to the screen but not limited to what is displayed thereon, it has taken on “a kind of quasi-autonomous existence with relation to the visual field, in that it does not depend moment by moment on what we see onscreen” (ibid.). The superfield “provides a continuous and constant consciousness of all the space surrounding the dramatic action” (ibid., 151). Complete silence, however, is devoid of anything to magnetise. The superfield disappears in complete silence. This disappearance of our continuous and constant consciousness of the space the dramatic action takes place in forces us to reconsider sooner or later the relation between the space we inhabit as spectator and the space depicted on-screen, limited by the frame. Relative and relational silences can be prolonged as these are illusions of silence in sound. This sound is “magnetised” to the screen and keeps the virtual silences magnetised thereto as well. The superfield beyond the frame is kept intact, even in silence. This also means that in Chion’s unification the unity of the cinematic subject is kept intact as long as the virtual silence is magnetised to the screen. Complete silence will threaten to rupture this unity much sooner, but as long as relational silence stays magnetised to the image the spectators can interpret this silent extension through the image as mediated. The third function of unification is to provide “unity through nondiegetic music: because this music is independent of the notion of real time and space it can cast the images into a homogenizing bath or current” (ibid., 47). The independence of non-diegetic music of time and space makes it often used in diegetic silence, as the example

of the opening scene of *Easy Rider* elucidates. Different silences can provide a similar homogenising bath or current, with context prescribing the homogenising affect. Chion's concept of unification is thus closely related, although not similar, to suture. Before continuing with Chion's other theoretical approaches to film sound, I briefly recapitulate and illustrate Gorbman's concepts to cement their meanings.

### **TRANSPOSING GORBMAN**

In contrast to Des O'Rawe's claim that we should not look to traditional film theory to deepen our understanding of silence (O'Rawe 2009, 97), the transposition of Gorbman's approach to film music into their counterparts in silence proves to be quite fruitful and results in important additions to our understanding of silence: the form and volume of silence, discomposure and ancrage, and the tension between rupture and identification. The function of film music subjugates its form and volume to its context, whereas silence has the inverse relation therewith. It is defined in both form and volume by its context. Its form is unvarying, there is no underlying structure of silence which is broken by its context. The context of silence defines its beginning and end. This is akin to actual silence where silence and sound are each other's limit. The attribution of volume to silence is, although seemingly paradoxical, rather important. It elucidates the impact of silence according to its contextual volume. This is especially interesting as an addition to complete or relative silence and relational silence. In complete or relative silence the volume of silence is the echo of the previously sonorous elements. A loud bang gives the silence that follows it a bigger impact as well. In relational silence, volume takes the form of the space necessary for the sound that is present to resound in. The oppression of dialogue silence is lent depth according to the loudness of the still sounding parts of the soundtrack, and vice versa. In a way, silence is the negative volume of context. The volume of silence is the amount of silence that is necessary to counterbalance the

contextual volume. An iconic scene that demonstrates this use of silence is the helicopter raid in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979). Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) attacks a Vietnamese village from the air with Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* from the third act of *Die Walküre* blasting from loudspeakers on the helicopters. The music volume increases significantly to the point that it almost, but not quite, drowns out the diegetic volume of the helicopter noise. Then suddenly, unannounced and unexpected, the image cuts to a village square with the volume of the music completely cut off. After a second of complete silence, the only audible sounds become those of dogs barking, and the slow increase in volume of children's voices singing or talking. The loud silence left by the abrupt disappearance of the music lies as a heavy blanket of impending doom over the village scene. Slowly the *Ride of the Valkyries* reappears in the soundtrack and a little while later we see the helicopters appearing in the distance. The whole village is soon completely dominated by the combined volume of gunfire, explosions, and the *Ride of the Valkyries*. In the silence left by the abrupt disappearance of the music when the image cuts to the village, we also experience discomposure. It becomes uncertain whether this is the intended village, for it is an abrupt cut that breaks with both the image and sonorous space previously inhabited. The meaning of the new image is rendered ambiguous through the sudden (musical) silence. This silence conjures up questions. Is this image related? Is this a new narrative element or is it related? It is probably the village that Kilgore wishes to attack, but it does not seem like a Vietcong nest of resistance in this shot. So is this silence ominous or peaceful? The later reappearance of the *Ride* anchors the correct meaning and sutures the scenes together. The music reappears off-screen, however, and stays with the village scene for quite some time. A sustained off-screen sound becomes uncanny (Buhler 2014, 401). It gains the power of an oracle or prophet of the end of the world (Bonitzer, as quoted in *ibid.*, 401). Indeed, the village's fate is sealed with the acousmatic reappearance of the *Ride of the Valkyries*. The quiet of the village is soon

overwhelmed by the sonic warfare of the American soldiers. The sounds of battle and Wagner resonate throughout the attack on the village and there are no more dialogue sounds from the Vietnamese after the helicopters hit the village. The Vietnamese are pushed into dialogue silence for two reasons. They cannot withstand the oppressing attack, and the spectator only follows the American point of view wherein there is no space for a Vietnamese presence. The acousmatic presence of the *Ride of the Valkyries* over the village scene before the image cuts to the helicopters approaching in the distance also reflects the tension between the bonding and rupturing qualities of silence. The acousmatic music is present in very low volume. Although the music eventually sutures both scenes together, it is not until the crescendo of the music that this suturing effect is achieved and the meaning is anchored. The relative quietude of the village is necessary to juxtapose the oppression brought about by the deafening volume of the sonic warfare. Should the music stay softly in the background the silence of the village scene would first impose a feeling of doom upon us, but only for a limited period of time after which we would disconnect our mental link between the *Ride of the Valkyries* and the previous scene. This is why the crescendo of the music is so important. It announces an anchoring of meaning and drives off the rupturing qualities of the silence present in the scene. The crescendo is followed by a de-acousmatising of the helicopters in the next shot, completing the suture and ancrage and finally clearing any doubt. Interestingly, Chion describes de-acousmatisation as being usually reserved for villains. The ambiguity of right and wrong in war is of course one of the overarching themes of *Apocalypse Now*. The concept of the acousmatic in film was further developed by Michel Chion, who took the term from Schaeffer (who got it from Pythagoras). Although perhaps one of his best known theoretical concepts, Chion develops other theoretical concepts dealing with film music which are perhaps of more interest for the theorisation of silence in film and directly add to the concepts developed by Gorbman and transposed to silence thus far.

## TRANSLATING CHION

Although perhaps not as well-known as the acousmatic, one of Chion's other rather (in)famous theorisations was that "there is no soundtrack" (Chion 1994, 40). This means two things for Chion: first of all, that the viewing of images without sound still produces a rather coherent whole, whereas all the sounds from a film do not present such a coherent whole when heard apart from the image. This is not to say that Chion considers the image track to present a unity by itself, he merely considers the images to be more coherent than the sounds. He expands his statement by saying that "there is no image track and no soundtrack in the cinema, but a *place* of images, plus sounds" (ibid.). While this might be true, it would go too far to say that the either can exist without the other in the sound film era. Most, if not all, mainstream films use a combination of visual and auditory information to tell a story. Even in the sound era titles are used to display time and place or narrative information, as in the opening sequence of the *Star Wars* films (Lucas, 1977-). A lot of modes of silence would lose much, if not all, of their semiotic power without a corresponding and elucidating image. Important to note here is that these remarks only and specifically deal with film. Used correctly, a silence in the soundtrack can be used to devastating effect as proven by Orson Welles' radio broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* in 1938. The second implication of Chion's statement that "there is no soundtrack" is of more interest for its implications on filmic silence:

each audio element enters into *simultaneous vertical relationship* with narrative elements contained in the image (characters, actions) and visual elements of texture and setting. These relationships are much more direct and salient than any relations the audio element could have with other sounds. (Chion 1994, 40)

To Chion the relation of sound to image carries more weight than that of sound to sound. I posit that the same is true for silence. Although silence is dependent on contextual sound,

especially for its volume, most modes of silence are more dependent on their relation with the image. The unit of silence and its volume might be defined by contextual sound, but without the image many modes of silence would be indistinguishable. Diegetic silence is completely dependent on the image for its effect. If only music is playing and we cannot see the corresponding images, we can have no idea what the narrative importance of this music is. A case in point of this simultaneous vertical relationship between diegetic silence and the image can be found in *The Road to Perdition* (Mendes, 2002). In one of its most beautifully shot scenes we see John Rooney (Paul Newman), who has reluctantly ordered the killing of Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) in the beginning of the film, leaving a shop with his gang of thugs. The sound of rain is heard as they exit the shop into a dark and rainy street. Softly Thomas Newman's song *Ghosts* sets in with a slow piano melody over eerie ambient noises. As Rooney walks up to his car surrounded by his men the diegetic sounds slowly fade and by the time Rooney arrives at his car only to find his driver dead, the only audible sound is Thomas Newman's *Ghosts* over the diegetic silence. This diegetic silence continues for one minute ten seconds, during which we see Rooney look around a deserted street questioningly until his men get shot down one by one by a distant machine gun firing from the dark. *Ghosts* continues its slow piano melody and eerie sounds during the shooting and Rooney leans against his car acquiescently. The diegetic silence continues while in the image we see the massacre of Rooney's men. Sullivan then walks up slowly to Rooney while very softly, barely audible, the sound of rain fades back in. It is only after one minute and fifty seconds words are uttered again in the scene, when Rooney resigns himself to his fate and says "I'm glad it's you." Sullivan hesitates and visibly reminisces – they used to be like father and son – and then shoots Rooney at point blank range, the gunshots resounding quite loud in the previous diegetic silence. As soon as Sullivan shoots Rooney and the gunshots fade out all we hear is complete silence for a couple of seconds, after which *Ghosts* fades back in again. The sounds

of rain do not, however, and the diegetic silence returns for another forty seconds under the presence of *Ghosts*. The only things heard in this scene of about three and a half minutes, are the shop doorbell, the rain, "I'm glad it's you", gunshots, and Thomas Newman's *Ghosts*. It's a great scene in its use of sound and elucidates the "simultaneous vertical relation" with the image Chion alluded to. The relation between the sounds themselves is unclear at best. The soundtrack needs the image to be interpreted in a meaningful way to the narrative. Chion calls this meaningful vertical relationship of sound with image "synchresis", which is a contraction of synchronism and synthesis (Chion 1994, 63). It is the relation between sound and image where meaning is created. Although Chion describes this relation as a "spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" and "independent of any rational logic", it is not a completely automatic phenomenon (ibid.). Synchresis is "organized according to gestaltist laws and contextual determination" (ibid.). In contrast to unification Chion does include the spectator in his explanation of synchresis. It is a psychological function of meaning. Chion calls a moment where synchresis is particularly prominent "a point of synchronization, or synch point" (ibid., 58). Moments of silence in film are particular points of synchronisation. Silence in itself is ambiguous and needs contextual determination, whether it be sound or, preferably, image. The silence of a character in fear or awe is often a case of synchresis. In a scene from *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) where Danny Torrance (Danny Lloyd) is cycling through a hallway and encounters the ghosts of the murdered Grady twins (Lisa and Louise Burns), Danny can only visually express his emotional reaction to what he sees. He has no words or sounds, not even a gasp or a scream of anguish, but displays complete terror in his facial expression. His dialogue silence and visual reaction is a point of synchronisation. It is a salient moment of synchresis where the context determines the semiotic function and semantic content of this silence. Danny's silence is no longer ambiguous: it is a silence of



utmost terror, while at the same time giving his visions the necessary dreamlike connotations. These connotations are doubled in the imagery. Without warning the spectator is confronted with rapid shot changes of the Grady twins and their murder, causing the spectator to question what is real. The empty corridor at the end of Danny's vision will prove both images to be fantastical. This dreamlike state of Danny's vision is reinforced by the slight reverb added to the Grady twins' greeting and invitation: "Hello, Danny. Come play with us. Come and play with us, Danny. Forever. And ever. And ever." Danny's point of view, alternating between the Grady twins standing next to each other and inviting him and the scene of their murder, is correctly identified as a vision rather than diegetic reality by the spectator through the combination of Danny's silence and the reverb over the twins' speech. This slight reverb places Danny's point of audition inside his head, outside reality. We recognise its gestalt as being an illusion inside the filmic illusion. This scene is also a good example of Chion's concept of "added value" (Chion 1994, 5). Added value works like ancrage and unification in that it solidifies meaning. The unconscious reception of sound is what differentiates added value as a separate concept, however. Added value "is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary" (ibid.). It gives the impression of duplication of meaning while it actually brings about the correct meaning. Danny's silence is broken when he can no longer bear to watch his vision and tries to hide from it by placing his hands in front of his eyes. The first sound we hear from Danny's character since the start of the vision is that of his hands slapping against his face. It seems this is a duplication of the previous expression of terror through image and sound, but it is also the exact moment that the vision disappears. When Danny dares to look through his fingers again, the corridor is deserted and all that remains is the ominous non-diegetic music. By making a sound (his hands touching his face) Danny is placed back in the real, living world. Danny's silence throughout the vision has added value as well, for this silence brings about the correct meanings of horror and

internalisation that what is happening is in Danny's mind. Although seemingly unnecessary or merely stylistic, it is Danny's dialogical silence which solidifies the correct meaning, reinforced by the reverb of the twins echoing through Danny's silence. The sonic universe has shrunk to what Chion calls "null extension" (Chion 1994, 87). These are the sounds heard by one character, Danny, and the inner voices he hears. The opposite thereof is "vast extension", which are usually ambient sounds, the sounds of the world. These sounds, which Chion also calls "ambient extension", have "no absolute limit except those of the universe" (ibid.). Null extension often correlates with Théberge's description of diegetic or dialogue silence to depict the mental state of a character. The null and vast, or ambient, extensions indicate the spaces wherein silence and sound can be found. Sound which is found in the ambient extension beyond the frame of the image and causes the spectator to ask "Who or what is making this sound?" is acousmatic sound. The question where sound comes from is resolved by the spatial magnetisation of the sound to the image. Chion calls off-screen sound that raises questions (like acousmatic sound, but not limited thereto) "active off-screen sound" (ibid., 85). It is magnetised to the screen. Passive off-screen sound is sound that envelops and stabilises the image. In the same manner we can translate this to active and passive silence. Passive silence is silence that envelops and stabilises a scene. The musical silence that can render a scene realistic and gritty at the same time stabilises it. Active silence, on the other hand, raises questions. The diegetic silence of the Vietnamese village in the scene from *Apocalypse Now* analysed above is active silence. In a way the silence of Danny in the corridor during his vision is stabilising and enveloping. His silence does not raise questions but frames the scene to the null extension of his mind. It anchors the terror that we hear and see to Danny, rather than acting as discomposure. Silence functioning as discomposure will tend to be more active silence. Questions arise due to discomposing silence's ambiguity. Silence functioning as a synchronisation point, which we might call synchretic silence (from synchronous and

synthetic, as adjective of Chion's synchresis), is more passive silence. It establishes and frames meaning. It gives the ear a stable place rather than confusing it. Synchretic silence is more prone to have added value as well, seeming unnecessary but fulfilling a pivotal role, like Danny's silence framing the scene as a vision. This does not mean that scenes with passive silence require passive interpretation, for a spectator still attends the image more intently in the presence of silence. Passive silence affects us no less than active silence. The lack of sonorous input, active or passive, focuses our attention which is normally divided between audio and vision completely to the image. (cf. Chion 1994, 132). Both active and passive silence allude to silence's signification of stasis (cf. *ibid.*, 9-10), which is the opposite of the normal filmic experience. Silence is the inverse of sound in this aspect. Sound has often difficulty denoting stasis, because it "by its very nature necessarily implies a displacement or agitation, however minimal" (*ibid.*). Sound is a vibration and needs thus needs a displacement of atoms to propagate. Sound is thus a natural conveyor of movement. Chion translates this to the temporal dimension and puts forward sound as the prime exponent of the passing of time in the image (*ibid.*, 13). It does so in three ways. Sound conveys the "temporal animation in the image", it renders the perception of time as exact or vague. Second, it gives images temporal linearisation. Most importantly for a translation to silence is the third manner, however: "sound *vectorizes* or dramatizes shots, orienting them toward a future, a goal, and creation of a feeling of imminence and expectation The shot is going somewhere and it is oriented in time" (*ibid.*, 13-14, emphasis in original). The presence of sound drives a shot, it propels the shot and the narrative forward. Chion calls the effect of sound on film "chronographic": the sound film is written in time as well as in movement (*ibid.*, 17). The inverse of a drive forward and orientation in time is that silence immobilises shots (as de-vectorization). Silence places the shot in a temporary moment outside of movement and time. This does not mean that a scene is frozen in time or placed in stasis, but rather that the

presence of silence can make the scene behave outside normal time and space. The diegetic silence in the opening scene of *Easy Rider* is necessary to allow the non-diegetic music to take on its transformative nature, passing time and space in a more-than-normal manner. The silence of Danny in *The Shining* subjugates his normal perception of the world, which is temporarily suspended, to the power of his supernatural and horrifying vision. Chion calls the absence of sound we would normally expect “suspension”, like the diegetic silence in *Easy Rider* or Danny’s silence in *The Shining* (Chion 1994, 132). Suspension creates a feeling of emptiness or mystery, without the spectator actively noticing it or consciously locating it in the soundtrack. Danny’s reaction in *The Shining* is suspended but until we stop to analyse the scene we are too engulfed by the Grady twins and Danny’s vision to notice this suspension. Closely related hereto is Rick Altman's “sound advance”. Although developed in an article dealing with television sound, this concept is easily applicable to silence and directly relates to Chion's concepts of magnetisation and suspension.

#### **ALTMAN’S SOUND ADVANCE**

Rick Altman discusses Raymond Williams’ notion of flow in his article “Television/Sound” (1986) and adds to this his thereof derived concept of the “household flow”, which is anything competing with the television screen for the spectator’s attention – not necessarily confined to the household. Altman then discusses six important functions and techniques of the television soundtrack: labeling, italicizing, the sound hermeneutic, internal audiences, the sound advance, and discursification. While all of these functions and techniques specifically deal with drawing the attention of television spectators away from the “household flow”, the sound hermeneutic and the sound advance are also concerned with the relation of sound to sound which makes these concepts interesting to an analysis of silence as well. Altman’s concept of the sound hermeneutic is the televised counterpart of the psychological play of acousmatic sound and magnetisation of sound to the screen. As the unity of the filmic subject is different

from that of the television subject, and as silence can perform a wholly different function in television broadcasts, I leave the sound hermeneutic for what it is. The sound advance, on the other hand, is of particular interest. Altman describes the sound advance as the recasting of reactionary sound as a prediction (Altman 1986, 50). In television broadcasts this is used to draw the spectator's attention to whatever was reacted to in the first place (laughing will announce something funny, applause will announce someone coming onto the set, etc.). Applying this logic to filmic silence, the question that the sound advance forces us to ask is "Why is it so silent?". Silence becomes an announcer of what is to come. In its most cliché use, silence is the announcer of death and "fatality, dying, and deathlike experiences" (Link 2007, 71). A silence announces a character's death, near-death, or loss of Being (cf. Link 2007, Smith 2008, Frith in Bloustien 2010). The connotation of silence with death or not-Being is found in non-Western cultures as well, e.g., in Indian culture (Sundar 2010, 282) and Japanese culture (Takemitsu 2005, 17). The silence in a horror film before a character is murdered is such a stereotypical example of a sound advance of silence, which I shall call "silence advance" henceforth. It is also quite literally a reactionary sonorous state recast as prediction. As soon as someone is dead, they stop producing sound. The absence of sound with a character is an auditory flash-forward. A silence advance is, in a way, the opposite of Chion's suspension. Whereas suspension is subconscious or passes us by unnoticed, yet still affecting us, the sound advance (and thus silence advance) wants to be noticed because it is the soundtrack giving the spectator a heads-up: something is about to happen here. The silence advance also differs from ancrage, as it does not convey and solidifies the correct meaning of the image being displayed, but rather predicts a possible meaning. It is the soundtrack announcing to the spectator the arrival of narrative signification. Like flashbacks and especially flash-forwards, the silence advance is the aural equivalent of using silence as authorial device. It is foreshadowing. The silence advance is a narrative function of silence,

then. It asks our attention and announces a future event. While it serves as an announcer, the silence advance differs from the sound advance in that it is not necessarily always a reaction recast as prediction. It is the conscious counterpart of suspension, actively asking the spectator's attention.

### III. SEMIOTICS OF SILENCE

Thus far I have mainly focused on different modes and aspects of filmic silence in their relation to the image, soundtrack, and narrative. These modes and aspects are mainly differentiated through their role and function in the narrative or the soundtrack. Although different in function, most modes and aspects of silence are dependent on contextual or narrative integration for their semantic content. While contextual information can be derived from the moment itself but is not limited thereto, narrative dependency means these modes and aspects are dependent on information relayed to the spectator over time. This also means that some spectators will interpret certain instances of filmic silence as more information-laden than other spectators. Still, a significant part of the way silence brings about meaning lies in its actual effect (and affect) in the moment it is used. The perception of silence in itself can render an independent meaning, not fixed to the meaning conveyed by the narrative echoing through this silence. The particular meaning and interpretation of silence belongs to the individual spectator, because each spectator will remember different things throughout the narrative and pick up on different contextual relations. What silence means is of less importance for the development of a theoretical framework than its possibilities in meaning creation. This is where the inclusion of semiotics in the development of my analytic framework becomes necessary. Semiotics is the study of signs. It deals with the way a sign relates to the object it represents and the way this sign-object relation is interpreted. While the visual aspects of film have a well founded tradition of semiotic analyses (cf. Wollen 1969, Metz 1974), the film soundtrack has not received extensive scholarly attention in semiotic approaches. Andrew Goodwin includes semiotics in his analysis of the relation between sound and image in music videos (Goodwin 1992). While a music video arguably contains more visual-aural sign interaction, his approach is still interesting as visual-aural signs can also be

found in films and other multimedia. Syncretic silence and the silence advance are some of the more evident possibilities for silence to be interpreted and analysed as a sign. Goodwin discusses the relation between visual and aural signs in Peircian (rather than de Saussurian) terminology, i.e., as symbolical, iconic, and indexical relations. The advantage of using Peircian terms over de Saussure's terms (the dichotomy signifier – signified) is that Peirce's semiotic theory includes meaning generation and the manner in which a sign effectuates this meaning, while at the same time avoiding meaning itself. Peircian semiotics explicitly does not address the meaning generated by a the interpretation of signs. Meaning, for Peirce, is "pragmatically simplified by defining it as the actual effect of a sign" (Turino 1999, 224). Peircian sign theory allows for a detailed distinction on the level of sign (qualisign, sinsign, legisign), relation between sign and object (icon, index, symbol), interpretation of the sign (emotional interpretant, energetic interpretant, sign interpretant) and the overarching process of meaning generation (Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness) (Miyake 2008, 25). This does also mean, however, that Peirce does end up with more than ten different sign types, which can make his sign theory quite daunting to use. The sign-object trichotomy is the most widely used aspect of his theory, although his other trichotomies are quite relevant as well. Thomas Turino's (1999) discussion of the musical relevance of Peircian sign theory is elucidating, comprehensive, and interesting for his application of sign theory on music, and I shall extensively refer to this article throughout this chapter. Goodwin, perhaps due to lack of space or applicability, is only concerned with the sign-object relation (symbol, icon, index) in his analyses of music videos. However tempting Turino's extensive discussion of sign theory is, Goodwin is of more interest to my theoretical framework for his incorporation of the relation between visual and aural signs. Goodwin's first key issue is his description of this relation as a process wherein "an aural signifier generates *another* signifier, which is visual, *simultaneously* with the mental production of the signified" (Goodwin 1992, 58, emphasis in



original). This description also happens to be almost identical to Lacan's definition of a metaphor as the substitution of one signifier for another (Lacan 1977, 164), which subsequently results in a chain of signification. The term "metaphor" need not mean the same thing in Lacanian and Peircian terminology, however. Still, an interesting parallel to the visual analysis of film arises here. Whereas the semiotic analysis of film imagery has traditionally ascribed much importance the indexical nature of cinema (cf. Gunning 2007), the ubiquity of silence as metaphor might lead us to expect a dominance of the icon in the soundtrack (a metaphor is a subdivision of the iconic sign, Turino 1999, 227). Turino does indeed put forward a dominance of the icon and the index in his discussion of semiotic relations in music and Goodwin devotes most of his attention to the iconic relations in his article as well (Goodwin 1992, 58). As a film is very different from a music video, so are the signs used therein. One similarity is that both filmic silence and music video signs are highly dependent on narrative (if present in a music video) and context. Two major differences are that in music video silence will be all but non-existent and that, for the most part, video and audio in a music video form a more homogenous relation, while in film audio and video can be more freely heterogeneous. Applying Goodwin's description of the signifying process in sound-image relations to silence is thus not an easy matter. Goodwin describes another key issue in the sound-image relation. The second key issue is the problem of "which signifier attaches to the signified – or whether indeed the sound-image fusion is sometimes so great that the two signifiers are actually one" (ibid.). If we see a weathervane turning about wildly whilst at the same time we hear the sounds of strong wind, which of these two signs tells us that heavy winds are blowing? This might be an example of the sound-image fusion being so great that both signifiers are actually one. But what happens when we see a dog sharply turning its head and cocking its ears at the same time we hear a floorboard creaking? Here the floorboard can indicate intrusion, or danger, which the dog then also comes to signify. A dog turning its head

and cocking its ears by itself need not indicate danger, but it duplicates the signified of the creaking floorboard. The sound-image fusion tends to complicate things even beyond the normal complexities of semiotic analysis. This might be one reason for Goodwin to restrict himself to the sign-object relation. This complexity becomes even more salient when analysing filmic silence. Silence, in Peircian sign theory, is namely a “zero-form signifier” that carries meaning. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney describes a zero-form signifier (which she shortens to zero-signifier, as will I henceforth) as a “signifier without materiality, that is, without representation by linguistic labels or objects” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994, 59). It is the fact that silence carries meaning without referring to linguistic labels or objects by itself which makes it such a complex sign. The meanings of a zero-signifier can range from “a most concrete and specific to various types of ‘nothingness’” (ibid.). This nothingness of the zero-signifier can also be described as absence: verbal, spatial and temporal absence (ibid., 68). The abstract application of silence in film, combined with its contextual dependence and our personal interpretation, results in a conceptualisation of absence in its broadest sense. Although silence in itself is an immaterial and empty signifier, it is interpreted as representing the absence of particular materiality. This can be an actual absence of something (a presence of nothing, a void), oppression (lack of power or voice in the hegemonic discourse), dislocation (outside of time and space), both fantasy and reality (absence of reality or imagination), and so forth. In all these cases silence as zero-signifier is used to convey meaning. As filmic silence is wholly different from linguistic silence (from whence the term zero-form signifier originates), its signifying relationships will differ from that of traditional zero-form signifying relations. W.J.T. Mitchell even goes as far to say that if we approach media from sign theory, using Peirce’s elementary triad of icon, index, and symbol, we “find that there is no sign that exists in a ‘pure state’, no pure icon, index, or symbol” (Mitchell 2005, 261). What does this mean for filmic silence, then? Although Goodwin limits his

semiotic approach to the relation between sign and object (icon, index, symbol), I approach the semiotic relations of filmic silence from Goodwin's descriptions of these relations as he includes the sound-image fusion in his analysis. I will add to his basic semiotic approach by drawing from Turino's musical descriptions of Peircian semiotics where and if necessary.

### **SYMBOLIC SILENCE**

Goodwin starts off by describing symbolic relations, which exist "where a musical convention has been established" (Goodwin 1992, 58). This convention can be internal to a musical system, like a guitar solo that signifies machismo and virility (ibid.). The zero-form structural unity of silence already eliminates the possibility of any internal conventions. The symbolic use of silence are necessarily contextually dependent. Turino adds that the meanings of symbols are "relatively fixed through social agreement" (Turino 1999, 228). This still proves problematic. What are the conventions or social agreements on filmic silence? This problem cannot be solved correctly for filmic without more information on the symbolic relation. Symbols are part of the third category of phenomena in Peircian semiology which is aptly named *Thirdness*. This category involves "the mediational capabilities of a person to bring a first and second entity into synthetic or general relationship with each other" (ibid., 231). Symbols are mediated. Leaving the discussion of the medium itself or our perceptive awareness thereof as mediation aside, this is one, if not the most, important difference with the other sign-object relations (icon and index). The symbol's dependency on a person's mediational capabilities means they pass through a language-based thought system. Its language dependency is at the same time quite elusive when accounting for filmic silence. Put rather simplified, symbols are signs that are either thought about or understood through their convention or social agreement (like a term in a dictionary). The difficulty of analysing the sign-object and sound-image relation as symbolic lies in cinema developing its own language,

on top of the image language and sound language we grow accustomed to from respective art forms (e.g., paintings, sculpture, music, radio). Add to this the cultural language in which we think, and a simple description of the symbol as “convention” becomes suddenly quite complex. This is also why films from other traditions, like Japanese films, can be quite puzzling in their use of symbols and silence. It is because the concepts used in these films (like *mu*, nothingness, and *ma*, interval, spatiality, pause) are strange to us in both their filmic and linguistic-philosophical traditions. We can, however, learn to recognise symbols in films without knowledge of the linguistic-philosophical and cultural traditions behind them. As film develops its own language as medium, regular spectators internalise its language and its signs. In the process of this internalisation and in the filmic language the absence of pure signs in multimedia (Mitchell) and silence as zero-signifier (Ohnuki-Tierney) are important factors. Turino writes that symbols operate “relatively context-free” (Turino 1999, 228) because of their standardisation. The contextual dependence of silence has been a red thread throughout this paper, nonetheless. Contextual dependence is inherent to silence as a zero-form signifier. Symbolic filmic silence is part of an ambivalent zone semiotics, an example of the impossibility of pure signifiers Mitchell alluded to. Symbolic silence gives and receives meaning through the other signs around it. Ohnuki-Tierney calls this effect the transgression of the zero-signifier (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney, 66-67). Although it is a zero-signifier, it changes the signs around it by drawing from them and changing their and its own object relation. The key importance in Turino’s description of symbols, then, is that they are *relatively* context-free. Symbolic silence in film can be understood apart from narrative, through its conventionalisation, if and only if the interpreting subject is able to link the conventions used to the film at hand. This understanding is key to a discussion of symbolic filmic silence and presupposes two things. First and foremost the presence of an interpreter is required. A symbol inherently necessitates an interpreter for it must be evaluated through a linguistic-

based comparison. Running ahead of my argument, this presupposition of a rationalised interpretation is also one of the biggest differences between a symbol and an icon or index, which can resemble or indicate their object without a linguistic-based interpretation. Second, the interpreter must be both knowledgeable of the symbolic silence's convention and be able to identify this convention through the context surrounding the filmic symbolic silence's occurrence (not unlike Pierre Bourdieu's embodied cultural capital). In other words, as symbols mediate between a first and second entity on a general or synthetic level, they cause a spectator to hear/see *A*, relate it to a context *B* and subsequently think of *C* (where the cultural capital comes in). The interpretant (i.e., a class of effect generated by sign-object relations which eschews the mind-body dichotomy, Turino 1999, 224) for most symbols is the sign-interpretant, which is the most linguistic-based concept. Symbols, according to Turino, are more likely to generate "'rational' or 'conscious' responses" (ibid., 234). In his article Turino puts forward a theory of musical affectivity wherein he posits that "the affective potential of signs is inversely proportional to the degree of mediation, generality, and abstraction" (ibid.). Although symbols are a part of *Thirdness*, which is the most mediated form of meaning generation, this does not mean they do not affect us. Their affect will merely be less direct than that of other interpretants. Symbols are "general, mediational signs *about* rather than *of* the experiences they express" (ibid., 232, emphasis in original). They are referential (*A* refers to *B*). Symbolic silence is a convention in film that, if thusly known and recognised, elucidates and refers to something else.

One example of symbolic silence is the use of the silence advance as a genre-specific trope. In horror and thriller films the generic silence advance functions as announcer of death (cf. Link 2007). The character displayed in the generic silence advance is the visual signifier to which the aural signifier's meaning (impending death or deathlike experience) becomes attached as well. A seasoned horror or thriller film viewer can recognise this generic silence as

a symbol. The spectator recognises the trope and *knows* that something ominous will happen to the character displayed. The symbolic generic silence refers to death. This reference, combined with contextual references, i.e., the visual signifier of the doomed character, results in the foreboding of the character's death or deathlike experience. Specifically, this silence advance in horror or thriller films can be analysed as a rheme-symbol. The rheme is part of Peirce's third trichotomy, which deals with how a sign is interpreted. A rheme indicates a qualitative possibility without it being judged true or false (Turino 1999, 229). As it is foreboding, this symbolic generic silence announces the possibility of a deathlike experience to the informed viewer, for it will not always be the case that the silence advance results in death. The spectator recognising the symbolic reference understands the sign on an intellectual level as authorial device. This rational understanding does not mean that the spectator is not affected by the symbol. The unity of the cinematic subject is not undone by a rational thought and the spectator is still empathically engaged with the film. Someone who is not as versed in genre-specific tropes, however, will not recognise this silence advance as a symbol. Yet this silence advance can still affect the viewer because of its contextual relations. It receives signification from the visual signifiers rather than the other way around. Although the spectator is affected by the silence, the silence advance *in itself* is not recognised as a sign. Nonetheless, the more this spectator watches films the more the silence advance will come to be recognised as symbolic. It becomes internalised as part of the filmic language used to convey meaning. Eventually the silence advance can come to symbolise this meaning, in turn transgressing upon contextual signifiers while at the same time being contextually dependent as it still is a zero-signifier. Filmic language is an important aspect to take into account when discussing symbols, as are the cultural background of both the film and the audience. A spectator might discover symbolism where the filmmaker perhaps did not intend any. I already alluded to this in my discussion of the scene from *Apocalypse Now*. When the

helicopters attack the village the Vietnamese population is dialogically silenced. The only sounds heard are the *Ride of the Valkyries*, gunshots, explosions, and the American soldiers. Although the Vietnamese are seen gesturing to each other, there is no shot from their point of view while there are plenty of close-ups of American soldiers sitting in the helicopters. One of the soldiers tellingly yells “Run, Charlie, run!” from the helicopter, reinforcing the American point of view. The Vietnamese are but figurines in the spectacle of American dominance. A spectator with some postcolonial knowledge could recognise the binary social relation in this scene as conventional for power relations. The dialogue silence of the Vietnamese is the necessary sonorous inverse of the dominant American presence and point of view. The Vietnamese are, quite literally, silenced in the hegemonic discourse.

A third example of symbolic filmic silence can be found in the opening scene of *Easy Rider* I discussed above. In this case the diegetic silence is symbolic for the passing of time and space. This diegetic silence is combined with visual signifiers of Wyatt and Billy in different parts of the U.S.A. and the scene is sutured together by the soundtrack. The diegetic silence comes to symbolise travel and a sense of adventure through the passing of time and space. Such a use of diegetic silence is also a case in point of Mitchell’s idea that in cinema there are no pure signifiers. In se the relation between the diegetic silence, the image, and the object (passing of time and space), is symbolic. The relation between the whole of the scene however, thus incorporating the presence of *Born to Be Wild* in the soundtrack, is iconic. It is a common filmic device that is recognised by the viewer: a montage. The *Rocky III* (Stallone, 1982) training montage featuring Bill Conti’s *Gonna Fly Now* is, taking this into account, truly iconic. At the same time these montages are also symbolic for the overcoming of obstacles, travel, etc. It is silence I am concerned with however, rather than whole scenes. This merely elucidates the complexity in the relations between aural-sign and object, visual-sign and object, and the aural-visual sign relation. The other signs, icon and index, have a

much more immediate sign-object relation than the index, although it is important to remember that these signs too, are mostly impure of form and symbol, icon, and index can all be part of the same sign.

### **ICONIC SILENCE**

Goodwin continues his discussion of the visual and aural sign-object relations with a description of the icon, which works “through resemblance” (Goodwin 1992, 58). Specifically dealing with music videos, Goodwin adds that this resemblance “is not visual (as is usual in semiotics and semiology), but rather one that involves onomatopoeia” (ibid.). The examples Goodwin offers are guitars emulating police sirens, vocal performances suggesting sexual acts, and rhythm sections emulating trains or machinery (ibid., 58-59). Iconicity can also involve intertextuality, which in music videos is made explicit through sampling (Goodwin 1992, 59). Applying Goodwin’s description of the sound-image sign-object relation to silence is rather problematic. Filmic silence, being a zero-signifier, cannot emulate something or exhibit intertextuality by itself. An onomatopoeic silence is a contradiction in terms. A silent object does not sound like a specific other object, but rather sounds like all other silent objects, or more specifically it sounds like nothing. Rather than strictly an onomatopoeia, iconic silence is akin to an ideophone. An ideophone is an expression of phonetic symbolism, which holds that sounds have meaning in themselves, with onomatopoeias as a subclass of ideophone (cf. Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001, 141-142). As such, filmic silence is perhaps even better described to be the negative aspect of phonetic symbolism (much like the negative volume discussed above). It is the absence rather than the presence of sound and its semantic content that expresses an idea. Iconic silence is silence that is understood to resemble its object. Using the concept of filmic silence as ideophone offers more latitude to discuss its semiotic role as icon. The use of “resemblance” needs elucidation to avoid confusion, however, taking the characteristic nothingness of the zero-signifier into account. Turino



describes the iconic relation in music as “motivic unity and most aspects of musical form” (Turino 1999, 227). While a categorisation of recurrences of the form of filmic silence as iconic is a non-issue as this form is always homogenous (any mode of silence is thus always resembling, and an icon, of all other applications of this mode of silence – which makes this approach not very practical), the notion of motivic unity is interesting. One such motif can be found in diegetic silence expressing null extension. The silence of the diegetic world when inner thoughts or visions are portrayed is a typical filmic motif. Unlike symbols it does not require a thought-based process, a knowledge of filmic language or an understanding of cultural background. It is more immediately felt. It immediately resembles otherworldliness and does not need to be connected thereto by the interpreting subject. Icons belong to Peirce’s *Firstness*, which indicates “oneness, quality, and possibility (ibid., 231). The “spectacular” scene in *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999) uses this motif of inner thoughts and visions. We see a rose petal floating down from nowhere to Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) lying in bed next to his wife Carolyn (Annette Bening). The only thing heard in the soundtrack is Thomas Newman’s composition *A Rose*. The diegetic silence combined with the surreal image of rose petals floating down from nowhere allow us to correctly interpret the image as null extension; it is all in Lester’s mind. The soundtrack resembles Lester’s perception, we see the images through his mind’s eye. The origin of the rose petals is subsequently shown: Lester is projecting his imagination of Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari) lying on a bed of roses onto his ceiling. Rose petals float down from the ceiling onto Lester’s bed. Music is still the only sound, until Lester says “It’s the weirdest thing. I feel like I’ve been in a coma for twenty years, and I’m just now waking up.” This reinforces our interpretation of the scene as dreamlike because Lester is not seen uttering these words, we merely hear them. We hear his mind narrating to us. The music continues until a about a minute later Lester speaks again: “Spectacular.” As Goodwin remarked, it can be problematic to distinguish which signifier of

the aural-visual relation triggers signification. In this scene both the diegetic silence and the surreal imagery of the rose petals are strong signs. While it can be argued that the diegetic silence in this scene is relative or ambient silence, anchoring Lester and his wife lying in bed late at night, there are none of the familiar ambient sounds that normally symbolise night-time (crickets, distant traffic in the dark, an owl call). The same motif is found in the waltz scene from *Anna Karenina* (Wright, 2012). Alexei Vronsky (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) asks Anna Karenina (Keira Knightley) to dance. While they waltz we hear ambient sounds of feet shuffling and dresses rustling, until Vronsky lifts Anna. As soon as he lowers her, their diegetic surroundings seem to have disappeared. We only hear the music and Anna's heavy breathing. This silence is also visualised: Anna and Vronsky are suddenly shown alone in the ballroom which just now was filled with people. We find ourselves in their shared mind and experience as they alone exist for each other. This visualisation reflects the silence's iconicity back to it and reinforces it: an icon functions as a sign of identity as well, as "unspoken signs of who we are, whom we resemble, whom we are with" (Turino 1999, 234). Vronsky and Anna are not part of the crowd but they stand out, they stand alone. Slowly the diegetic sounds return and with it the diegetic world: the other dancing couples return in the frame. The scene from *The Shining* I discussed above is a case in point of both this motif and Mitchell's notion of impure signs. The diegetic silence in this scene is both iconic and indexical. It is iconic as motif, showcasing the null extension of Danny's vision. It is indexical as immediate expression of Danny's terror. When the diegetic sounds return (Danny smacking his hands against his face) the iconic diegetic silence ends and so does the vision. Danny still expresses speechless shock, however, which is shown through Danny's indexical dialogue silence that continues for a few seconds even after the vision (and with it the diegetic silence) has disappeared.

Another motif for which iconic silence is frequently used in films is the expression of an absence of time. Whereas I discussed the passing of time and space as symbolic, this iconic motif is rather the inverse. In this iconic use of silence time has all but passed, it stood still. In *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012) this motif is used when James Bond (Daniel Craig) visits the home he grew up in. The drive to the house is underscored with ambient sounds, strings, and a clarinet. This underscore continues when Bond and M (Judi Dench) enter the house. Soon after they enter, however, first the clarinet and then the strings fade out, leaving only ambient sounds. For about thirty seconds a relative ambient silence is created. The only sounds heard are the ambient sounds and Bond and M's footsteps echoing through the house. The aural sign is coupled with visual sign of furniture covered in white blankets. This is also an example of the internal logic of silence: the narrative dictates this use of silence to portray Bond's home as a relic from the past. While it is not immobilisation, this scene and its silence do slow down the frantic pace of the film thus far. The secret service is being targeted by Silva (Javier Bardem), a threat from MI6's past. Fitting the theme of the film, Bond and M choose refuge in the past, where the film will reach its dramatic end. This silence is iconic in its use as filmic motif as well as in its use to resemble time standing still through the absence of sound, which is a sign of time and motion.

The icon is also used to express intertextuality (cf. Goodwin 1992, 59). In film scenes the iconic silence is then often copied in the imagery, creating a temporary stillness. Usually this silence is diegetic or dialogue silence, but in almost all cases this silence is an application of immobilisation. Rather than driving the scene or shot, a momentary lapse in time is created. In some cases the actors are temporarily frozen in movement as well, creating a *tableau vivant* (living painting), usually referring to actual paintings. One rather interesting example of this is the last supper scene in the rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Jewison, 1973). The disciples are singing of their trials and tribulations while preparing for a picnic, which

will turn out to be Jesus Christ's (Ted Neeley) last meal. As the disciples finish their first verse of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Last Supper* they seat themselves and two bars of diegetic silence (considering the disciples' singing is diegetic but the music is not) are heard while the music continues. Simultaneously with changing both instrumentation and key (from G major on Hammond organ and guitar to g minor on piano) the actors freeze for ten seconds, creating a tableau vivant of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (ca. 1495-1498) on the first g minor piano chord. The brief diegetic silence, combined with the longer visual immobilisation, is filled with meaning. It is iconic in referencing Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and, for Christians, symbolic as well in referencing an important part of their religious rituals. Moreover, there is a brief eighth-note complete silence in the soundtrack before the g minor piano chord. This can, with the necessary cultural capital, be interpreted as a symbolic musical silence advance foreshadowing Jesus' sacrifice. The silence, the change to a minor key and the immobilisation of the scene is followed by Jesus singing the following line: "The end is just a little harder when brought about by friends." His first two words ("The end..") are stressed by stretching them over almost a whole measure, over the prolonged g minor piano chord, thus solidifying the meaning of this scene: it is in this scene Jesus becomes aware of his fate. This meaning will be reinforced later in the scene when Jesus sings to Judas Iscariot (Carl Anderson) to no longer waste time before betraying him ("Why don't you go do it? Hurry they are waiting!"). This scene showcases silence as icon (it is directly referencing Da Vinci's painting), symbol (it is referencing a specific religious ritual which in turn symbolises sacrifice, the effacing of sin, and the remembrance thereof) and immobilisation, which transgresses upon the imagery thusly creating the tableau vivant. It also elucidates the importance of the spectator to recognise a sign as such for it to engender effect. Someone who does not know Da Vinci's mural painting or the rituals or Christian religious rites will not recognise the sign references.

The above examples elucidate the role of the icon in filmic silence. It is used to emphasise intertextuality, but is more commonly found as an expression of inner thoughts and vision. In both cases diegetic silence features prominently. The motif of inner thoughts should not be mistaken with contemplation or awe, for this would make the silence indexical. Although Turino discusses the icon as a musical role resemblance of excitation (Turino 1999, 227), the same is not necessarily true for silence. The difference lies in that the icon resembles its object without being directly affected by it, while indexical silence can be a direct reference to silence as mode of excitation. The difference with a symbol is that the sign-object relation is not processed in language-based thought but more directly felt or understood.

### **INDEXICAL SILENCE**

Goodwin describes the index as “a causal link” that is seen in the “mind’s eye”, which in music videos is often the musician’s movement creating the sound (Goodwin 1992, 59). When a musician raises his arm or guitar simultaneously with the pitch of the melody rising, this can be seen as indexical in music videos. Such a direct example for filmic silence might be hard to find, however. How would an actor portray silence? The causal link an indexical relation indeed denotes, can fortunately be applied more broadly in film than in music videos. Turino describes the index as “related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience” (Turino 1999, 227). This co-occurrence in actual experience is an important factor in the dominance of the index in semiotic analyses of film imagery (Gunning 2007, 30) and is largely derived from the paradox of perceiving the mediated filmic universe as real, what Félix Martinez-Bonati calls “the mimetic stratum” (Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis 1992, 116). The mimetic stratum is “‘the real world of the of the fictional universe,’ the ‘factual domain’ which the viewer imagines he or she perceives directly, rather than through representation” (ibid.). This means a spectator does not distinguish in realities (cinematic or

“normal”) when internalising signs, which helps to explain the power of the filmic language I have alluded to earlier. It is an extra language we learn to understand, a way of doing, conceptualising, and imagining. The status of cinema itself has even been oversimplified and made equal to that of the index because it *points to* that which we perceive as real (Gunning 2007, 29). Herein lies also the power of the index. In perceiving cinema as reality, the indexical sign becomes “intimately bound as experience” (Turino 1999, 227). One such intimate experience of filmic silence is the feeling of mystery or tension it can bring about. It is the silence that we unconsciously interpret as ominous. I analysed the silence advance as symbolic, but it functions as indexical as well albeit that in its indexical form it does not function as foreshadowing. Whereas the symbolic sign-object relation of the silence advance points towards a future event, the occurrence of filmic silence in the silence advance itself can be analysed as indexical as well. Rather than actively recognising the impending death of a character through the generic silence advance, this silence is “not processed in language-based thought” but simply felt. It is the silence of the moment engendering a feeling in the moment. It is no longer a silence advance then, however, but a different kind of silence which points not to the future but creates a feeling of mystery in the moment. This is the typical silence in a horror or thriller movie denoting danger. While it does not always indicate imminent death or deathlike experience, it does accompany scenes wherein an element of danger is needed or to improve the effect of a sudden surprise. In the scene from *The Shining* I discussed earlier the indexical silence has a twofold function. First, it denotes general suspense as a trope in psychological thrillers. In this function it is used as suspension. It creates an eerie atmosphere and doubles as iconic silence to signify the null extension of Danny’s vision. Second, Danny’s silence is also a direct affect of his terror. His dialogue silence is functioning as a dicent-index. The dicent sign is part of Peirce’s third trichotomy which deals with how a sign is interpreted, like the earlier discussed rheme. Whereas the rheme indicates possibility, the

dicent sign is interpreted as representing its object in actual existence (e.g., our mirror reflection or a portrait or photograph of someone we know) and as being affected by that object (Turino 1999, 229-230). Danny's silence is affected by his shock. The aural sign of his dialogue silence is coupled with the visual sign of his wide-eyed face and gaping mouth. After he peeks through his fingers and his vision has disappeared, a relative silence hangs over the image of the empty corridor like the calm in the eye of the storm. Danny turns to his imaginary friend Tony (his right hand index finger) and echoes his own and our feeling: "Tony, I'm scared." We copy Danny's feeling because dicent-indices are among the more powerful signs. A dicent-indexical relation creates a strong connection with the imagery provided during this silence and results in an emotional interpretant, i.e., an "unreflected-upon feeling" (ibid., 224). We perceive it as actual and real and interpret it in a directly affecting manner. This is also why it is so often used in horror and thriller films. Through its widespread use we become conditioned as spectators in such a manner that silence can evoke fear as a Pavlovian reaction even without help of the imagery. It is a condition of our internalisation of the filmic language and its signs.

Dicent-indexical silence can also be used to denote pensive moments in films. This use of silence alludes to wonder, awe, or contemplation. In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, 1986) it is used to elucidate the contemplative admiration of Cameron Frye (Alan Ruck) when standing in front of George Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884). The whole scene in the Art Institute of Chicago is underscored with diegetic silence and an instrumental version of The Smith's *Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want*. The shots of Ferris Bueller (Matthew Broderick) and Sloane Peterson (Mia Sara) retreating to a secluded room for a steamy make-out session are contrasted by shots of Cameron standing still in front of Seurat's painting. Cameron focuses on the detail of a mother and child walking through the park. The scene ends with increasing close-ups of Cameron and the child until the

child is no longer visible, but merely the painted points of Seurat's painting technique (pointillism). Through the immobilisation of the scene and the increasing close-ups we identify with Cameron's contemplation of the girl in the painting until we are one with him, and he is one with the painting. The diegetic silence in this scene starts off as symbolic by indicating the passing of time in a montage, but then shifts to indexical in the later parts of the scene where there is no more movement, only Cameron intently watching Seurat's painting. In this part of the montage the indexical relation denotes immobilising contemplation.

Indexical silence mimicking the silence of wonder and awe is used in *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006) when Theo Faron (Clive Owen) brings a newborn child out of an assailed building. A relative ambient silence is created through a sudden absence of the intense fighting that precedes Theo's exit. The soldiers outside the building lower their guns and can only stare in wonder of the fact that a human child has been born for the first time in two decades. The relative silence is broken by the explosion of a rocket-propelled grenade, but in that brief moment where the gunfire is suspended it expresses both the human awe and wonder of the soldiers as well as the eeriness of the dystopian, childless society. This shows another important aspect of the index: it can "condense great quantities and varieties of meaning – even contradictory meanings – within a single sign" (Turino 1999, 235). Both awe and eeriness are expressed in a the single relative silence in this scene. This is because we know indexical silence from other films and situations to signify both awe and eeriness. Although this sign is used in other situations to signify merely one of these connotations, such as in Cameron's contemplative awe in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, these semantic possibilities can be combined in new uses of the index. Once an indexical relation is emotionally internalised through its co-occurrence, other significations can be attached to a the same sign, or these can be combined as is the case in this particular moment. Although the film scenes



and occurrences of indexical silence I have thus far described were all relative, diegetic or dialogical silence, musical silence is a strong indexical sign as well.

Th  berge describes musical silence as usually depicting a stark realism. Analysed as an indexical sign it becomes easier to understand why it is such a strong sign in depicting realism. We experience the indexical sign as real (it is based on our internalisation of its co-occurrence in reality with its object) and direct (it is interpreted on a direct emotional level, engendering “unreflected feelings”). The opening sequence of *I Am Legend* (Lawrence, 2007) features no less than seven minutes without music. The film starts with a TV-interview with Dr. Alice Krippin (Emma Thompson) announcing a cure for cancer. After the interview the film cuts to an establishing shot of a silent, seemingly abandoned, New York with the caption “Three years later”. This is followed by a few different shots of well-known places in New York that are normally always bustling with people, yet now are deserted and overgrown. The only sounds heard in this post-apocalyptic New York are birds and distant animal sounds creating a relative silence that stands in stark opposition to the way New York is normally depicted as a busy, noisy and especially lively city. Whereas commonly different shots of a city are underscored with music, creating an atmosphere and setting the tone for the film, this relative silence serves as a post-apocalyptic negative thereof. The relative silence provides an eerie contrast with both the TV-interview and the urban environment in the shots, signalling to the audience that something clearly went wrong with the supposed cure for cancer. In this function the relative silence derives from the internal logic of the film, serving as ancrage. The relative silence continues over an extreme long shot tracking a car through the streets, the first movement shown in the post-apocalyptic scenery. Softly the sound of the car engine enters the soundtrack, which is the first non-natural sound in the soundtrack since the TV-interview. The next shot is a close-up of Robert Neville (Will Smith) driving his car through this deserted New York, hunting for game. The relative silence now shifts to musical silence.

This renders Robert Neville's desolation gritty and real. This silence falls under Peirce's category of *Secondness*: it belongs to "actual existing relations and reality connections" (Turino 1999, 231-232). It is an indexical relation between sign (silence) and the object represented (post-apocalyptic New York). In indexical relations the sign is directly affected by its object: the absence of humans in New York results in an absence of man-made sounds and cultural sounds (music). It is also interpreted as more-real due to the absence of music. The presence of music effectuates what John Butt calls "roller-coaster listening"; it seizes the audience and takes the listener "forward in the development of action and character" (Butt 2010, 11). This is akin to Chion's vectorisation, although Butt's roller-coaster listening implies the presence of a listener more than Chion's term. In contrast to the presence of music and the roller-coaster ride of the filmic experience, musical silence presents an audience with the impression of events as they are or have happened. The indexical nature of cinema itself points to that which is real, i.e., the images. This is coupled with our internalisation of the co-occurrence of musical silence with scenes that depict a reality, whether it be a filmic scene or the reality of a news report. We are conditioned to see such a scene and believe it. This expectation is also played with by filmmakers.

### ***A special case: Breaking the fourth wall***

A peculiar case of indexical silence is the silence which coincides with a breaking of the fourth wall. This happens when in films the audience is directly or indirectly addressed, by talking to the camera (direct address) or by acknowledging the film itself (indirect address). In both cases the frame is ignored (i.e., the fourth wall, separating the audience from the film), and the film recognises its own artificiality. Breaking the fourth wall in films is often a device to convey extra information, usually in the form of a character addressing the audience. This can be an extra-diegetic narrator or diegetic characters stepping out of their fictional universe and directly addressing the audience, usually by looking directly in the camera. This can be

used to humorous effect, as in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (Smith, 2001). When Jay (Jason Mewes), Silent Bob (Kevin Smith), and Holden McNeil (Ben Affleck) are discussing a film based on their characters, Holden says “..a Jay and Silent Bob movie. Who would pay to see that?” The non-diegetic music disappears and momentarily a complete silence is created wherein the three characters turn to the camera and look directly at the audience for a second, before smirking and continuing with the narrative. In this momentary silence the audience is involved in the film. This is a peculiar indexical sign-object relation because it takes the frame, the limit of the image, as object rather than a specific object in the film. The complete silence, the sign, signifies a temporary absence of the whole filmic illusion. Suddenly the film addresses the audience directly. The turn to the camera of the three characters involves the audience as subject of the joke, destroying the frame as barrier and equating the filmic world with the real world of the audience. This is an example of involvement of the audience where the characters do not actually speak to the audience. In films where characters directly address the audience this silence functions also as a superimposition. It is a layer placed on top of the already existing layers of narrative. It silences the diegetic narrative and allows for the creating of a meta-diegesis. The character of the diegetic world addressing the audience steps outside this diegetic world into a meta-diegetic point of narrative wherein the audience is drawn as well. A meta-narrative is created onto the superimposition of the indexical silence. Such a silence is then a meta-silence, superimposing on the filmic artefact yet allowing for a character to connect to the audience. It also changes the suspended reality of the audience which suddenly is reaffirmed into a meta-reality. The audience finds itself *in* the film. Such a meta-narrative is particularly prominent in films where the audience is regularly addressed, such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. In the last scene of this film, after the final credits, Ferris walks into a corridor in his bathrobe towards the camera and seems puzzled by the continued presence of the audience: “You’re still here? It’s over. Go home. Go.” Ferris then walks off,

waving the audience away. In *Spaceballs* (Brooks, 1987) this meta-narrative is even used as a plot device. While the audience is not directly addressed, the film as artefact is acknowledged and thusly placed in the meta-narrative. When Lord Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis) is searching for Lone Star (Bill Pullman), Colonel Sandurz (George Wyner) and his radar technician find the rebels by playing the VHS tape of *Spaceballs* and fast forwarding it. Later in the film, Yogurt (Mel Brooks) meets with the rebels and tells them of his merchandising ideas, “Where the real money from the movie is made” and shows T-shirts, colouring books and lunch boxes all bearing the *Spaceballs* logo. Every time the characters enter a meta-narrative, it is accompanied by musical silence. Although the audience is not directly addressed, this silence still functions as a superimposition on the “normal” diegesis of the film. It silences the film and allows the characters to remind the audience of the reality outside the film. Breaking the fourth wall is a device mostly used for humorous purposes. Mel Brooks uses it in almost all of his films, as does Mike Meyers (*Wayne’s World* and the *Austin Powers* trilogy).

## CONCLUDING

Filmic silence is a powerful indexical sign. It lends the imagery a realness which is directly internalised by spectators. It is so powerful because like the zero-signifier of silence itself, the index is “highly context-dependent” as well. (Turino 1999, 236). This allows the index to contain a semantic complexity, more so than the symbol and icon. Once an indexical connotation has formed within a sign, the original object it refers to need no longer be present to recall this connotation when the sign reoccurs. New layers of indexical relations can be formed on top of the earlier connotation(s). Turino calls this effect “semantic snowballing” (ibid., 235). These associations can even be conflicting. The contextual dependency of the index anchors the different meanings that can possibly apply to a particular scene. This also elucidates why silence as a zero-signifier, with its inherent ambiguity, can be applied from horror to comedy films and all variations in between with such suitability. It carries its

connotations over genre limits. Turino describes this ambiguity as beneficial, or even crucial, to the sign's interpretation: "The ambiguity or density of the sign complex discourages a response in Thirdness and encourages unanalyzed feeling" (ibid., 237). Whereas the symbol requires some cultural capital with the spectator to be distinguished, the index and the icon are more immediate. As such, they are important signs in the filmic experience and help to explain why we can be so empathically engaged in and moved by film, as well as film's ease of reference and power as cultural artefact. Turino stresses the importance of the iconic and indexical sign relations in the perception of art because "certain parts of ourselves are only available through pre-symbolic signs" (ibid. 244). The direct affect through iconic and indexical signs is quite congruent with my discussion of Gorbman's and Chion's psychologically and psychoanalytically infused terminology. This discussion of semiotics has added an important aspect to the "unity of the cinematic subject" in that it more fully acknowledges the role of the spectator as more active than being merely a unified subject susceptible to and drawn in the cinematic experience. Despite our suspension of disbelief we give as much signification to the film as the film gives to us. John Mullarkey, in his critique of Žižek's psychoanalytical approach to the cinematic experience, describes cinema as being

the Real-as-process, or process reality; it is that which engenders this very circular movement between subjective, epistemic viewing [...] and the artwork viewed. Film-subject and film-object are co-engendered. [...] [W]e too are not any sort of thing at all, but a relational process. We are neither an informed brain nor a formless void: we are a mutating connection. The relation of world to subject, or film to spectator (and critic), is indeed central. But I will claim that it is also multiple, that there is not one film-text but many... (Mullarkey 2009, 76)

It is this "mutating connection" which is key to understanding the cinematic experience. Although a spectator might be submerged in a soothing sound bath and be more receptive to a film's impulses, much of the affective relations between film and spectator depend on the

readiness of the latter to engage with the former. This also elucidates why much of a sign's effect is dependent on the spectator's ability to recognise it as a sign. This sign can be recognised through its dependency on spectator knowledge outside of the film, through a spectator's ability to recognise its resemblance, or through an internalisation of the sign, either through co-occurrence in real or perceived-as-real events, or through a recognition of its direct relation to the object the sign represents. Due to the strong and active dependency on the spectator's contribution to the process of semantic interpretation I have also tried to avoid semantics. Meaning, as the sign's signification, lies with the spectator. Although analysis can provide a possible theorisation of possible meaning through decoding of a sign, I have first and foremost attempted to discuss general ways in which silence can work. These semiotic distinctions work hand in hand with the different modes and aspects I discuss above.

#### IV. IN CONCLUSION: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper started with a differentiation between filmic silence and silence in reality. While I analysed the modes of filmic silence through these orders of silence, it is the contextual relations of silence that are of more importance for the theoretical framework for the analysis of filmic silence. These *modes* of silence (to distinguish from the *orders* of silence in reality) describe the place of silence in relation to other elements in the soundtrack. In keeping with Théberge's differentiation of silences three overarching categories can be discerned: complete silence, relative silence, and relational silence. Complete silence is the seldom encountered total absence of silence. This mode of silence is rarely encountered. It is the least connected to its context, taking only referential meaning from previous sounds and concurring imagery. This means that in the process of meaning creation it is at the same time very powerful, offering a direct confrontation with absence of sound in its narrative functionality, and dangerous because it can be seen as a technical breakdown and a direct confrontation with a film's artificiality, possibly destroying this same process of meaning creation. Moreover, a prolonged complete silence confronts us with ourselves as we are forced to either distance ourselves from the film or engage with the complete silence, internalising it and giving it meaning from the depths of our own psyches. Complete silence is usually emulated through relative silence. In relative silence the general volume of the soundtrack drops to a barely discernible level and usually only ambient sounds are audible, reinforcing the feeling of absence of other sounds. Relational silence is the most common form of silence in films. It is the silence of a part of the soundtrack, in relation to other still sounding parts. This sets it apart from relative silence, where the whole of the soundtrack volume is brought down. The major forms of relative silence are musical silence and its counterpart diegetic silence. Although music is the primary non-diegetic sound, musical silence encompasses part of the

diegetic world as well. Of all modes of silence musical silence is perhaps the easiest overlooked silence, as we tend not to consciously notice or pay attention to background music. Musical silence indicates an absence of background music, usually used to render a scene more realistic. Conversely, diegetic silence can be used to lessen the feeling of reality, usually used in fantastical sequences or to distance the audience from the imagery (cf. the “spectacular” scene from *American Beauty*). Diegetic silence can also be used to draw in the audience, however, through an enlarged effect of the vectorisation of a scene through music. The rollercoaster listening mode of the spectator is reinforced through the absence of other sounds and a semantic and direct connection is made between the music and the imagery (cf. the use of Thomas Newman’s *Ghosts* in the scene from *Road to Perdition*). Diegetic silence is a strong catalyst in both cases, strengthening the empathic bond between spectator and film. These modes of silence can be used to describe individual distinguishing characteristics of silence: the place of silence in relation *to* the other elements in the film. Two additional modes are of importance and deal with silence in relation *with* the other filmic elements. Less general than diegetic silence is dialogue silence, which is applicable to a specific character or to a whole scene including all characters. Dialogue silence can coexist with diegetic sound, which makes it less obvious, although not as easily overlooked as musical silence. These modes of silence describe silence in relation to other parts of the soundtrack. While it is possible to discern more specific silences for particular instances, these general modes can be used to describe these specific situations as well with limited additional descriptions, e.g., the sound of breathing in otherwise complete silence. Although it can be tempting to put forward “ambient silence” as a mode to describe this example, ambient silence can just as well be interpreted as diegetic silence and be described as such, creating ambiguity on the possible presence of music. Adding more modes of silence could create confusion rather than elucidation, which is also why I have described yet not used generic and structural silence as



these silences can be better analysed in other ways (semiotic analyses specifically). There is one exception to this and it is the only mode of silence I add to Bloustien's and Théberge's modes, which is meta-silence. Meta-silence is the superimposition of silence on the soundtrack save for the speech of a character breaking the fourth wall (cf. the *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* post-credits scene). The different modes of silence describe the place of silence in the soundtrack. By incorporating mainly Gorbman and Chion I have also been able to develop specific aspects of silence, which add to the modes of silence by incorporating functionality in the analysis of silence. Whereas most of these modes deal strictly with functionality, the volume of silence is a relational characteristic. Silence derives its volume from the contextual sound level. As such it is both an individual characteristic and a functional aspect; it provides the negative of sound as a counterweight.

The functionality of silence is only discernible by incorporating the whole of the soundtrack, imagery, and spectator engagement. These concepts offer the specificity lacking in the modes of silence by encapsulating the possible ambiguities of silence to a specific function. This does not mean that all of these concepts are a function of silence itself, however. There are two major discernments to be made here. On the one hand there is the function of the relation of silence *to* its context, and on the other hand there is the function of silence *in* its context. It is a matter of emphasis. In the first case, the emphasis lies more with what silence effectuates as a catalyst for its context. In the second case it lies with what silence creates in its context through its relation therewith. The first category is much more general. Closely related to diegetic silence we find the expression of extension in this category. Null and vast extension express the size of the sonic universe. Seemingly contradictory, this size can be effectively expressed through a combination of imagery and silence. The silence used to depict null extension is usually diegetic silence save for the presence of bodily sounds of the character's universe we are shown, be it breathing or speech

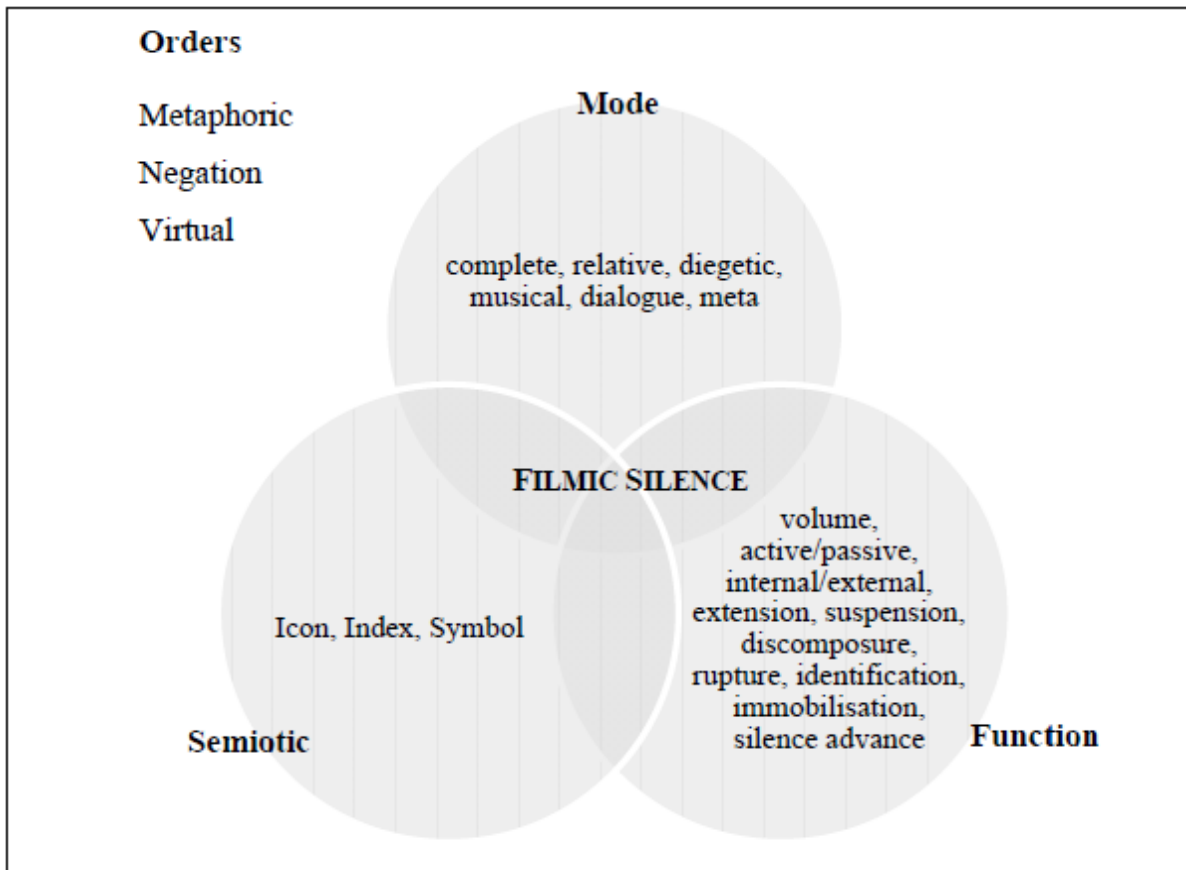
(cf. the “spectacular” scene). Conversely relative silence is used to depict vast extension wherein merely the slightest of sounds are audible and bodily sounds are usually absent. These low volume ambient sounds are off-screen sounds. The silence these sounds emulate is passive silence. It envelops the frame and creates vast expansion without drawing attention to itself. Active silence, on the other hand, calls attention to itself and raises questions. This in itself does not mean that active or passive silence has a stronger bond with the spectator or the image. A passive silence depicting null extension can draw a spectator in just as much as an active silence depicting vast extension. Although both silences can be salient points of synchresis, passive silences will tend to have more added value, i.e., the unconscious and seemingly superfluous anchoring of meaning. Active silence does not go by unnoticed and is rarely superfluous. As such, passive silence will also rarely be part of the external logic of the film which causes discontinuity in the audiovisual flow as an effect external from the film, save for the notable exemption of the superimposition of meta-silence. It is usually driven by narrative, which forms the internal logic of the film. Suspension is a passive silence as well. It creates a feeling of mystery as the silent omission of sounds normally expected in a situation (cf. Danny’s expression of horror in *The Shining*). The concept of suspension balances between emphasis on silence itself and the relation of silence with its context as it is normally unconsciously interpreted. The following concepts are functions of silence in relation to its context as well, but the emphasis here lies much more with what silence itself effectuates. A first dichotomy can be made between discomposure and anchorage. Silence is ambiguous in itself and can create this ambiguity in its context as well, usually through feelings of uncertainty or mystery. Whereas anchorage solidifies meaning, discomposure creates ambiguity in its context. Discomposure is the primary function of silence in most mainstream films. The tension created by silence can draw a spectator in through identification. It places the spectator *in* the film through its lack of anchorage which forces the spectator as cinematic

subject to make sense of a scene and fill in the blanks created by silence. Identification then always oscillates with rupture, which is the opposite of suture. A prolonged use of silence causes a spectator to snap out of the audiovisual contract and back into one's own reality. This danger of rupture is especially prominent in active silence, which is not self-effacing, and strong direct modes of silence such as complete silence. It will disrupt the fragile unification of the spectator as cinematic subject. The two other functional applications of silence are much less disruptive. Silence as immobilisation is the inverse of Chion's vectorisation of a scene through music. Rather than driving or directing the imagery, silence can create a momentary lapse of movement, a stasis in the ongoing narrative. Paradoxically, this can be used in conjunction with music (cf. the diegetic silence in the museum scene in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*). Complete or relative silence are often used as powerful immobilising silences. The silence advance is specific use of silence as the announcer of stasis, usually indicating the death of a character. The silence advance is a trope for those who recognize it as such, a flash-forward indicating the impending death of a character. It is particularly used as a trope in horror films. If thusly recognized, the silence advance is a symbolic use of silence. It relies on the understanding of the spectator of its use and the connection to the narrative and context wherein it is presented. Although all silence can, and usually does, fulfil a signifying role this does not mean that it is always recognised as a sign. The most important factor in the sign-object relations (icon, index, symbol) I discussed is the dependency on the spectator's ability to recognise and decode this signifying role of silence. The decoding of silence is complicated by two important factors; its form and the impurity of signs in visual media. Due to the monomorphic form of silence this impurity and silence's inherent ambiguity also cause it to be a rather unstable sign. Although it is always recognisable in the same form, it usually means something different in every context. This is because silence in itself, as a zero-form signifier, internalises the contextual relation and derives its semantic content from this

internalised representation of contextual information. As silence is ambiguous in itself this does also render the contextual relation ambiguous, which is reinforced by the impureness of audiovisual signs. The relation between aural, visual, narrative and contextual information and the spectator's own embodied cultural capital makes a semiotic analysis difficult, although not impossible. The symbolic sign-object relation is based on conventions; it is the most mediated relation of this trichotomy. Due to its nature as convention and its dependency on a spectator's ability to recognise and decode it as such, the symbolic relation is much more dependent on the spectator's cultural capital than the iconic or indexical relation. This dependency also elicits more rational spectator responses than the other signs. It is learnt rather than internalised, and its engagement with the spectator's cultural capital causes it to engage with other learnt symbols as well, thusly creating possible symbolic interpretations where the filmmaker did not intend any (cf. a postcolonial interpretation of the village attack in *Apocalypse Now*). The montage is another symbolic use of the sign-object relation. The montage is a filmic convention, more often than not sutured by the presence of music. The presence of diegetic silence indicates a passing of time without directly resembling it or being affected by it. Resemblance and direct connections are part of the iconic and indexical sign-object relations. The icon expresses resemblance. This can be an utterance of intertextuality or a filmic motif. Whereas a filmic convention is learnt, a filmic motif is internalised. The more a spectator experiences a motif, the more it is recognised, e.g., the use of diegetic silence to express null extension. The difference with the symbol is that an icon elicits a more direct affect than the symbol. The passing of time can be expressed iconically as well, although it usually depicts the stasis of a place or character through time rather than the passing of time itself. Telling of the impurity of signs and the instability of silence as signifier is that the passing of time can also be expressed indexical. The silence in the museum scene of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* when Cameron is admiring Seurat's painting is indexical in that it is

expressing Cameron's awe. Time seems to be temporarily suspended in this moment. Cameron is briefly lost in time and space through his absorption of the details, specifically the mother and child, in the artwork. The indexical sign-object relation is internalised through co-occurrence in reality or in filmic reality. It deals with a direct connection between sign and object. Musical silence used to render a scene more realistic or gritty is an indexical sign (cf. the post-apocalyptic opening of *I Am Legend*). Another common indexical sign is the wordless expression of terror or fear (cf. Danny's terror in *The Shining*). The direct connection between sign and object makes the index the most common sign in cinema.

The concepts I put forward here help to construct a framework for the analysis of filmic silence in many of its facets. The type of silence present can be analysed in two ways. The *orders* of silence can be used to analyse silence in itself in relation to our perception of reality. Specifically metaphorical silence, silence by negation and virtual silence in any possible combination are important for filmic silence. The *modes* of silence place the type of silence in relation to the rest of the soundtrack. These modes are all dependent on their relation to context and narrative. This contextual relation can be functionally analysed with the concepts I put forward to this use. While these functional relations are part of the process of meaning generation with the spectator, a semiotic analysis deepens the understanding of this process all the more. While the orders of silence are no less important, the latter three categories elucidate the contextual relation and the complexities of filmic silence in the audiovisual contract more. Analysing the contextual relation of filmic silence would ideally comprise all these categories as different qualities of silence. Schematically, this might look as follows:



Although this paper hopes to be an exhaustive approach to theorising filmic silence, it can by no means be complete. There are plenty of theories on film music that can be looked at in terms of their applicability to silence, and other fields of study which merit attention as well. One possible approach is the incorporation of empirical research. Possible research topics could include the average attention span of a spectator engaged with silence or the ability of a spectator to recognise Gorbman's structural silence, a mode of silence I have not incorporated in my general approach due to its per-film specificity and limited theoretical background. Another interesting approach is the application of cognitive ideas on silence. The work of Annabel Cohen might be interesting as it approaches film music from a cognitive basis (cf. Cohen 2013). Future continuations of this approach could expand upon this framework with theories from traditional film and music theory I have not yet addressed here. There is always more to be said and written on the rich world that lies beyond the horizon of sound.

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