



The Bias of Horror :

Sound as Subtext

Although film is categorized as a “visual” medium, the role of sound as a formal element is as essential to the reading of filmic texts as the image itself. In the tradition of the classical Hollywood narrative (since the closing of the silent era), movie soundtracks have allowed filmmakers to position a chosen text, stamping the text with a specific bias, and, in turn, demanding an equally specific textual reading. In no other genre is this more evident than in the horror film.

Within the interplay of diegetic (inside the story) and non-diegetic (outside the story) sound, characters and settings are lifted free of the narrative plane and recontextualized in a predetermined subtext. This is attempted for several reasons: to intensify conflict between the governing subtextual biases, or to elicit a certain response to the text itself. Not surprisingly, conflicts generated between elements of diegetic sound, by definition, are contained within the narrative, and the consequences precipitate in the storyline. Non-diegetic sounds, however, are meta-narrative and manipulate viewers’ perceptions of characters and settings vis-à-vis their thematic significance. A polarizing force in the horror film, sound (both diegetic and non-diegetic) tags characters, settings, and situations, segregating threatening elements from those that promise resolution or refuge. Similarly, the absence of sound provides subtle variations between the dangerous and the safe. In these ways, the biased readings of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) demonstrate the inexorable stamp of each film’s soundtrack.

At first glance, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* seems an incongruous mishmash of horror film icons (Frankenstein, Dracula, Wolfman, etc.) and assorted Hollywood genres. A recap of the opening credits, however, suggests a justification for this curious potpourri. In cartoon form, these

classical horror figures slink in a single file across a black horizon, their backs to us. Last to follow is the shapely silhouette of a female who turns to face us, arms outstretched and eyes replaced with Xs, accompanied by a bit of sexy, vamping music. As the narrative progresses, we understand this strange mélange as a homogenous grouping of threatening elements. Chick (Bud Abbott) and Wilbur (Lou Costello), therefore, become the narrative agents under attack. Operating within the equally dangerous company of monsters and women, our protagonists strive to preserve their buddy coupling, thus defining the film’s central narrative conflict. The liberal usage of non-diegetic music and diegetic silence assists in the localization of threat as well as the characterization of the protagonists and their relationship.

While Chick and Wilbur uncivil the horrific cargo in McDougall’s Wax Museum, a distinctive pattern of sound is established and repeated throughout the film. Frankenstein, Dracula, and attendant sound effects are dramatically active in the presence of Wilbur, the innocent child-man, yet conspicuously absent when Chick, the surly authority figure, is called back into the scene. Left alone to the task of unpacking, Wilbur is unnerved by the creaking hinges of Dracula’s coffin, while menacing, non-diegetic violins underscore the activation of threat. A repetitive, comic gag ensues as Wilbur mournfully calls for Chick. His buddy’s return is marked by a sudden aural calm, acknowledging a return to order. This back-and-forth play between threat and safety, punctuated in the middle by Wilbur’s cry (“Chiiiiiiick!”) valorizes the comforting role Chick plays in the relationship (the absence of non-diegetic score equated with normality or narrative control). Similarly, the swirling violins accompanying Dracula’s attempted hypnosis of Wilbur and the crescendo of timpani and brass at Frankenstein’s resurrection point up Wilbur’s phantasmic imagination and childlike vulnerability.

Later in the narrative, the Wolfman is replaced as the threatening agent. Wilbur, accompanied by a capricious flute score, repeats the touch-'n-go gag. In a tenement hallway separating Chick and the Wolfman, Wilbur vacillates between two rooms. The Wolfman's room is filled with a non-diegetic melee of chaotic, minor-key violin runs, and the other room—or the camera's promise of the other room—is treated with the flute ditty. Wilbur's childish vacillation, his poor judgment symbolically enacted in a stolen apple, is read as the mediating will in the choice between danger and protection.

Emphasizing the role of non-diegetic sound in the construction of subtext, the final scene of *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* reiterates the theme of coupling under fire. Wilbur and Chick, together and safe in a floating boat, realize that the Invisible Man is also aboard with them. Characteristically, the protagonists bail out. The Invisible Man laughs sinisterly at their reaction, and the sound of his voice—initially diegetic—is technically mixed into a broad echo free of the sounds of the splashing protagonists or the fire on the shore. Once again, sound is treated non-diegetically to recast a specific horror figure under the general rule of “threat,” directing the subtextual emphasis back toward the buddy duo’s threatened relationship.

Whereas non-diegetic sound and silence in the Abbott and Costello film are used to localize threat in terms of the threatened, *The Bride of Frankenstein* utilizes sound to sustain moral conflict. Again, threats to coupling are tagged by non-diegetic music, but this bias shifts among the characters and is offset by a conversely positive musical endorsement of successful couplings. This aural strategy clearly indicates when characters are meant to be read as sympathetic and when they are meant to be perceived as antagonistic.

The appearance of the monster at the old mill is met with a sinister non-diegetic theme of horn and string instruments. Established as a menace to the community (of couplings) and a threat to Dr. Henry Frankenstein and fiancée Elizabeth, the monster has difficulty shaking the imposed negative moral stamp. Stumbling into Arcadia, however, the monster finds his niche with the blind old man and the community, and ultimately his own opportunity to couple. The old blind man takes him in as a variety of sound cues demand a recontextualization of the monster. “Ave Maria,” played on a diegetic violin, is co-opted into a non-diegetic musical motif underscoring the pathos of the characters’ shared isolation. Unlike other moments in the film, the appearance of the monster here occurs in silence. There are no non-diegetic violins or brass to accompany his grunts, groans, and jerking movements. The silence is striking as we observe this sympathetic, “realistic” presentation of the monster in society.

Pretorius, another threat to the Henry/Elizabeth coupling, is also treated by non-diegetic bias. On the heels of Elizabeth’s hysterical, violin-laden monologue at Henry’s bedside, the arrival of the older philosopher-scientist builds the mood with cellos, violins, and horns all culminating in a sinister introduction in the couple’s private quarters. This same ominous theme is continued in a distilled form as Henry and Pretorius agree to work together. Despite Pretorius’s charming manner, we are aurally instructed to penetrate his façade by non-diegetic sound cues. This aural stamp of disapproval also permeates the discussion between the characters about further experimentation with corpses. As Pretorius proposes a “world of gods and monsters,” his enthusiasm is marred by the heavy-handed musical score.

At the mention of a “mate” for the monster, however, the moral gears shift, audibly. Lilting harp music, reprised from the opening, envelopes the notion of a woman monstrous enough to domesticate Frankenstein’s “boy.” During her enlivening, a timpani heartbeat counts a cadence of anticipation. Occurring diegetically, this unusual sound is quickly stolen away to the non-diegetic level where it subtextualizes the monster’s own desire. Like an emotional marker, the timpani continues throughout the crackling experimentation scene, giving way only to a reprise of the romantic, minor-key harp theme as the female monster is robed and wedding chimes accompany Pretorius’s prideful introduction, “the Bride of Frankenstein!” The lovely creature, baptized and wed at the same moment, is clearly disoriented by the experience. Her screams at the sight and touch of the monster miss a beat and are as disarming as her jerky, wide-eyed movements. The female monster’s sympathetic presence is aided by the absence of non-diegetic musical treatment. She is, in essence, taking her first steps. Quickly returning to the world of moral quandary, in the film’s climax and judgmental resolution, Henry and Elizabeth narrowly escape the “spawn of Hell” and slip off to a nearby hill to watch the incineration of the laboratory and its evil grotesqueries. A cascade of violins carries them away, and as Henry whispers “darling, darling”—one for each of them—the reprise of the romantic harp theme implies a condoning and forgiveness for all moral trespasses.

Overhanded at times, essential at others, the use of diegetic sound and non-diegetic music works as a subtextual device fixating on character in these two films. Our attempts to “read” characters based upon their actions or narrative consequences are thwarted by the genre’s (and filmmakers’) predetermined biases. Delineating evil as the threat to romantic coupling, our own value system is forced into a moralistic vice by the subliminal manipulation, through sound, of the viewing experience.

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Steve, TA – Not bad. You fudge a bit at the beginning by describing the opening cartoon sequence visually as a way of setting up the larger concerns. Overall, this may still be in the “formative” stages—while your notion of sound as a positioning of character is intriguing, I think another draft would take it somewhat beyond a very “quick and dirty” evaluation of the scores to both these films, which is what takes up most of your critical energies. Try thinking more about the relationship the scores have to one another—is there a particular musical motif we recognize with horror films? B-