

TRIGGERING FEAR: POSSESSION AND SOUND DESIGN IN *HEREDITARY*

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The horror film *Hereditary*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2018, has received a lot of critical acclaim for its screenplay, its performances, and its sound design. The film was directed by Ari Aster and it tells the story of the Grahams, a family whose matriarch has just passed away as the film begins. Soon the surviving family members begin to experience unusual happenings that, it turns out, may be related to a cult with which the matriarch was associated. The soundscape consists of music, scored by Colin Stetson, and a soundtrack created by Supervising Sound Editor Lewis Goldstein and Director Ari Aster. Stetson's score combines with Goldstein and Aster's sound design to not only psychologically enhance the viewing experience, but also to cleverly impart narrative information and to trigger fear reactions. Elements such as the telltale "cloque" that Charlie makes to evince the presence of Paimon and the frantic banging on the attic door near the end of the film are just two examples of ways in which Aster plays with aural diegetic elements to elicit fear in both subtle and unsubtle ways. And Stetson's unusual instrumentation also serves to unsettle and give the film an otherworldly feel. Drawing upon Michael Chion's concept of "added value" this paper explores how direct and acousmatic sounds, and music are used in *Hereditary* to trigger fear and indicate possession/contagion within the narrative.

In regards to the scoring for *Hereditary*, Ari Aster gave one main direction to Stetson: “I want it to feel evil.”¹ In order to deliver that feeling, Stetson notes that he concentrated on getting results out of instruments through unconventional methods of playing them and through digital manipulation of sounds. Colin Stetson is a musician who plays a wide variety of instruments, and is particularly noted for his ability to use circular breathing and vocalizations to coax unusual sounds from woodwinds. Circular breathing is a technique in which musicians continue to blow air out from their mouth while taking air into their lungs so that a tone can be sustained for an indefinite period of time. This technique allows Stetson to create uninterrupted droning accompaniments that build tension with no letup. Stetson also employed unusual instrumentation to make the score seem strange and unfamiliar. Instead of the traditional synthesizers and strings often used in horror, for example, Stetson used contrabass clarinets and other reed instruments to create a more organic feel. He also digitally manipulated his own voice to create some of the sounds contained in the score.² Stetson comments that in scoring *Hereditary* he specifically tried to avoid the standard, overused tricks found in many horror films; so he stayed away from the conventional use of “strings, synths and creepy percussion” because he believes that their familiarity and overuse allows listeners to easily tune out that type of instrumentation.³ And although he used some of the traditional musical modes found in horror films—such as minor and discordant tonalities—he delivered them with unusual

¹ Bryan Bishop, “How *Hereditary* composer Colin Stetson made the movie ‘feel evil’:Vocals, clarinets, and strings that sound like bats” Jun 12, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/12/17451100/hereditary-composer-colin-stetson-interview>. Accessed Feb. 26, 2019.

² Bryan Bishop, “How *Hereditary* composer Colin Stetson made the movie ‘feel evil’:Vocals, clarinets, and strings that sound like bats” Jun 12, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/12/17451100/hereditary-composer-colin-stetson-interview>. Accessed Feb. 26, 2019.

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instrumentation and specific auditory cues that add psychological richness to the viewing experience.

Hereditary's soundtrack is heavily layered with staccato, percussive sounds overlaid upon low, rumbling drones. Sometimes heavy reverberation is added to the accompaniment so that it gives the aural impression that a scene is taking place within a large enclosure in which the participants are trapped. This is a perfect aural metaphor for the family's condition. They are trapped within a predetermined situation, with seemingly no way to escape their fate. The concept of the family being trapped within something bigger than themselves also relates the way in which Annie's miniature versions of the house and scenes from her life are contained within the actual Graham house itself. This is directly alluded to in the first scene in which the camera zooms into the miniature version of the house wherein the action actually begins.

I'd like to play a short clip from the opening of the film to give you an idea of what *Hereditary* sounds like. It contains examples of the layering and unusual instrumentation and also contains an almost subliminal moment of a voice layered in.

(play clip)

The auditory cues contained in *Hereditary's* soundtrack elucidate the narrative and provide what Michael Chion terms "added value, which he defines as:

The expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression naturally comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. ⁴

⁴ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994):

One subtle example of added value in *Hereditary* occurs when the music subtly slides from a major to a minor tonality just as Toni Collette's character Annie, notices the word "Satony" scrawled on the wall near Charlie's bed. In this instance, the move from major to minor helps to shift the viewer psychologically from a feeling of stasis to one of anticipation or sadness. It also subliminally alerts the viewer that the word onscreen is of potential importance to the narrative and that it probably signifies something malicious or evil. While this knowledge might be picked up without the musical accompaniment, the tonal shift delivers the information in a more direct and affecting way for, as Alberto Cavalcanti notes in his essay "Sound in Films": "Sound speaks directly to the emotions."⁵

Another very effective aural cue to *Hereditary's* narrative occurs when Annie sees the apparition of her dead mother standing in the corner. Here the octave tones accompanying the sighting slide down a half step to acoustically indicate dread and give the impression that Annie's sanity may be sliding away; the world is sinking and everything is distorting. When this occurs, it makes it seem that the image itself is distorting, even though it is not. So, in addition to providing an emotional cue for viewers, these aural accompaniments also support a glimpse into the psychology of the characters since the sounds are so well-integrated into the image, they almost seem to be emanating from the diegetic world itself. These audible cues enrich the viewing experience and work reciprocally with the visual elements of the film. As Chion notes, "Sound shows us the image differently than what the image shows alone, and the image likewise makes us hear sound differently than if the sound were ringing out in the dark."⁶

⁵ Alberto Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia UP, 1985): 109. [98-111]

⁶ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 21.

Hereditary relies very little on the traditional, often-overused, horror film trick known as the “jump scare,” a technique used to create a startle effect within the audience by joining a sudden visual occurrence with a loud, sharp sound. In most of the potential jump scare moments in the film, such as the bird banging into the glass of the classroom window, however, Aster chooses to keep the sound effects at a relatively natural level. He does not unrealistically increase the volume in order to activate a jump scare. In fact, throughout *Hereditary* he often employs the opposite technique: rather than breaking a quiet or silent moment with a startling loud sound, he juxtaposes an ongoing loud drone with a quick cut to silence.

As are many horror films, *Hereditary* is focused upon various aspects of the body —here we have possession of the body, the importance of heads as totems, manipulation of the throat --- and in order to accentuate this, Aster wisely foregrounds the sound of breathing as a vital part of the film’s sound design. The sound of breath is a wonderful bit of “added value” to the viewing of this film since breathing is a physical process that involuntarily animates the body, causing both physiological and psychological effects, which aligns with the way in which a body possessed may experience involuntary physiological and psychological effects. Also, breathing is a repetitive, unending cycle for animate creatures, a concept that alludes to the perhaps repetitive, unending cycle in which the Graham family finds themselves trapped. Breath is absolutely foregrounded in the climactic scene in which Charlie meets her horrific fate when — SPOILER ALERT—she is decapitated by a telephone pole as she sticks her head out of a speeding car. The tragedy is directly precipitated by Charlie’s inability to catch her breath due to the anaphylactic reaction brought on by her allergy to nuts. The tension rises as the car speeds faster and Charlie gasps and clutches at her throat before sticking her head out of the window in an attempt to get more air, thus bringing on the preordained accident with the telephone pole.

After the accident Peter stops the car and the scene is silent, except for Peter's uneven, tremulous breathing and his weak, sotto voce attempts to talk to Charlie and assure himself that she is o.k. Breath becomes the perfect organic accompaniment to this horrifying, powerful scene. Here, breath underscores the internal, psychological trauma and it also builds a direct empathetic connection with the viewing audience. As Chion notes, "Sound, much more than image, can become an insidious means of affective and semantic manipulation. . . . [Because it] works on us directly, physiologically. [For example] (breathing noises in a film can directly affect our own respiration)."⁷ Thus, the scene works on the audience on multiple levels as it delivers a horrific image and also literally possesses us by affecting our own breathing patterns.

In the sound design of *Hereditary*, Ari Aster employs the concept of triggering to create a reaction in the audience to a sound that would normally be considered benign or inconsequential and he also uses that triggering sound to help the audience follow the narrative of the story. The example of this is the "cloque" sound exhibited by Charlie. Throughout the course of the film the audience eventually realizes that this sound indicates possession by the demon Paimon. This sound is very effective and has become a memorable touchstone for horror fans and reviewers. In almost every audio and video review of *Hereditary*, the reviewer will imitate the sound, and print reviews mention it as well.

The sound is introduced in the funeral scene as Charlie is sitting, sketching in her notebook as she listens to her mother deliver the eulogy for Ellen. At this point the narrative doesn't reveal exactly what the sound indicates, so it only reads as a strange 'tic' suggesting that there is something unusual about Charlie. As the narrative progresses, however, the audience comes to understand the connotation of the sound and it begins to trigger dread as a result of the

⁷ Michael Chion: 53.

realization that it indicates the presence of evil. The “cloque” sound becomes acousmatically linked to the Paimon, indicating his unseen presence and thus it provides a shorthand way for Aster to indicate when Paimon has moved from one body to another. *Acousmatic*, a word of Greek origin was used by acoustic theorists *Jérôme Peignot* and *Pierre Schaeffer* to describe a sound one hears without seeing the originating cause.⁸ Interestingly, when a sound indicates the unseen presence of a demon inhabiting an onscreen character, the sound actually is both simultaneously visualized and acousmatic, since we can see what is actually, physically producing the sound, (the vocal chords of the character), but cannot see the demon themselves, so they are an unseen cause of the sound and could be considered to be “playing” the vocal chords of the affected character from inside.

One of the most jaw-dropping moments in *Hereditary* involves the shocking reveal of the cause of a particular banging noise. In the scene where Peter is trying to escape from his possessed mother, he runs up into the attic, pulls up the ladder and shuts the door. Immediately we hear a frantic banging on the door to the attic. While we can assume it is Annie, somehow banging on the door while standing below it, a shift in point of view quickly reveals that the sound is actually a result of Annie “kneeling” on the ceiling and violently banging her forehead up against the door. This move from an acousmatic to a visualized sound offers a shocking reveal of just how sound can be used to surprise an audience by thwarting expectations and making the diegetic world seem irrational and threatening. (play clip?)

As all horror fans know, the soundtrack is often key as to whether a scary movie “works” or not. *Hereditary*’s sound design is a great example of one that helps a film to “work.” It demonstrates Chion’s concept of added value through the way in which it builds tension,

⁸ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 71.

enhances dread, organically supports the diegetic world, triggers fear, and delivers narrative information in a shorthand way. It is a wonderful example of how sound can add value to the viewing experience.