

The Musical Function of Sound in Three Films by Alfred Hitchcock

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Alfred Hitchcock directed three films in which he set himself severe limits in one or more dimensions: *Lifeboat* (1944), *Rope* (1948), and *Rear Window* (1954). Each is constrained in a different way: *Lifeboat*, in diegetic space only, the action taking place entirely in a small boat; *Rope*, in terms of space, narrative time, and imagetrack editing, being restricted to the rooms of a single apartment and filmed in “real” time in a series of ten-minute-long takes;¹ and *Rear Window*, in which diegetic space consists of a room in an apartment (but includes the view from its windows) and in which one character (played by James Stewart) is confined to that room.²

In addition to the spatial and temporal limitations noted above, Hitchcock imposed limitations on the soundtrack. In each film, nondiegetic music (background music) is used only in the main-title and end-credit sequences. All three films, however, use diegetic (or source) music to varied extents. In keeping with his desire to create suspense out of a heightened sense of both reality and time, Hitchcock replied to a proposal for a possible background score to *Lifeboat*, “Where would the music come from?”³ He was also very aware that sound, deployed carefully, can heighten dramatic intensity, an attitude clearly reflected in a denigrating comment about

¹Barry Salt notes that recent technology changes made Hitchcock’s scheme practicable: the development of the “crab dolly” in the late 1940s, a camera support stand with a four-wheel steering mechanism (Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* [London: Starword, 1983], 292). For sake of accuracy in detail, it should also be noted that the audience is given a view of the street outside the apartment during the main-title sequence. Similarly, individual shots at the beginning or end of *Rear Window* and *Lifeboat* frame the apartment or boat, respectively, from the exterior.

²*Dial M for Murder* (1954) is another “single-set” film. We choose to compare *Rear Window* with *Rope* and *Lifeboat* instead because *Dial M for Murder* uses a substantial non-diegetic music score, which fact generates soundtrack characteristics very different from the films studied here.

³Quoted in Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), xiii.

scriptwriters, who he said jumped too quickly to solve a script problem with a line of dialogue: “Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms.”⁴ In *Rear Window*, the diegetic soundtrack is very live, and it includes a popular song gradually “composed” throughout the picture by one of James Stewart’s neighbors. In *Lifeboat*, the diegetic music is restricted to a tin whistle and some songs; instead, the sounds of sea and wind are exploited for emotional and atmospheric effect. In *Rope*, the dialogue itself carries a similar responsibility (reflecting Hitchcock’s comment above), with the one exception of a citation from Poulenc’s *Mouvement Perpetuel No. 1* in the main titles, which reappears when one of the characters plays the piano (he does so on three separate occasions)—we shall explore the significance of this music in section I below.

Of the three films, only *Rear Window* approached the status of an unqualified success with audiences. *Lifeboat* was sharply criticized, not for its unusual technique, but for treating its German and Allied characters as more complex than was appropriate for the black-and-white requirements of wartime propaganda. Similarly, the moral cynicism of *Rope* caused it to be condemned in America; some European theaters even refused to show it, and eventually Hitchcock removed the film from circulation altogether.⁵

Although these other factors were perhaps primarily responsible for the commercial failures of *Lifeboat* and *Rope*, the special cinematic techniques themselves were difficult to accept for an audience accustomed to a cinema tradition that derived primarily from the stage melodrama, with its emphasis on action, movement, and scenery:

The deliberate, self-imposed restrictions of place had fascinated Hitchcock in *Lifeboat*, but a certain languor resulted from several long periods of constant dialogue without action or cutting—without the insertion and rearrangement of separate pieces of film to establish point of view, to gather emotional momentum, and to sustain audience interest and involvement. This restricted method, carried to its ultimate logical extreme

⁴Francois Truffaut, with Helen G. Scott, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 222.

⁵Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (paperback ed., New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 325–26.

in the uninterrupted ten-minute takes of *Rope*, turned out to be an intriguing failure.⁶

Hitchcock himself later told Francois Truffaut:

When I look back [at *Rope*], I realize that it was quite nonsensical because I was breaking with all my own theories on the importance of cutting and montage for the visual narration of a story. . . . [But] the mobility of the camera and the movement of the players closely followed my usual cutting practice. In other words, I maintained the rule of varying the size of the image in relation to its emotional importance within a given episode.⁷

The master's comments do not suggest contrition over a failed experiment. In the interview, Truffaut concurs: "I don't agree that *Rope* should be dismissed as a foolish experiment, particularly when you look at it in the context of your whole career: a director is tempted by the dream of linking all of a film's components into a single, continuous action"; still, he has to admit that "classical cutting techniques have stood the test of time."⁸

In what follows we argue that even if one accepts Donald Spoto's claim that the restricted methods Hitchcock used in these films constitute an "intriguing failure," then it is certainly not the fault of the soundtracks. We shall first investigate how the lack of music aids drama in *Lifeboat* and *Rope*. The "languor" in these films is perhaps more a result of the heightened discomfort the viewer feels—aspects such as silences certainly do feel longer without a musical background, but these silences are compelling through their realism and involve audience members further through their discomfort.⁹ Tempo, pacing, and overall form rely on other aspects of the

⁶Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, 2d ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 153.

⁷Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 180.

⁸*Ibid.*, 184.

⁹One aspect of this discomfort is the difficulty for the viewer of avoiding the sensation of being in the apartment; that is, Hitchcock's "roving camera"—in a publicity interview at the time of *Rope*'s release, he said he "wanted to do a picture . . . in which the camera never stops"—strongly encourages identification of the viewer's eye with the camera "eye" ("My Most Exciting Picture," in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 275).

soundtrack than music and in each case are exploited to great effect. The sense of form in particular is incredibly strong, with sound providing large-scale climaxes as well as a frame for the action. Next, we shall discover how dialogue in *Rope* and the sea and wind in *Lifeboat* adopt musical properties and, to a certain extent, take on the cinematic function of music.¹⁰ To the basic elements of music—pitch, rhythm, timbre, dynamic, and tempo—we shall add the traditional musical roles of form, unity, continuity, and characterization. The former are basic elements of all sound, and the latter can be achieved through extended use of sound. Finally, we shall compare these two earlier films to *Rear Window*, arguing that music is in fact necessary to the latter. Overall, our findings are consistent with Elisabeth Weis's generalization that "Hitchcock's often-stated goal was to hold the audience's fullest attention, and . . . he never overlooked the possibilities inherent in the sound track. . . . He hardly ever used it redundantly but rather as an additional resource."¹¹

How the Lack of Music Aids Drama in "Rope"

Brandon and Philip share a New York apartment. They have distorted the rather Nietzschean ideas of their former headmaster Rupert and decide to strangle their "inferior" friend David Kentley. Placing the body in an old chest, they continue with plans to hold a dinner party whose guests include David's parents, his fiancée Janet, and Rupert. As Brandon's behavior becomes increasingly more daring and Philip's more nervous, Rupert begins to suspect. He finally confronts them and then calls the police.

The lack of nondiegetic music in *Rope* gives additional emphasis to the on-screen music which does occur (phonograph and piano), allowing it more easily to take on significant meaning. We hear a phonograph at approximately thirty-nine minutes (39:00); the actual source is never seen but is cited in the dialogue. The banality of this (unidentified) music gives the effect of heightening the tension preceding and following it; at the same time, it forms

¹⁰It is of course reasonable to do this work only if Hitchcock himself espoused a conventional attitude toward the use and functions of music in feature films. He did so in "On Music in Films: An Interview with Stephen Watts," in Gottlieb, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, 241–45.

¹¹Elisabeth Weis, *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Sound Track* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 14.

a small interlude in the proceedings, concentrating on the sub-plot of two secondary characters, Janet and Kenneth.

The piano music, on the other hand, is essential to the drama. From the beginning, Brandon (the murderer) expresses himself confidently, as can be heard in the regular pace of his speech and his deeper voice and resonant tone. Philip (the accomplice) is much more anxious and is typically silent with sudden interjections of a rhythmically irregular, high and strained vocal quality. Charming dialogue is Brandon's domain, whereas Philip, as we find subsequently, prefers to resort to the piano. However, this is also his undoing. He plays the piano three times during the film: at 27:00, during the climactic scene at 46:00, and as an epilogue at 79:00. The Poulenc composition he chooses to play each time has a regular and naive diatonic opening but quite soon resorts to abrupt twists in harmony and tonality that, in context, give the impression of something altogether more sinister. It is during the climactic scene that Philip's defenses break down. He is questioned intensively by Rupert, who is simultaneously setting a metronome against the music at an ever-increasing tempo. The tempo of metronome, piano, and dialogue all increase, but at slightly different rates, creating tension not only through the acceleration but also through the conflict of pulse. Philip finally breaks down and stops playing, then almost immediately gives himself away with his worried stare at the books that are carried past, held by the rope with which the murder was committed.

In this scene, the soundtrack also comments on the meaning of the dialogue through changes in the music, at one point adding the sound of a siren from the street below. When Philip says, "I don't like to play with light in my eyes," the music changes to minor. When Rupert says insistently, "Yes, Philip, I asked you a question," we hear the sound of a siren from outside. When Rupert asks, "Yes, but a rather peculiar party—what's it all about, Philip?" the musical theme changes to a menacing, sinuously snake-like melody. The response to Rupert's "Temper, temper" is silence, and to his "Unfortunately, I don't know anything; I merely suspect" a change from major to minor; then Philip stops playing.¹²

The absence of music allows our attention to focus not only on the meaning of the dialogue but also on its sound qualities and rhythms. At various points in the film, tension is achieved through a "disconnect"

¹²Similar changes to minor occur with Rupert's statements "Brandon knows [where David is]" and "You said you have never strangled a chicken."

between soundtrack and imagerack. The two most important of these are when Mrs. Wilson is clearing the meal from the top of the chest and is about to replace the books inside it, and when Rupert is telling the story of how he would commit the very same murder. In both instances, there is no music, but a strongly heightened sense of tension is achieved through “counterpoint” between image and sound; that is to say, the image and soundtracks follow different paths but between them achieve a greater effect than either might by itself. In the first situation, the tension is heightened through anempathetic means¹³—that is, the soundtrack seems indifferent to the imagerack: the suspense engendered by Mrs. Wilson’s actions is accompanied by a fairly stable conversation of regular rhythm and pitch. In the second, tension is heightened by the slow tempo of Rupert’s dialogue and by the images that follow his meaning (rather than focus on him). The climactic moment of this scene uses an inversion: a view of the chest is accentuated by silence, after which dialogue continues at a faster pace, higher pitch, and louder dynamic, effectively releasing the tension.

Sounds from outside the apartment are occasionally used to dissipate tension. For example, in the opening minutes of the film there is no sound from outdoors until after the murder, when the blinds are opened and traffic noises are heard. This releases tension by allowing us to think for a moment of the everyday world outside the apartment. A similar use of traffic noise to release tension occurs after the conversation about murder; Mr. Kentley says, “Please Brandon, I think we’ve had just about enough,” and traffic noise is heard in the short silence that follows.¹⁴

Doorbell and telephone sounds also figure strongly. At the beginning of the party, for instance, we hear the doorbell ring for every new arrival except for Rupert: he arrives as Philip is playing the piano for the first time. This anticipates the effect that Rupert will have on Philip, later catching him unawares. Near the end of the film, when Rupert calls that he is coming back to collect his cigarette case, the sound of the telephone ringing takes on the function of warning bells, and the tension it creates finally makes Philip

¹³“Anempathetic” is Michel Chion’s term: see his *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 8–9.

¹⁴Thus, Weis is not precisely correct when she says that no street sounds are heard between the opening scene and the final moments. Nevertheless, her point holds, that “the shift to outside noise signals a shift from subjectivity to external reality . . . and the final wail of a siren brings [the murderers] into the larger world of retribution” (*The Silent Scream*, 130).

snap;¹⁵ traffic noises are no longer heard when he goes haywire. Both doorbell and phone sounds take on the additional role of articulation since visual cuts, which could function in this capacity, do not exist here.

There is one point in the film where the conventional function of a musical “stinger” is taken over by a sound. Near the beginning of the party, Mrs. Atwater mistakenly calls out “David,” believing Kenneth to be him. The “stinger” effect is Philip’s glass breaking, and, although at a realistically low dynamic level, it does function to highlight the emotional situation suddenly created, especially as it is followed by a close-up of his bloodied hand and conversation about the injury.

Overall, the treatment of sound in *Rope* corroborates Hitchcock’s claim that “careful use of sound can help strengthen the intensity of a situation,” as it can likewise help to shape the pacing and articulation of a film. The general result here, however, is claustrophobic: the viewer is an intruder on a party and is present, watching the situation develop. There is no escape in image, sound, or time, nor in the emotion of a nondiegetic soundtrack. The continuous takes are partly responsible but so is the realism of the soundtrack: we never hear anything that could not reasonably be heard from within the apartment.¹⁶ The overall effect is one of stark, cold reality with few options open to us, this despite the fact, as we shall see, that the soundtrack is heavily manipulated, particularly with respect to sound levels of conversation.¹⁷

¹⁵Both are instances of what Weis calls “aural intrusion . . . [or the] use of offscreen noise to threaten an onscreen character” (*The Silent Scream*, 125).

¹⁶Weis explains the apparent contradiction between realism and the strong sense of the subjective in Hitchcock’s American films through *Marnie* (1964): the “major point of [these films is] to show how easily a character . . . can misinterpret events according to his own preconceptions. . . . The most persuasive way of demonstrating the seductiveness of such misinterpretations is to let the viewer make the same mistake. . . . Thus the most persuasive of Hitchcock’s subjective films are also the most realistic in style” (*The Silent Scream*, 107).

¹⁷Hitchcock told Truffaut that “They put the walls on silent rails, and the furniture on rollers,” and he agreed when Truffaut said “What is truly remarkable is that all of this was done so silently that you were able to make a direct sound track” (Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 183, 184). James Stewart, on the other hand, recalls that the walls were too noisy to allow a direct recording, and “so we had to do the whole thing over again for sound, with just microphones, like a radio play” (Spoto, *Life of Hitchcock*, 324). In remarkable and fanciful contrast to the realism of the apartment scene, the background for the film is an enormous cyclorama of the New York skyline: Hitchcock says it

How Sound Functions as Music in "Rope"

To carry out our analysis of dialogue in *Rope* (that is, to discover the "musical" functions of dialogue, outside its semantic meaning), we used Michel Chion's method of "reduced listening."¹⁸ Chion identifies three modes of listening: causal, which focuses on determining the physical source of a sound; semantic, which focuses on decoding sounds for their meaning; and reduced, a term which he borrows from Pierre Schaeffer, originator of *musique concrète*, and which "focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning."¹⁹ Since we attend by instinct to the causes and possible meanings (dangers?) of sounds, reduced listening requires practice and is the most difficult of the three modes; one might consider it a particularly musical form of attending to sound.

We shall take each of the musical elements in turn, starting with pitch. There are two aspects of pitch in dialogue which are interesting in *Rope*: first, the basic register for each character's voice and its role in characterization and contrast; and secondly, the variation in pitch for each voice. The film has eight speaking characters (the murdered man, David Kentley, utters only a scream). These comprise five men and three women. Of the men, both Brandon and Rupert are baritones, Philip is a tenor and Mr. Kentley (David's father) a bass. The three women (Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Atwater, and Janet—respectively, Brandon's housekeeper, Mr. Kentley's sister-in-law, and David's fiancée) are altos (though Mrs. Wilson's voice is slightly higher than the others). All this suggests a gravitation towards lower pitches; indeed, ultimately, the dramatic tension lies in the male register.

The three most intense scenes are the opening ten minutes, the closing ten minutes, and the scene in which Rupert questions Philip as he plays the piano (at c. 46:00). These are all striking in their exclusive use of male voices, without the background of female voices as commonly used elsewhere. Within this register, Philip's voice is the highest, depicting his nervousness and emotional strain. Brandon, on the other hand, generally maintains a lower and more resonant pitch, indicative of his more confident

covered 12,000 square feet and required 8000 light bulbs; its changes were controlled by a single technician: a "man at the light organ [who] played a nocturnal Manhattan symphony in light" ("My Most Exciting Picture," 278).

¹⁸Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 29–33.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 25 ff.; the quotation is from page 29.

and relaxed approach to the situation. Rupert also has a lower voice, depicting him similarly as a more calm and confident personality.

In contrast to the exploitation of lower pitches for the more serious dramatic moments, the women's voices are used to lighten tension. Mrs. Wilson brings light relief from her very first entry, which signals an end to the tension of the opening minutes. (This effect also depends on the timbre and rhythm of her speech, as we shall discuss below.) Mrs. Atwater and Janet bring similar relief through both speech and laughter: at moments such as Rupert's disconcertingly vigorous, amoral speech about murder (at c. 35:00), their high-pitched laughter both punctuates his words and undermines any seriousness we might attach to them. This has important dramatic implications: Rupert's philosophy on murder has instigated the murder of David, yet his statements on the matter are depicted in a way that indicates his words are not to be taken seriously—certainly not to the extreme that Brandon and Philip have done.

The variation in pitch of the voices also mirrors emotion. Brandon's voice becomes higher when he is stressed, as, for example, when he tries to explain to Rupert the reason behind the champagne (at c. 29:00). However, this registral shift occurs very infrequently, reflecting the fact that his emotions are basically in control. In contrast, Philip's voice is quite high and strained, even when taking into account that he has a naturally higher voice, and it seems to become progressively higher as he comes closer to the breaking point, eventually reaching its upper limit as he shouts "Cat and mouse, cat and mouse" in the final scene. Janet's voice also varies in pitch according to the emotional situation, although in reverse: her higher pitches are used to lighten the drama, whereas her lower pitches are used when the situation is more grave. Both Mrs. Atwater and Mrs. Wilson remain fairly constant in pitch, which is significant as they do not become emotionally involved in the proceedings.

The second musical element, rhythm, can be exploited to dramatic effect in a number of ways. Variation between halting and regular speech is most evident in Philip and Brandon: each of them speaks haltingly when under strain or when overexcited. Furthermore, the effect of irregular rhythm in speech is almost always highlighted through being placed directly against regular speech. Philip displays his stress almost from the beginning, and it is only when the guests are first arriving that we hear him speak in a regular and unhalting fashion. Rupert actually draws attention to Brandon's stuttering as the latter tries to explain why it is such a significant occasion

that they should be drinking champagne—this is the first break in Brandon's reserve and confidence. In the final scene, Rupert's calm and assured manner is exhibited in the regular rhythm of his conversation, whereas we can sense the anxiety of both Brandon and Philip through their halting speech and irregular rhythms.

In contrast to the exploitation of irregular rhythm to heighten dramatic tension in the main characters, those not involved in the drama maintain a steady pulse to their conversation. Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Atwater and Mr. Kentley never falter in the steady flow of their speech, and Kenneth (David's friend and Janet's former boyfriend) and Janet only rarely do so.

The tempo and pacing of speech is also a very significant source of tension. An increase in tempo is used either to increase tension or to release it. During the scene when Philip is playing the piano and simultaneously being questioned by Rupert (at c. 46:00), the gradual increase in tempo dramatically mirrors the heightening emotional tension. The increased tempo of Philip's speech is matched by that of the metronome and his piano playing, and it mirrors his emotional state as his anxiety levels increase beyond control. But a more rapid tempo can also release tension under the right circumstances. In the opening few minutes, for example, in the immediate aftermath of the murder, the tempo moves very slowly, with few vocal interruptions to what is basically silence; it picks up noticeably as Brandon speaks more consistently. Similarly, at the end of the film, as Rupert recreates his version of how a murderer would successfully complete his crime, he speaks slowly and carefully for much of the main part of his theory, followed by a silence as we wait to see whether he will say that he would put the body in the old chest. Seeing the gun in Brandon's pocket, he decides against this and immediately increases the tempo of his conversation with the words that he would take the body outside and into the car. This provides a dramatic release of the tension that has built so steadily towards this silence, thus underscoring the meaning of his words and the tension the listener feels while wondering whether or not he will mention the chest.

The timbre of each character's speech—that is, his or her particular vocal quality—is also significant in portraying both general character and specific emotions. In general, Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Atwater share a slightly comical timbre, partly brought out by their accents. Mrs. Wilson often changes her voice quality to that of a hushed whisper, which has additional comic effects and provides the sharpest contrast to the male conversations. For example, she speaks in this manner to Rupert about the special pâté she has bought,

but also to Janet that she should go easy on the pâté due to its calories. Similar humorous effects of female laughter have already been discussed. In various other moments, Philip displays his tension through hushed whispers, although the obvious strain in his voice at these times has a completely different effect than do Mrs. Wilson's whispers. For example, just after the piano scene where Rupert has questioned him, Philip and Brandon are talking by the drinks table. At this moment, Philip's voice is high, strained, and almost in a monotone, and it betrays his anxiety more than his words do.

Other vocal sounds such as sighs and breathing are strong elements of the soundtrack. In the opening few minutes, for example, Brandon's sigh and exhalation of the cigarette smoke are fundamental to the slow release of tension, being coded sounds with which we associate very readily. These and similar non-speech vocal sounds are not always at a different dynamic level than regular speech, a fact which once again underscores the surprising effect of realism in this strongly manipulated soundtrack.

It is not surprising, given the constraints of the extremely long take, that *Rope* contains much offscreen speech, but there are also moments when the dialogue of those we can see cannot be understood. When the image focuses on two or three characters, the background noise to their conversation is provided by the speech of others. Sometimes a few, apparently random words are intelligible, as when Mrs. Atwater refers to "Scorpio" in the background after Brandon states to Rupert "I'm a creature of whim—who knows" (at c. 39:00). In an earlier scene, Mrs. Atwater states to Philip "These hands will bring you great fame," and we hear Mr. Kentley talking audibly about the books (c. 27:00). As Mrs. Wilson is talking to Rupert (at c. 44:00) about how strangely both Brandon and Philip have been acting all day, her voice fades. This is explained by the appearance of Philip in the image and signals that we now hear subjectively, from his point of view. We realize how disturbing her voice must be to Philip when the words themselves are unintelligible, and all that he hears is the dangerously gossipy quality of her speech.

The background sounds of conversation are always present when the situation is lighter in character but are often omitted for dramatic situations, such as the story of the chickens (Brandon tells Rupert that Philip kills chickens with his hands on his parents' country property in Connecticut). Here the focus of all attention on the soundtrack has the similar effect of focusing the viewer's attention on the dialogue, thereby increasing the tension and the dramatic significance of the moment.

As form in music is a matter of structuring time, formal design in film music is dependent on the way in which time is structured within a film, that is to say, on the film's plot. In *Rope*, however, the traditional need to exploit sound to enhance continuity is largely irrelevant, since the image itself is continuous, no gaps in time occur, and the action all takes place within one apartment. Nevertheless, sound does contribute, by providing a continuous soundtrack to match the continuous imagetrack; that is, the sound does not cut in time nor contain sharp changes in content, such as jumping suddenly from one conversation to another, but instead is always fluid in accommodating new voices or noises. In addition, the soundtrack is limited exclusively to the voices of the characters and diegetic sounds. The opening and concluding scenes comprise male voices only, which enhances the strong frame provided by the music.

The opening scene also provides a "subject" for us: we are given two vocal sounds (Brandon and Philip) which then develop to a greater or less extent throughout the film through their influence from, and interaction with, other characters. The entries of the other characters provide points of articulation and additional "statements" of the material. There are various points of climax, notably in the scene concerning the chicken story, the piano scene, and the final scene when Rupert discovers the crime. In between, various points of relaxation are created through small groupings of people, all of them, however, advancing a particular element of the plot. The real turning point occurs during the piano scene, which is when Philip really loses control. Additional formal punctuation is provided through the use of diegetic music (the piano and phonograph) and other noises in the soundtrack such as the doorbell and street noises.

Thus, although our discussion of the last musical element—form—has tended to overlap significantly with questions of film form and narrative, the prior discussion demonstrates that a "musical" analysis of the soundtrack can contribute to an interpretation of a film's style and a reading of its narrative discourse. In *Rope*, the task of sound design is very like musical composition.

How the Lack of Music Aids Drama in "Lifeboat"

The story of *Lifeboat* is simplicity itself: six men and three women find themselves together in a *Lifeboat* after their ship is sunk by a torpedo; they interact, assisting or clashing with one another until the survivors are rescued.

As in *Rope*, the severe restriction on nondiegetic music in *Lifeboat* places additional value on the small amount of diegetic music, which is restricted to Joe's tin whistle and the characters' singing voices. Never is more than one character heard to sing at a time. The tin whistle also has a solitary and fairly pathetic sound. The diegetic music that is heard therefore always reinforces the situation: one of loneliness and abandonment on a vast ocean, pitted against the odds.

In the scene leading up to amputation of his leg, Gus (a sailor) demands that Joe play his tin whistle. Not content with Joe's first choice of music, Gus asks for something more lively, and then joins in to sing: "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me." Joe stops playing, and Gus continues to sing as a banal background for the image of the knife being sterilized in the flame (at c. 41:00). In this instance, the diegetic music heightens the emotional intensity in the image through its obvious discordance.

Diegetic music also features strongly in the scene following the second storm, when Willy (the German U-boat commander) is singing to the accompaniment of "Ritt" (a passenger on the freighter). The beginning of the scene provides a marked contrast to the tempestuousness of the storm. It can also be seen retrospectively as an ironic comment on the dramatic development: Ritt is happily accompanying Willy but is totally unaware of the latter's danger. The second song they sing at this time is cheeky in character and provokes an entirely different mood, with its own irony: the image shifts so that we see only the feet of Connie (the first passenger to board the *Lifeboat*) and Kovac (a sailor) flirtatiously touching.

The lack of background music transfers our aural attention very much to the sound effects. In this way, the ocean noises and weather take on new roles of emotional comment, establishing atmosphere, form, unity, and continuity. This has the additional effect of heightening realism, since all the sounds we hear emanate from the boat and its immediate surroundings. For example, the empty thud of Gus's boot as it is thrown down on the deck is more expressive than the same result would have been if heard against music, simply because the stark realism of the situation remains unemotionalized. Similarly, the scene where Willy is thrown overboard is

incredibly graphic in its sound effects. The sounds of heavy breathing, of the long struggle, and of various blows are all very much in the audible foreground. Hitchcock later used much the same method for the murder of Gromek in *Torn Curtain*. Truffaut says of this latter scene that “Since it is played without music, it is very realistic and also very savage,”²⁰ words that could apply equally well to the scene in *Lifeboat*. In addition, the lack of both music and dialogue portrays the actions as intense but largely unemotional; the overall effect of the scene is of animal instincts.

Similarly to *Rope*, *Lifeboat* occasionally uses counterpoint between image and soundtrack to express tension. A striking example occurs at approximately 17:00, when the image focuses on Mrs. Higgins’ empty hands (she lost her infant child when the freighter sank): the soundtrack heightens the fragile subjectivity of this moment through a banal accompaniment of the men talking about practical amenities such as food and sleeping. Somewhat earlier, in the first argument the crew has about Willy (starting at c. 12:00), the sense of anxiety is heightened because it is set against the banality of a calm sea. On a broader scale, during both storm scenes, there is a conflict between the rhythm of the sea and of the wind, which is unsettling to the listener and underlines the tension and uncertainty of each situation.

As in *Rope*, the lack of music in *Lifeboat* serves to focus our attention on the meaning of the dialogue, the interaction of characters, and the development of relationships. These are integral parts of the drama of both films; of *Lifeboat*, Elisabeth Weis writes that “the alternation between moments of relative intimacy and moments of shared experience is central to Hitchcock’s concern . . . with the tension between the formation of love relationships and the interdependency of a small group of people.”²¹ Also as in *Rope*, the suspense in *Lifeboat* is heightened through soundtrack realism. Although there are discontinuities of both time and image in *Lifeboat*, the sense of claustrophobia remains very high in all but opening and closing moments through the absence of any surrounding life (which was at least minimally indicated by traffic noises in *Rope*). Again, we cannot escape through the emotion of a nondiegetic soundtrack. Although the sound effects replace the function of music to a certain extent, their initial point of existence is always grounded in reality, a fact which serves most to accentuate the tension, claustrophobia, and suspense of the situation.

²⁰Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, 254.

²¹Weis, *The Silent Scream*, 133.

How Sound Functions as Music in "Lifeboat"

Just as the atmosphere in *Rope* is very much characterized through dialogue, the sea and wind in *Lifeboat* are fundamental in creating a background ambience which heightens drama and emotion as well as in creating a sense of form. The sea and wind, therefore, will be the focus of attention as we delineate the musical functions of sound in this film.

With respect to pitch, it is the wind in *Lifeboat* which most exploits changes to dramatic effect. For the majority of the film, the wind sounds are nonexistent or very quiet. However, at several points the wind becomes a significant part of the soundtrack: for example, in the argument over who will be appointed skipper of the boat (at c. 28:00), at the height of the first storm (42:00), and as the second storm brews while the crew discusses killing Willy (at 55:00). Characteristic of wind, the sound comes in gusts, each with a swell in pitch; overall, the swells in pitch become slightly higher each time. The basically high, strained pitch of the wind creates a great deal of tension when combined with these surges in pitch. A howling wind is often used to underlie conflict in the plot, as in the above scenes. Its association in this way is also exploited during the card game between Kovac and Ritt, when a sudden sweep of wind initiates a fight between them after their cards blow away. It is similarly exploited before the first storm scene, when Gus and Kovac begin their argument about Rosie (Gus's girlfriend at home, whom Gus naively believes is faithful to him) (at c. 34:00); this is the entry point of the wind which then crescendos and rises in pitch throughout the upcoming storm.

The waves in *Lifeboat* maintain a fairly constant overall pitch, using variations in dynamic, timbre, and rhythm to underlie different dramatic situations. However, just as wind is heard in swells and gusts, so waves consist of small swells in pitch which provide a background that is both static in its ostinato repetition and active in its surges, a mirror of the restricted spatial setting in which there is nevertheless constant development of relationships through dialogue.

The rhythm of each wave and of the wind is mainly outlined through these swells and surges. The almost constant lapping motion of the waves is often used to mirror emotion, as when Alice (the nurse) talks to Stanley (sailor) one night about the romance in her life (at c. 51:00): the gentle lap of waves provides an atmosphere appropriate to both her mild personality and her words of affection.

The increase in tempo in the waves and wind gusts has a similar effect to music in creating atmosphere. Although the two storms rely on a faster tempo of the waves and wind for their sense of momentum and increased activity, the scenes after the storm appear calm, with sharply decreased activity. For example, when Kovac's and Ritt's cards are blown away shifts in tempo are used to dramatic effect. The sweep of wind precedes a sudden climax in tempers, and the two fight. As they begin their altercation, loud sounds of rain can be heard; they stop, and a moment later the rain stops just as suddenly. There is a moment of near silence, with no dialogue and very little weather noise; this gives way once again to the sounds of the regular lapping of the oars. The soundtrack here directly mirrors the dramatic climax and heightens the sense of anticlimax afterwards through the banality of the calm sea sounds.

Speaking of timbre, it is difficult to classify the sound quality of waves, but on certain occasions they assume a more menacing or more calm quality. These contrasting qualities in the waves undoubtedly depend on the variations in pitch, rhythm and dynamic, but nevertheless are essential in establishing atmosphere. For example, soon after the card-playing scene, Gus and Willy begin to talk. This is a highly dramatic moment as we see that Willy has some drinking water he has hidden from the others. The tension is brought out in the sound of the waves, which becomes more menacing. In contrast, the waves quickly assume a calm quality after the remaining passengers have thrown Willy overboard (at c. 82:00). This atmosphere is established almost immediately; that is to say, it does not rely on extended regularity and repetition for its effect.

Variations in dynamic of both wind and wave sounds are used to great dramatic effect throughout the film. Aside from several scenes already mentioned, several other, more subtle uses of a sudden increase in dynamic level highlight dramatic incidences. For example, just after Willy has been thrown overboard, a close-up of Ritt coincides with a single loud wave sound: this is the moment of realization, when he thinks of what they have just done—like a stinger chord, this isolated chord forces attention to Ritt's thoughts. Earlier in the film, wind is used in a similar way. Just before Alice states, "I'm glad the freighter was torpedoed," there is a loud blast of wind, bringing added significance to her words (at c. 32:00). We therefore remember them, and they are explained to us later in the story.

The wind also becomes incredibly loud during the build-up to the second storm. As the crew argues over killing Willy, the wind crescendos immensely. It therefore maintains its associations with conflict; significantly, it is the wind

and not the sea which is louder here. A similar discrepancy between wind and wave dynamic occurs in the argument over who will be skipper of the boat.

In contrast, moments of relative silence are also used to underscore significant moments. As Mrs. Higgins takes her dead baby (at 11:00), a moment of near silence amid all the water and general movement noises is very expressive, bringing our attention to the horror of the situation. Similarly, silence expresses shock and emptiness when we see the dangling rope, the only remaining evidence of Mrs. Higgins' suicide. The one other moment when near silence is exploited occurs late in the film, as the remaining passengers begin fishing with Connie's bracelet. Together with the image of the bracelet being let down into the ocean, the soundtrack is very nearly silent: here we are hearing the point of audition of the bracelet. Although a weak moment in the film overall, it provides a strong aural contrast to the atmosphere above water, where the action has taken place exclusively so far.

The sounds in *Lifeboat* create a strong sense of form. The film is framed (at the beginning and end) not only by its only instances of nondiegetic music but also by the sounds of ships being torpedoed and sunk, the freighter (at the beginning), and the German supply ship (at the end). The two storms create moments of climax and articulation within the film. The first occurs at 42:00–44:00 and the second at 54:00–59:00. The second is louder, longer, and more dramatic than the first, thus sustaining tension. (As an aside, the golden section occurs within the second storm, and it is striking in that connection that the climax in sound and a dramatic turning point—as they discover Willy can speak English—occur together here.)

Lifeboat differs from *Rope* in containing both visual and temporal cuts. The visual cuts create articulation within the film, thereby contributing to form, and it may be argued that, as a consequence, there is less need for articulation in the soundtrack. Just as in *Rope*, the traditional need for unity and continuity provided by nondiegetic music is lessened as the image is unified through its restrictions. The fact that *Lifeboat* contains both visual and temporal cuts, however, requires some level of both unity and continuity, which is easily achieved by the sounds of both waves and wind heard almost constantly throughout²² and by the association of wind with conflict and of the stormy sea with emotional drama.

²²The temporal gaps rule out overlapping sound effects as a transition between scenes, a traditional function of the non-diegetic music cue: instead, soundtrack and image dissolve simultaneously. At all other moments, however, the soundtrack provides

The Need for Music in “Rear Window”

The third Hitchcock film which has restrictive spatial limitations is *Rear Window*, in which a wheelchair-bound photographer (Jeff) misspends his convalescence by spying on his neighbors from his apartment window; as a result, he becomes convinced that one of them (Lars Thorwald) has murdered his wife. *Rear Window* is unlike *Lifeboat* and *Rope* in that music plays a strong role throughout; this music does not undermine realism, however, because it is part of a diegetic soundtrack, and its sources are identifiable (even if they are frequently offscreen).²³

The question then is this: if the absence of music in both *Rope* and *Lifeboat* has a positive impact on the atmospheres of these films, why would such an absence in *Rear Window* not have a similar effect? The simple answer is that *Rear Window* is in fact much more like a conventional film. It makes use of standard editing and is much less restricted spatially than either *Rope* or *Lifeboat*, since the imagetrack is not confined to the apartment where Jeff lives: through his camera or his unaided eyes, we follow the view from his window around the courtyard and into what is visible of his neighbors' apartments. As a result, music serves unity, continuity, and characterization in the traditional manner. For example, continuous music often underlies the image as it focuses in on different apartments in turn, such as during the opening and concluding scenes. And music contributes to larger-scale unity in that the songwriter's music appears several times, continually evolving the same theme, which gradually becomes recognizable until it is played in its entirety near the end of the film.²⁴ In general, diegetic music provides coherence because it is limited to only a few sources: the radio, the composer's piano and instrumentalist friends, someone whistling, and someone singing. This reinforces our notion that the music is diegetic by establishing strong associations with sound sources.

continuous background noise through image cuts, thus assisting in establishment of a sense of continuity within scenes. The persistent ocean sounds do negate Donald Spoto's remark that "All the loss and the fear [of the characters] are felt amid the silence of the sea" (*Life of Hitchcock*, 284).

²³Stefan Sharff gives an exhaustive account of the development of the story and script and a shot-by-shot analysis in *The Art of Looking in Hitchcock's "Rear Window"* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1997).

²⁴This idea was Hitchcock's own, and he was apparently somewhat disappointed by the result (Truffaut, Hitchcock, 216).

There are limitations: in a diegetic soundtrack, music cannot bridge gaps in time. On the contrary, music is often used to accentuate a temporal discontinuity by providing a sudden change in the soundtrack. For example, during the night that Thorwald travels to and from his apartment, the passing of time is expressed through the music, which changes each time the cut is temporal rather than simply spatial.

The realism in the soundtrack is matched by that of the imagetrack: we only see what Jeff can see, sometimes aided by his binoculars and zoom lens.²⁵ The soundtrack never allows us to hear more than a few words of what is said within each apartment (we hear this much only because it is midsummer and all the windows are open); “all we can normally hear from the neighbors’ apartments is the music they play or listen to.”²⁶ The result is that we have little information about each character, and music helps us by commenting on them and rounding out their characterization. We are left with a strong feeling for the character of Miss Lonely Hearts in particular simply through the choice of gramophone music that accompanies all the images of her. Similarly, Miss Torso is always seen against lively music, the composer is often depressed and plays minor chords on the piano, etc.²⁷

Jeff’s apartment is simply a base from which the action can be seen. The diegetic music has an additional function in that it draws our attention out of Jeff’s apartment and into the courtyard. It is significant that music is never heard from within Jeff’s apartment, save once when Lisa starts humming to the composer’s music. The apartment itself remains the domain of dialogue,

²⁵We use “realism” here in the same everyday sense that we used it when discussing *Rope* and *Lifeboat*. Because of the link between photography and cinema, the literature on *Rear Window* explores extensively notions of realism, subjectivity, the camera, the gaze, etc. Among many others, see Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 31–39; R. Barton Palmer, “The Metafictional Hitchcock: The Experience of Viewing and the Viewing of Experience in *Rear Window* and *Psycho*,” in *Perspectives on Alfred Hitchcock*, ed. David Boyd (New York: G. K. Hall, 1995), 144–60; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 73–85; Sharff, *The Art of Looking*. For a concise historical overview of the main approaches in Hitchcock criticism, which inevitably pay great attention to realism, subjectivity, and audience manipulation, see the editor’s introduction to *Perspectives on Alfred Hitchcock*, 3–14.

²⁶Weis, *The Silent Scream*, 109.

²⁷Song titles and lyrics contribute as well: for example, “Bing Crosby’s ‘To See You is to Love You’ [plays], ironically, while Miss Lonelyhearts [sic] entertains a phantom lover” (Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, 79).

focusing on the interrelation of Jeff and Lisa as well as the development of their detective skills.

The nature of *Rear Window* means that there is a lesser degree of claustrophobia than in *Rope* or *Lifeboat*, despite the spatial restrictions that still exist. However, realism and suspense are still uppermost in the general effects of the film. The fact that sound sources can be found for all the diegetic music supports the realism. The element of suspense relates directly to this realism and depends in part on the varied character of music chosen to comment on each scene. The occasional use of silence or of sound focusing (for example, on Thorwald's footsteps) is heightened because it contrasts so directly with the diegetic music.²⁸

Conclusion

Hitchcock's suggestion, cited earlier, that he was aware of the importance of the soundtrack is corroborated by his practice in *Lifeboat*, *Rope*, and *Rear Window*. The intensity of these films is partly achieved by their very different soundtracks, each of which creates an atmosphere distinct to that particular film and forms an integral part of the suspense and claustrophobia characteristic of drama and image: in *Rope* through dialogue, in *Lifeboat* through effects of ocean and wind, and in *Rear Window* through fragmentary dialogue and the extensive use of diegetic music. The lack of nondiegetic music not only creates a heightened sense of reality, but also allows these elements of the soundtrack to dominate, as each partly takes over the traditional role of film music in establishing atmosphere, emotional comment, and pacing. Not one of these aspects is lacking in any of the three films; on the contrary, as the observations we have made demonstrate, they appear to be strongly fulfilled.²⁹

²⁸Weis offers a detailed reading of the music for *Rear Window* in *The Silent Scream*, 110–17.

²⁹The first coauthor has also carried out commutation tests which reinforce these observations. Commutation tests involve substituting new music for the music in the soundtrack—or, in our case, adding music to a soundtrack which has none (Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Music in Narrative Film* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 16–19). In *Rope*, the addition of music takes away part of the suspense created by the careful use of rhythm, timbre, dynamic, and pacing of dialogue, and also takes our attention away from details such as breathing sounds and traffic noises, which are far more effective and captivating through their subtlety. In *Lifeboat*, the addition of

Additionally, the lack of nondiegetic music enables the diegetic music employed in each film to take on more dramatic significance, as exemplified in the piano playing in *Rope* and in the continuously developing composer's theme in *Rear Window*. In *Rope* in particular, the piano playing gives us great insight into Philip's emotional state. The roles of dialogue and music are thus reversed yet again, with Philip's piano playing expressing his state of mind just as Brandon's speech expresses his contrasting one. The existence of nondiegetic music in the film would undermine this relationship, and our focus on the state of Philip's piano playing would be much reduced. In *Rear Window*, the music's function is more formal, as it articulates and unifies the film's narrative time.

Finally, then, our twin exercises of looking at sound and effects as aiding drama and as taking over some of the functions of nondiegetic music support not only the claim that sound (effects and dialogue) can be used to serve narrative functions in the same way as music, but also that Hitchcock deployed such a technique coherently and effectively himself. Such a result fits comfortably within an auteurist approach to cinema: that is, the critical stance which proceeds from the claim that films—despite the necessity of multiple individuals' involvement in production—are essentially the work of one artist, the director (the contrary view, stated most forcefully by Walter Benjamin, is that what is unique about cinema as an art form is exactly its communal production, the traces of which are never lost).³⁰ In an auteurist history, following a process familiar to musicians from the entrenched Beethoven-centered canon, statements about the style of an individual director (as in the sentence which begins this paragraph) are readily expanded outward to historical-stylistic generalizations. In our case, we can assert that, although sound design is a practice usually associated with the 1970s and later (its *locus classicus* being Walter Murch's work on *Apocalypse Now* [1979]), it is clear that some in the first generation of sound-film directors prepared the path for that practice by “never overlook[ing] the possibilities inherent in the sound track”; that is, by paying close attention to sound and its affective and formal potential.

music disrupts our natural sense of timing and takes our attention away from the film's impression of realism, instead drawing out emotions and actions that are not integral to the drama.

³⁰Robert P. Kolker, “The Film Text and Film Form,” in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12–13.