

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Particular Silences

By Thomas Phillips

In his recent collection of essays, *Minute Particulars*, percussionist and improviser Edwin Prévost suggests that “moments of significant silent serenity are only ever achieved after some kind of catharsis” (38). In relation to music as a stand-alone medium, I could not disagree with this claim more vehemently. Such silence need not necessarily be preceded by the howling voices of metallic scrapes and electronic feedback in order to engage the listener in a profound musical or even spiritual experience. I find more common ground with Prévost when sound and image are combined within the cinema. My chosen cinematic moment exemplifies the conversation (to use a term familiar to improvisers) between silence and precisely the kind of catharsis to which Prévost refers – a rewarding reciprocity indeed.

Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (1963) utilizes both silence and percussive noise to generate horror (especially effective in the space of a theatre) that is relatively independent of any visual manifestation of the abject. I say “relatively” because Davis Boulton’s cinematography provides a striking collection of images that clearly support the sound. Normally in such films, that which haunts is

revealed as a more or less human object to be seen: a killer, an alien, a monstrous Other (with an obvious exception being the absent witch of *The Blair Witch Project*). In the *Wise* film, however, the object is produced most prominently as an auditory experience.

We first encounter the sonic force of this absent presence along with two female characters who are highly sensitive, and thus vulnerable to infection by the uncanny. Huddled together in a bed, they are literally surrounded by the mounting volume of a pulsing, rhythmic bang issuing from Hill House. The sound begins at a distance from the bedroom and moves closer and closer until it reaches the door, at which point it has become uncomfortably loud. “It was looking for the room with someone inside,” says Eleanor, the weaker of the two. This is a moment of filmic suture, or conferred subjectivity; we as spectators, and more importantly as listeners, join her and are compelled to occupy the same space as the “someone” for whom “it” is searching. Like Eleanor, we are suddenly submerged in existential absence in the process of being addressed by that which is itself a terrifying but empty signifier. And yet, Eleanor’s voice-over narration, accompanied by conventional string music, subverts this identification; it reminds us that it is the well-being of an individual psyche, not our own, which is at stake in this confrontation between the human and the supernatural. Her enunciation and its soundtrack, I would argue, are the weakest elements of the film. One may be reminded here of Tarkovsky’s Alexander in *The Sacrifice* who complains of the ineffectual “words, words, words!” polluting modern life.

I suggest that what salvages *The Haunting*, and this scene in particular, is the interplay between noise and silence. Once “it” finds us, we are accosted by a stark tension that develops during “its” explosive blasts and in the mute wake that follows. In “its” silence, lasting as long as nine seconds, anticipation of the next attack becomes the real monster. This silence generates simple fear as process, territorialization, and catharsis: our fear. Upon reaching the door, the noise reverts to a clicking sound and the knob begins to turn. Jump-cuts move from object to object. The house itself is searching; an objectification that in no way delimits our experience of the abject, given that we are positioned within “its” own nightmarish space and action (again, most effective in a theatre). A ghostly cackling follows, drenched in reverb, with only vague connections to the narrative.

As the resonance of this final sound fades into a drone, and then back to silence, a period of calm descends. The second woman responds with the realization that “it’s over.” The haunting has ended, for the time being. The monster has absconded to “its” place in the depths of the unconscious, temporarily shrouded by familiar forces, the buffers of defence mechanization. A “silent serenity” is achieved post-havoc that is well deserved for characters and viewer alike.

I enjoy horror films. I relish the sensation of having my own monsters let out to play. The more time I spend with both film and music, however, the more inclined I am towards a silence whose cost is a little less vocal.

Source Cited:

Prévost, Edwin. (2004). *Minute Particulars*. Essex: Copula.

Bio:

Thomas Phillips (b. 1969) is a composer, novelist, and teacher whose sound work focuses on improvisational performance and minimalist through-composition. He began composing electronic music in the early 1990s, releasing limited edition cds under such monikers as Sea Optic, Lisbon and Eto Ami (with Dean King), and has since released music on such labels as Trente Oiseaux (Germany), Non Visual Objects (Austria) and Line (USA). Additionally, he has created music for installations and collaborations in dance and theatre. Thomas has taught in the disciplines of literature and fine arts at various universities in the US, Québec, and Finland. In 2007 he completed a PhD at Concordia University in Montreal. He currently lives in Raleigh, NC, where he teaches literature at North Carolina State University.