

Summary

In chapter 3 we covered sound in relation to the physical space of the filmic world. In this chapter the attention turned to the temporal relations of sound and image, specifically the formal effects of scene transitions that manipulate sound (sound bridge) and the close (or loose) coordination of sound and image (synchronization)—and its opposed term, the deliberate juxtaposition of sound and image (counterpoint). We also discussed synchronization and counterpoint in terms of what we might call narrative or emotional dissonance (another common meaning of “playing with” or “playing against” the film).

EXERCISE: THE COMMUTATION TEST

There is no easier way to confirm our explanation of music’s role in the sound track and its narrative functions in a scene than by seeing (hearing) what happens when we substitute other music. In fact, this kind of exercise is very closely allied in its method and even in its goals to the spotting process that is used to decide on music for a film: you can feel much more comfortable that you “got it right” by considering alternatives.

Commutation tests are easily made for any film by simply playing music on a CD player while the film runs without sound.⁵ The disadvantage is that

you lose the dialogue and effects, so that the overall character of the sound track is altered (unless you have editing software available, of course). You might try an experiment with main titles, which are often accompanied by music only. For scenes without music, on the other hand, you can judge what music does by playing both CD track and film audio simultaneously. More frequently nowadays, DVDs are released with alternate tracks, for example, *Dracula* (1931) with a new string quartet score by Philip Glass.

Suppose that we removed the quiet, slightly nervous music from the bedroom scene in *Psycho*, discussed in chapter 1, where Marion Crane packs her suitcase before running off with her employer’s money (Figure 4-12). Now, replace that music with a much more obviously ominous cue from a recent horror film. The empathy we feel for Janet Leigh’s character as she mulls over an all-too familiar human dilemma about how to balance behavior and desire would be lost—we would immediately be sharply distanced from her (“Is she about to become a victim already?”) but still wanting to communicate, to warn her about the danger that awaits her in a closet, perhaps, or in the shower we see in the background. What this substitution confirms, by negative example, is how effectively Bernard Herrmann’s music makes us empathize with Marion, despite its rather sparse and understated quality.

More radically, if we substituted a popular song sung by a woman, such as the classic 1970s-era “Get It While You Can” (Janis Joplin) or the more recent “Cornflake Girl” (Tori Amos), there would suddenly be an extra semantic layer whose meanings we would take to be emanating from Marion (because



Figure 4-12. *Psycho*. Marion hesitates for a moment about whether to take the money.

the soloist is a woman) or else from the singer as a confidante or mentor for Marion. This substitution confirms, again by negative example, that Bernard Herrmann's music emphasizes the immediate problem of desire in Marion—"Should I take the money or not?"—rather than the sexual desire that is the root motivation for her stealing the money (Figure 4-13). (Sexual desire here is best understood in the more abstract sense of wanting to establish the couple: Marion steals the money so that she and her lover, Sam, can move away and establish a life for themselves.) Alternatively, the stylistic anachronisms provoked by these songs might seem to put the singers at a distance from Marion, encouraging an interpretation of them as narrators or commentators (voice-over narration or "Greek chorus") and perhaps unsympathetic (anempathetic) commentators at that.

Finally, if we used an electronic dance track (say, early 1990s house, with volume level set lower than normal (for its style), although still prominent in the sound track), the music would pass over and ignore the very subtle shifts of emotion that occur every few seconds in this scene. What such an overbearing but neutral music confirms is that Bernard Herrmann's cue is firmly set in the classical tradition of empathetic, synchronized music. That in itself is an important observation about film style, as Herrmann is not necessarily known for closely adhering to that tradition, especially in his later film scores.

Note that the issue is not whether the music we substitute has an effect on the scene—thanks to the cognitive process that Chion called the "audiovisual contract,"⁶ any music added to the sound track will have *some* kind of effect,



Figure 4-13. *Psycho*. Marion takes the money.

leading us to draw connections among the things we see, even if those connections provoke confusion and therefore "play against" (what if we tried the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony?). The issue is the narrative coherence of those connections—our ability to judge easily the appropriateness of the music to the characters, emotions, and actions of a scene and our understanding of its narrative contexts.