

Barton Fink: Atmospheric Sounds of the Creative Mind

By Randall Barnes

¹ BARTON FINK won an unprecedented number of awards at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival by achieving the top three prizes: Palme D'or, Best Director and Best Actor. It was also nominated for three Academy awards (Art Direction, Costume Design and Supporting Actor (Michael Lerner) and at several Critics awards ceremonies won several prizes for cinematography and actors in supporting roles.

Joel and Ethan Coen have consistently used music, effects and dialogue to shape the atmosphere of their films. This is most evident in the 'world' they created for *Barton Fink* (1991). One of the main reasons for the film's highly communicative sonic environment is that it is expressed through a soundtrack that weaves together all of the aural ingredients. The integration of these elements is achieved principally through the Coens' collaborative filmmaking efforts. As a result, the aural elements are truly homogeneous: all striving to complement the narrative. This unique approach to the construction of the soundscape for *Barton Fink* stands in contrast with a majority of the general practices of Hollywood. Its critical success offers an example of a viable alternative to those modes of production.¹

While embarking on their third film, Joel and Ethan Coen experienced a creative impasse. During this state of uncertainty they temporarily abandoned that project and started a new one. The end result was *Barton Fink*, a film that has its main character experience a similar creative impasse. However, the narrative of the film transcends this simple plotline by emphasising the internal and external anguish this naïve and idealistic character (Barton Fink) experiences.

It is chiefly with the help of auditory elements (i.e. sound effects, dialogue and music) that the Coen brothers are able to cultivate an atmosphere of unease that not only highlights Barton's state of mind but also complements the film's ambiguities. By knitting together the sparse sonic ingredients in a subtle undulating fashion, supervising sound editor Skip Lievsay and composer Carter Burwell bring a well-defined cohesion to the soundtrack. Consequently, the sound scenarios in *Barton Fink* transcend the traditional role of merely reinforcing the visuals, which in turn, encourages deeper levels of meaning.

The overall sound design of *Barton Fink* is one based on the cooperative efforts of Lievsay and Burwell in partnership with Joel and Ethan Coen. Composer and supervising sound editor were given copies of the script to use as the basis for preliminary discussions in pre-production. Following this, they 'spotted' the film together, during the rough cut, by negotiating all the ingredients of the soundtrack. Lievsay and Burwell then continued to exchange preliminary ideas and samples of sounds or music on a regular basis so that their work would complement the script and the sounds would augment each other. According to Burwell (Barnes 2004) they had gone through the film scene by scene and divided up the frequency spectrum: a typical exchange would involve Lievsay saying he was going to use a high frequency sound for a particular item and Burwell offering music with a low frequency in response, or vice versa. The net result of these efforts was that the score and effects were partners in expressing the tonality of the film. They were also constructed in such a way that "the sounds had room

to be heard and a space in which to play out” (Underwood 2004). Consequently, there was less chaos in processing the final mix than is often found within the industry.

In an interview with Carter Burwell he gave a detailed example of the importance of the shared input for *Barton Fink*. It highlights the relevance of having advance knowledge of what Skip Lievsay had in mind so that their efforts could work in harmony. It also emphasises the affability of their working relationship. In particular, it draws attention to the give-and-take involved in the sessions. In Burwell’s words:

The sonic space Skip created is something that you could not just guess by watching the film. Often before a film you can guess what the sound effects person is going to do. ‘Oh there’s lightning outside, there’s going to be thunder.’ There’s a gunshot so there’s going to be a loud bang. But in *Barton Fink* it would not be easy to guess what sounds were happening in most of those scenes. That was one reason why the spotting was important. You could be watching a scene that just takes place in a hotel and Skip might say, ‘I’ve got these very low creaking sounds. You know, like the metal plates, the bulkheads of a submarine, creaking’. And so I’d say, ‘OK, I’ll let you have the low frequencies here and I’ll do a high violin note that will echo the mosquito we had in the previous scene’. And then we’d come to the next scene and Skip would tell me what he had in mind. And then I would say, ‘Then I’ll do this.’ And sometimes I knew what I wanted to do and I told him. We often traded off the frequency range for the picture. Skip would say ‘You’ve got this ‘danging’ thing you want to do

with prepared piano in the low middle range, so I'll stay away from that. I'll just do some wind sounds here' (Barnes 2004).

Maintaining this free exchange of ideas, Burwell and Lievsay worked on *Barton Fink* for approximately four months.

One of the main reasons that this method of working was encouraged was that the Coens envisioned the film being more sound-driven than music-driven. The script actually contains a number of scenes with little or no dialogue and a preponderance of sound effects that have a direct impact on the storyline. According to Burwell, "They were not even sure they wanted any score at all" (Barnes 2004). Therefore, if any music were to be included, it would have to be designed to work in partnership with the sound effects. Faced with this challenge, Burwell decided to compose some sketches, assured he could produce something that would achieve this purpose. In the end, he conceived cues that accommodated the other aural ingredients, while adding to the personality and background of Barton Fink. Upon playing these pieces for Joel and Ethan Coen, the composer explained that they "immediately knew that [they] lent something to Barton's character" and gladly accepted them as part of the film (Barnes 2004). This clearly demonstrates the Coens' flexibility and their open-mindedness to experimentation.

The narrative of *Barton Fink* is a darkly comic cerebral nightmare that denies any strict categorisation. This may principally be due to its focus being the

mental life of a writer. The film's narrative seems to depict 'the life of the mind' with all of its creative power as well as its delusions and confusions. Barton's intellectual journey is formed by his own blind passion to promote the Common Man: a single focus that results in him being simultaneously insensitive (to others) and misunderstood (by others). Throughout the film Barton's zeal seems to be tied to his identity, cemented by insecurity and naivety. Consequently, this callowness causes him to be unaware that his idealistic diatribes are merely intellectualisations that completely alienate him from the people he so wished to champion. In the end, he is left lost in his own mind, disillusioned: his ideals unclear.

The Coen brothers emphasise Barton's intellectual journey by communicating the film's narrative solely through his perspective; there are no scenes in which Barton is not present. Sound establishes this subjective point of view from the very beginning of the film. The first sounds we hear after the opening title music are diegetic mechanical noises of adjustments being made backstage and the voice of John Turturro, the actor playing Barton Fink. However he is not speaking as the film's title character yet; he is in fact heard offscreen as an actor on stage performing in one of Barton's plays. The camera eventually pans over to where Turturro is standing in the wings, hanging anxiously on every word. At this moment sound and image seem to define Barton's identity: hearing his voice through the language of the play not only functions as an embodiment of Barton's beliefs, but also displays the level of

disconnection between those beliefs and his true self. This strategy operates very much like the revelation of an acousmètre, which, according to Chion is “a kind of voice-character that derives power from being heard and not seen” (Chion 1994:221). By connecting this disembodied voice to Barton’s physical image, the acousmètre is localised and stripped of its ambiguity. As a result, it helps show that Barton Fink is weak and powerless from the onset of the film. What is more, the hyperreal sound of the backstage noises draws attention to the inner workings of the creative process. Thus, from the onset Joel and Ethan Coen are establishing themes that will repeat throughout the film.

The non-diegetic music for the title sequence recurs quite regularly throughout the remainder of the film. However, the overall use of score in *Barton Fink* is minimal. According to Burwell,

the melody is extremely childlike in nature and the octave jumps make it sound like it might be played on a toy piano...It suggests Barton's naivety [and] some of the darkness, confusion and cruelty of his childhood (in Brophy 1999:24-25).

As the character is portrayed rather unsympathetically, the composer’s music certainly helps to evoke the needed pathos. Furthermore, by communicating Barton’s child-like qualities, Burwell reinforces the idea that “he’s a complete innocent...He pretends to be knowledgeable about many things, but in fact he knows nothing about the real world at all” (Barnes 2004). Stating these notions from the onset of the film, the music helps establish (albeit indirectly) the

² One summary of the suspected historical inaccuracies can be found in Jameson 1991.

psychological makeup of the main character. Therefore, even before he is revealed, the melodies are meant to prime the audience for sympathy.

Joel and Ethan Coen place Barton in Hollywood, where he has been invited after having achieved success with his most recent play. They give the year as 1941, but this is merely to contextualise the events of the film; it is not meant to offer the audience historical accuracy. By setting *Barton Fink* in this timeframe, it allows the Coens to exploit Hollywood's machine-like mode of production and its keen interest in increasing the profit margin of its products. It also allows for a framework where studio moguls could embody this machine with their self-importance, their unwillingness to take economic risks and their capacity to restrict creative output. In other words, the setting forms a constructed backdrop where artistry and idealism might be corrupted rather than an attempt to authenticate a period in the history of Hollywood. The characters are simply emblematic of people who would have existed during Hollywood's studio era. As Landry suggests, *Barton Fink* is not about any of the historical figures for whom cinematic analogues have been devised; it merely incorporates them as pliable intertext (Landry 1993:43).² By using this setting as a template, it allows the Coen brothers to manipulate the historical timeframe to generate conditions in which the conflicts the main character would face could be plausible.

The absence of narration, usually a common Coen brothers' technique, demands that external factors represent the internal processes. This is never truer than when he arrives in Los Angeles. His transition from New York to

³ The Coens' script directly identifies the sound scenario for this entire sequence (Coen & Coen 2002, 407).

⁴ Much like the Overlook Hotel in THE SHINING (1980 Kubrick)

Hollywood is marked by a building wave that we then see crashing against a rock; this crash is followed by the seawater washing into a hotel lobby (via an extremely slow dissolve) that leaves Barton standing motionless near the entrance. Prior to his arrival the sound of the wave rumbles thunderously under the end of Barton's conversation with his agent, who has just made a joke about the Common Man that leaves them in cold silence. Having the wave begin acousmatically underscores the tension in the scene. Furthermore, its power seems to echo Barton's solemnity as well as his incomprehension. We are never shown what finally convinced him to go to Los Angeles, but we can insinuate from the wave building and then crashing on the cut that a trajectory is implied. It is as though he was thrust into that 'new world', compelled against his will. Moreover, the sharp edit and the powerful noise mark a schism in Barton's life and the beginning of his mental journey. Consequently, his momentary hesitation may be attributed to a subconscious fear that the sound-image of the advancing sea spray and sea foam means that he will be abandoned to his fate.³

The audible wash of the wave dissolves ominously into the low rumble of the deserted lobby. Here, Burwell's bass trombones and samples of prepared piano were mixed in with Lievsay's sound of the ocean spray (Sider, Freeman & Sider 2003:199). This dissonant sound introduces the presence of the Hotel Earle, Barton's chosen residence. The atmosphere throughout the hotel is densely packed with aural ingredients, which gives one the impression that it is yet another character in the film. The hotel appears to have a life of its own and this further

⁵ It was stretched out a full thirty-five seconds by underlining and prolonging the natural sound with a synthesised tone.

⁶ Both the elongated bell and Chet's 'dull scuffle of shoes on the stairs' are included in the script (Coen & Coen 2002, 407).

⁷ The inclusion of this sound actually began as one of Lievsay's inside jokes. He said, "That was something I stumbled on and I stuck in a few places as a little funny sound. [The Coen brothers] laughed and they thought that it was funny. They hadn't realised it was a joke, so when it came to the next sequence and they weren't there, they said, where's the door whoosh sound. We had to lay up that sound for all the doors of Barton's hotel room (Barnes 2003).

complicates Barton's mental state.⁴ Joel Coen claimed that he wanted to "make it a decaying organism" (Andrew 1992:20). Thus, in addition to the rumble in the lobby there are the subtle sounds of electric fans, the squeak of Barton's shoes and the knock of his luggage. The hyperreal quality of these sounds, amidst the relative quiet, expresses that Barton is alone and quite isolated.

The sound that first breaks the near-silence is just as foreboding. Barton taps the bell to register his arrival, but instead of a short, quick ring, the sound of the bell's decay continues well beyond a realistic time-span.⁵ It is perhaps for Barton the first diegetic sound that suggests something is awry. He is, however, undeterred. Presently, Barton hears footsteps, but is only able to note their source when Chet (Buscemi), the hotel clerk, emerges from a trapdoor in the floor and stops the bell with his finger.⁶ Here the threat of the unknown and its bizarre resolution not only establishes the film's absurdity, but also furthers Barton's unease.

The heightened sounds of the electric fans and the low rumble follow Barton up the lift. Once out of the lift and in the corridor, these atmospheric effects increase as a wind-like noise fills the cinematic space. As there is no visible means for air to flow through this area, this noise serves as a sinister metaphor. In the spirit of making the hotel like a mausoleum Skip Lievsay stated that "the [corridor] was a stepping off point into oblivion, and that each room off the [corridor] would be a sealed vacuum bottle where the occupants lived" (in Lobrutto 1994:257). Thus, by entering his room Barton was encountering an

⁸ 'worldising' is a technique invented by Walter Murch at USC, which refers to "manipulating sound until it seemed to be something that existed in real space... [It is achieved by] playing back existing recordings through a speaker or speakers in real-world acoustic situations, and recording that playback with microphones so that the new recording takes on the acoustic characteristics of the place where it was "re-recorded" (Maynes 2004, April/May).

environment that lacked life and inspiration: a place that is ripe for writer's block. Lievsay added elsewhere that these vacuum-sealed rooms allowed nothing to enter or escape, including ideas (Barnes 2003). As a result, every time Barton opens and closes his door a sudden rush of wind would enter the room as if the seal had been broken.⁷ Ultimately, this would suggest that the hotel room was a symbol for how Barton's blind idealism isolated him from the real world.

Barton manages to find some solace in the hotel in the form of a picture hanging on the wall in his room. It is of a beach setting where a young woman with her back turned looks at the sea. Every time Barton peers up at it the soundtrack emits a quiet roll of waves and seagulls (scripted) accompanied by a progressively building high note (unscripted). The non-diegetic sound effects and music evoke a sense of calm, or perhaps hope. The camera often zooms in from Barton's point of view giving the impression that he is mesmerised by it. However, Mottram quotes the Coen brothers, saying the picture was meant to designate "a false paradise", suggesting that if the room represents his mind, then the picture is symbolic of his self-delusion; the "realistic" sounds only reinforce this delusion (Mottram 2000:87). Therefore, despite the encouragement it supplies him it is in fact yet another instances were Barton's aspirations are not based on a tangible reality.

Any momentary peace Barton managed to obtain is constantly thwarted by external audible forces. From the very first night in the hotel Barton is plagued with irritations. Initially, the most prominent is a mosquito that disturbs his first

night's sleep. Following the initial sequence with the picture on the wall there is a brief silence in the soundtrack. An irritating buzz underscored with low droning trombones seems to emerge from that empty space and audibly pan across the room. Lievsay worldised a real mosquito sound by playing the mosquito's buzz on tiny speakers mounted on a stick and waved the stick in front of a microphone, recreating the Doppler Effect that would be experienced in reality (Shulevitz 1991:14).⁸ For many seconds this insect dominates the soundtrack, becoming the sole focus of attention. The shot looks down on Barton from the mosquito's perspective showing his inability to sleep. When the buzz is subsequently combined with a soft pulsing beat from a prepared piano its presence becomes more than a nuisance; it functions as an ill omen.

The near quiet of that night is ruptured by a sharp cut to a boisterous workplace as Barton is ushered into the office of Jack Lipnik (Lerner), the studio head of Capital Pictures, his new employer. On the cut, the phone rings are siren-like, and once through the door Barton is greeted with insincere praise and loud, bombastic speech. Lipnik's manner of speaking is authoritative and nearly uninterruptible, setting it in contrast to Barton's quiet reserve. Consequently, without protest, Barton is assigned to a Wallace Beery wrestling film. This is Barton's first experience of Hollywood; it is noisy, overbearing and deceitful, giving the impression that it is unwelcoming and threatening. This is further emphasised when Barton visits Ben Geisler (Shalhoub), another fast-talking employee of Capital Pictures. Geisler later arranges for Barton to screen dailies

from another wrestling picture in order to dislodge his writer's block. The sequence begins with the dailies, accompanied by the sound of the film projector, but the focus soon turns to Barton's face that holds an expression of horror as he witnesses the kind of material he is being asked to write about. While the camera remains fixed on him, the sound of bodies being slammed down on the mat of the wrestling ring takes on a hyperreal quality. The effects build in pace, setting a rhythm that generates tension. As the layers of noise intensify, their trajectory suggests an uncertain resolution, and this helps emphasise Barton's anxiety. Lievsay explained the rationale for the sound design and the degree of experimentation involved in this scene, as follows:

We had to have something there that reinforces [Barton's] utter panic and desperation he's feeling - he has no idea what they want and it's inaccessible to him [...] I wanted to have sound that goes from point A to point B - point A would be the sound of the dailies and point B is eventually the sound of the hammering home that he is completely lost, which is the sound of the bodies slamming on the canvas [...] In fact, [body slams] become the transitional sound as we go from that scene to the next. So I wanted there to be a sound that would be a transitional texture from the raw dailies to the sound of those huge explosions. I made this association with a gravel-turning machine [which has] a big metal cylinder with grinders in it, where the big rocks go in one end and the gravel come out the other. It's a kind of percussive, explosive, slightly rhythmic but arrhythmic crunching sort of rock-splitting type of sound. I feathered that in and with EQ I made it softer in the beginning and harsher at the end and of course with volume we just let it get louder and louder [...] Towards the end when you really close in on his eyes I took a chainsaw sound and I filtered it

⁹ Skip Lievsay (Barnes 2003) also stated that he reprises this light steam train whistle in scene near the end of the film, when Charlie (Goodman) comes into Barton's room after he hears him screaming and he takes Barton into the bathroom. Charlie then tells him to calm down and Barton passes out. As hits his head on the wall, a faint whistle can be heard.

¹⁰ In fact, it does every time he looks at it.

¹¹ Charlie too is introduced aurally. Initially, he is identified by his loud crying, heard by Barton through the walls of the hotel, and then by his voice on the phone in his room following Barton's complaint of too much noise. Charlie's presence is then expressed through his pounding footsteps, as he goes to knock on Barton's door. This lack of visual identification builds suspense and forces only a mental representation of the character.

so it's this roaring low sound and then at the very end I took this European train whistle sound and I did this reverberant type of thing, which became a topper and a nice transition because the bomb sound didn't grab the reverb very well but the European train sound was a nice high sound to grab the reverb and echo out of the scene (Barnes 2003).⁹

This sequence is also underscored by strings that develop slowly and help build the tension. The combination of these elements with the close-up seems to signal the chaos and confusion Barton is facing.

The threat from all sides in effect provides Barton with no safe haven. Back in the hotel Barton experiences the second harbinger of irritation. Barton sits down to type, but he has no idea what to write. His eyes move to the picture of the woman on the wall and the soundtrack revisits the aforementioned sound effects and music.¹⁰ However, they are suddenly muted by an exaggerated squelch heard behind him. Its presence quickly eliminates any inkling of inspiration he might have had. The source of the noise is that of the wallpaper above his bed, which is slipping off the wall: a sign of the hotel in decay. As he attempts to repair it, the mosquito returns to add further distraction and annoyance. The conspiracy of these elements recurs when the mosquito rouses Barton from sleep. It is accompanied by the non-diegetic sound of bells, notorious symbols of doom, which gradually transforms into the main theme as Barton eyes his typewriter. Here the melody ebbs and flows around Barton's actions until they are disrupted by the entrance of Charlie Meadows (Goodman), the only other identified guest of

the Hotel Earle.¹¹ Before he exits the wallpaper near the front door squelches as it splits from the wall. Charlie's irritation with the dilapidated state of the hotel is clear, while Barton innocently justifies it by stating: "You pick your poison" (Coen & Coen 2002:457). Thus, offering further evidence that he does not understand the Common Man's position: Barton is a visitor, choosing freely to live in impoverished conditions; whereas Charlie is a resident, whose choices are restricted by his circumstances.

Barton is recommended to seek advice from a fellow writer, but only comes upon one by chance. While washing his hands in the studio's restroom, Barton hears the sound of someone vomiting in a nearby toilet stall. This noise announces the entrance of Bill Mayhew (Mahoney), declared by Barton to be "the finest novelist of our time" (Coen & Coen 2002:432). Mayhew's dress and demeanour are meant to resemble William Faulkner, who notoriously had an unsuccessful time in Hollywood and often turned to alcohol to solve his problems. Mayhew's 'Southern' intellectualism is emphasised by poetic turns of phrase, such as: "Bein' occupied in the worship of Mammon" and "Well, m'olfactory's turin' womanish on me – lyin' and deceitful" (433,446). The script also highlights Mayhew's accent by spelling words phonetically, e.g. 'Mistuh' for *mister*, 'wrastlin' for *wrestling*, 'mebbe' for *maybe* and 'lit'rary' for *literary*. In addition, Mayhew's misery, which also comes from a lack of inspiration, is expressed audibly. Following their initial meeting Barton visits Mayhew's bungalow and overhears him in the midst of a drunken rant. Later, Mayhew's

¹² All of which is detailed in the script (Coen & Coen 2002, 471).

¹³ Skip Lievsay also explained that this sequence involved intense collaboration between Carter Burwell and himself. In interview he offered this sample: I sent him sounds, samples of what we were going to put into this scene and he said, 'Why don't you knock out these sounds and I'll put violins in there. And why don't you amplify these other frequencies and I won't use double bass for whatever it is' (Barnes 2004).

ravings can be heard while Barton is on the telephone with Bill's secretary, Audrey Taylor (Davis). Both instances leave Barton no further on his quest for creative insight.

The mosquito's last visit marks Barton's final decline. The night before he must present Lipnik with the rough outline for his wrestling script Barton panics. He pleads for assistance from Audrey, and after much hesitation, she agrees. However, instead of helping him with his writing Audrey offers him 'understanding'. What follows is an ambiguous lovemaking scene, predominately played out of frame, where sounds are used to suggest the action onscreen.¹² Initially only fragile verbal sighs are heard along with a variation of the main theme, but when the camera pans over and into the sink in the bathroom the soundtrack shifts into a much darker mode. The film erupts with sensual moans that become ghostly as they mingle with what Russell describes as a "demonic cacophony of voices blended with the sound of running water" (Russell 2001:80). However, these sounds are reminiscent of the lovemaking noises heard from another couple in the hotel from earlier in the film. This combined with the fact that these sounds are detached from the Barton and Audrey, presents the question of whether they had made love. Simultaneously, the 'demonic cacophony' hints at a much darker purpose.¹³

Underscored by bass trombones and prepared piano sounds, this eerie flood of effects continues over Barton's sleeping face and abruptly stops when he opens his eyes. This unexpected cessation of sound hints that something is awry.

¹⁴ It has been claimed that this is a sign of maturation on Barton's part (internet interview with the Coen brothers)

¹⁵ Responding as to whether he thought writing was peaceful Barton answers: "No, I've always found that writing comes from a great inner pain. Maybe it's a pain that comes from the realization that one must do something for one's fellow man - to help somehow to ease the suffering. Maybe it's a personal pain. At any rate, I don't believe good work is possible without it " (Coen & Coen 2002, 446).

At this exact point the buzz of the mosquito is heard. It finally alights on Audrey's side, making itself visible for the first time; possibly stating that the moment of doom has arrived. Barton smashes the mosquito with his hand, but Audrey does not react. The minor achievement he feels in killing the insect that had disturbed him almost every night vanishes as he realises the woman is dead. The music builds as the bed fills with blood, mickeymouses the turn of the body and cuts out at Barton's scream, adding dramatic intensity to this horrific event. As the music here is a reprise of the child-like innocence theme, Carter Burwell stated that it also lends itself to the absurd dark humour of the moment (Barnes 2004).

The enigma of Audrey's death pushes Barton from incomprehension to utter confusion. He discovers subsequently that Charlie Meadows is actually a serial killer named Karl Mundt and it is most likely that he had killed Audrey. However, in the midst of these devastating revelations Barton feels inspired to write. In Barton's room the camera cuts to a box wrapped in paper and tied up with string: it has been left for Barton by Charlie/Karl and it is strongly suggested to contain Audrey's severed head. As Barton moves toward the box and lifts it delicately, the strings take up the main theme surface and increase steadily, highlighting the fear and uncertainty of that moment. The music pauses momentarily as he shakes the box, allowing a dull thud to be heard from within, and then places the box next to his ear so that it shields his own head. The noise suggests a large object but it is ambiguous; and the visual seems to indicate a

'mental' identification with that uncertainty. However, Barton does not open the box; he simply places it on his desk near his typewriter.¹⁴ As he does so, the main musical theme resumes at a higher pitch and Barton begins to type. It is perhaps at this moment he is experiencing the inner pain he claimed was the source of his writing for it was then inspiration descended.¹⁵ The melody and the sound of the typewriter continue working in harmony and remain during a brief fade to black, which marks the passage of time. The telephone rings, but Barton is undeterred. He simply places cotton in his ears to block out the sound; the soundtrack physically registers this by muffling the volume of the phone and the typewriter. From that point Barton works on through the night accompanied by the main melody, dictating his script to himself in layers of overlapping speech. Midway his voice becomes disembodied as the camera moves to other locations in the hotel. The combination of these sounds resolves when Barton decides to ring his agent in New York. In a hoarse voice he tells him that "this may be the most important work [he has ever] done", but his agent ignores these words and merely questions his sanity (Coen & Coen 2002:500). Despite this, Barton carries on typing, confident in himself and his work. The score, however, does not return; instead the typewriter stands alone, which underpins the 'importance' of Barton's work while still allowing his agent's concern for his mental health to resonate.

The ending of *Barton Fink* is a violent display of Barton's obliviousness and utter self-delusion. After a night's revelry at the local USO he returns to find two police officers in his room reading his script. The intrusion on Barton's

private world is made clear by his angry reaction. They explain that they are awaiting Meadows'/Mundt's return and handcuff Barton to the footboard of his bed, claiming he is an accessory to the serial killer's crimes. Charlie's/Karl's arrival is announced with measured dissonant chords and the previously mentioned ominous bell tone; it is accompanied by the diegetic roar of a raging fire. The music builds until Charlie/Karl announces: "I'll show you the life of the mind" as he shoots one of the policemen, leaving only the sound of the flames as he then shoots the other (Coen & Coen 2002:510). Before killing the second policeman Charlie/Karl says "Heil Hitler" (512). Ethan has claimed that this allows an

even greater apocalypse to be incorporated into the background - the war..." and then adds that "all that brings us back to [the idea of] this world which has become a prison; the tragedy happening to Barton is in fact taking over the rest of the world" (Mottram 2000:84).

Barton's utter misapprehension forces him to ask Charlie/Karl why he had targeted him and the response speaks volumes. He bellows: "Because you DON'T LISTEN" (Coen & Coen 2002:514). Barton's ignorance of the real world, real situations and real people stems from this very fact: his ears were closed to them. The only voice he is willing to listen to is his own; a fact also established in the opening scene of the film. It is most evident in Barton's attitude towards Charlie/Karl's stories, where he would not let Charlie/Karl get a word in edgewise. Consequently, it is his inability to listen that puts him at a distance

from *Common Man* he hopes to champion in his art. This is perhaps best symbolized in the aforementioned scene when Barton puts the cotton in his ears to block out the world as he types his 'masterpiece'. Moreover, the portentous atmospheric noises and musical themes that permeate Barton's world also remain external to his internal perceptions, and as such they too help denote the warnings he never heeds. Barton's deaf idealism ultimately put him at odds with himself in that it that Barton could not hear the sounds of his true self; thus giving him no impetus to reflect on Charlie/Karl's words. Consequently, Barton is utterly oblivious to the significance of Charlie/Karl's enunciation, and this leaves him even more confused than before.

Freed from the footboard, Barton goes to Capital Pictures still intent on handing over his script to Lipnik. He claims that the work was intended to "show [him] something beautiful" and "something about all of us", but it is utterly rejected by the studio head on the grounds that it is overly grave and sentimental (Coen & Coen 2002:518-519). Lipnik continues to berate Barton by declaring that his ability to write is a façade and that his personality is best described as self-important. As 'punishment' Barton is forced to honour his contract by continuing to write for Capital Pictures while none of his work would be produced. The Coens do not allow Barton a chance to rebut or acquiesce to these statements; instead the scene cuts sharply to the wave heard earlier in the film as it pounds against a rock. This is done to mark the next significant moment in Barton's mental journey. It would appear to denote that he has been forced to

realise that his idealism is flawed and that he can no longer trust it to enable him to perceive the world truthfully. Locked in this confusion, he wanders onto the beach carrying the box that may or may not contain Audrey's head. There, he meets a woman, who resembles the bathing beauty in the picture from his room. Her presence is matched by the sounds of the waves and the seagulls that were heard earlier. She asks about the contents of the box, but in his utter bewilderment, all he can say is "I don't know" (520-521). His uncertainty would seem to indicate that he had lost his point of reference, which had been the basis of his identity and, as a result, it has left him totally unsure of anything.

Barton Fink ends in an enigma. The bathing beauty assumes the same pose as the woman in the picture, suggesting reality and fantasy are blurred. This is not to suggest that Barton's intellectual journey finishes here. In fact, it is reasonable to argue that it is far from over. The soundscape having mapped the deterioration of his mind continues to wash into the credits: the sea ebbing and flowing in an endless cycle. What he will do is impossible to predict; no suggestion is made; no hint is given. Perhaps one day he will understand?

The creative efforts of Skip Lievinsay and Carter Burwell in collaboration with Joel and Ethan Coen are demonstrated throughout *Barton Fink*. It is especially notable in their ability to generate an atmosphere that reflects Barton's internal and external worlds. In this way, the aural ingredients bring greater understanding to the Coen brothers' unsympathetic main character, which in turn helps give some clarity to the ambiguous presentation of the narrative. Together

¹⁶ As noted on pages 6-7.

sound, music and dialogue help express his ever-decreasing mental state as he clings to the delusions of his idealism. The aural ingredients augment the shortcomings of Barton's journey through "the life of the mind" by reinforcing his naivety and his deafness to the realities that exist before him. In particular, abrupt sound edits on and off the cut communicate constant threats to Barton's psyche. Sequences where only sound effects cues are prominent, suspense and menace are markedly enhanced. Burwell's music not only underscores the drama, but also communicates the wounds left by Barton's childhood.¹⁶ However, it is the dialogue that reveals Barton's most serious impediment. "Because you DON'T LISTEN" summarises the reason why Barton is isolated from the world around him, it pronounces the basis for his 'punishment' and, most importantly, it explains why he remains perplexed at the end of the film.

Furthermore, it was Lievsay and Burwell's unified approach to the soundtrack in relation to the Coens' script that gave the sound world of *Barton Fink* an integrated structure. Their efforts not only complemented one another, but they also worked in harmony with the overall construction of the film. As a result, this mode of production helps not only demonstrate the greater potential of the soundtrack, but it also affirms the benefits of closer collaboration among those responsible for its construction.

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Bio:

I was born in Los Angeles, California, but spent many years studying and working in Europe. After achieving an MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of York (UK) in 1997, I completed a PhD in Film Sound at Bournemouth University (UK) in 2006. My doctoral thesis argues in favour of a mode of production that could lead to a greater integration of sound and image. I have also written a paper on the Coen brothers' second film, *Raising Arizona*, which is pending publication in the e-journal *The Soundtrack*. In addition to this, I have worked on a small number of no-budget films as a sound designer and sound consultant.