

Exploring the Aesthetic and Technical Significance of Silence in Modern Cinema: A Case Study of Sound of Metal

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Abstract: *This article delves into the intricate interplay between sound and silence in modern cinema, with a specific focus on the film Sound of Metal. The paper examines how silence has evolved from being a mere absence of sound to a profound element capable of conveying deep emotions and enhancing audience engagement. Drawing on examples from the film, the article explores the multifaceted role of silence in various genres, including its use in creating tension, conveying emotions, and facilitating audience immersion. The characters' experiences of silence and their journeys towards acceptance are analyzed, along with the contrast between silent films of the past and the modern usage of silence in cinema. Ultimately, the paper highlights how silence and sound are intricately linked, shaping both the narrative and the audience's understanding of the cinematic experience.*

Keywords: silence, modern cinema, Sound of Metal, sound design, audience engagement

1. Introduction

In this paper, the focus is this that we see how silence is also important in the world of cinema and how has it affected the making and understanding of films along with sound. Sound is something that has been under focus for very long and that is why we don't take silence and its effects that seriously. Here, in this paper, we will see how Sound of Metal Darius Marder has brought into notice the aspect of silence in a way that one cannot avoid. Also, we see how the silent films were different from the silence that is now used in the films. This paper focuses on silence and its impact. It's a journey from sound to silence, its acceptance.

Silence as an integral part of Cinema

When it comes to Silence - it's really hard to for anyone to say confidently that they have experienced a phenomenon of complete silence. And it is simply not possible even if we are in an empty room that is completely fastened, we do hear our own breath. We have seen that sounds are used to create a special effect in a movie. So, the same can be done with silence as it is also an important aspect. Silence is used differently in different types of movies. In a movie where the motif is romance, silence is used to calm the people, in thriller it is used to show the tension or suspense while in horror movies it is used for horrifying the audience from this, we can elucidate that we cannot say that silence has no role to play in cinema. Many filmmakers are experimenting with silence in their movies. And to some extend it has played an effective role in the films. For example: - When the character is under water the sound is muffled and numbed that makes the audience aware of the condition that it is actually an underwater experience. And as sound can create many effects same will happen when silence is used. In Sound of Metal, we actually experience silence Ruben is losing his ability to hear. We see how a metal musician – a drummer realizes that ultimate and complete silence is his life and how he doesn't compromise with it but eventually starts enjoying it. Here we will see how silence is instilled

by a character who is surrounded by sound all the time and that sound is really the most important thing for him.

According to some interpretations there are two types of silence in narration,

“The first is the lack of live synchronized sound, but with sound effects and/or music. The second silence is the total lack of audio as scene plays. The first is not uncommon the second is more powerful, and not used all that often.” (Orero)

To some extend many filmmakers practice this. As in the historical films like ‘The King’ (2019) in which sound is used to elevate the effect of war. Not only that there are many movies and films and many directors who are trying to focus on the realistic effect of cinema by using minimal and contextual sound effects. Commercial Cinema is more popular about using various sound effects as it can trigger a lot of emotions.

‘Sound’ in Sound of Metal and other films

It's very interesting that the two significant characters of the movie - Joe and Ruben both of them have very important journey from Sound to Silence. The only difference in the beginning is that Joe thinks that people who cannot hear can live a completely normal life. So, for him silence is completely normal in a way that hearing aids are not necessary for a person who cannot hear. And maybe the extra effect that are there in the movies are just there because the filmmaker wants the audience to react or feel in a particular time period. A movie is how a life is presented in a particular time and the audience has to connect or at least understand how and what is happening in the movie. Now if sounds are used for this even silence that is the other side of the coin can be used for it. If we take example of the movie Interstellar there was a scene where there is an explosion that takes place in the space - Cooper and Brand they could only see and not hear that explosion: and it somehow was representing their helplessness because they couldn't do anything and it seemed that they will not be able

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to get out of the orbit of Mann's planet (the planet that Dr. Mann found). The silence here also shows that they are in a situation that is not normal for our world. And here silence is used for creating the alienating effect. And many a times silence is used for creating an alienating effect.

John Cage has mentioned that Sound Designers can express silence through subjecting the spectator to noises. Different noises get us in different headspaces, like how the sound of the sea makes us calm, while the sound of fire alarm has the reverse effect. So, when they remove these sounds in a track the audience feels the divergence.

Now, in *Sound of Metal* the thing that is expressed to the best is that in the beginning Ruben is a metal drummer and he realizes that he is unable to hear at one moment. When the audience watching this film, they may perceive this as 'filmic silence' because silence doesn't have one particular meaning. As it has been observed by many filmmakers that lack of sound gives rise to audiences' imagination and they all can come up with some different opinions. As in *Sound of Metal* silence is not only faced by Ruben but it is also faced by the audience and it guided the audience to move on with Ruben in his journey. If we look at *Sound of Metal*, we will see that the film shows a constant struggle that Ruben goes through and the silence – the element of it is leaping inside the film slowly. So, here the silence is not very direct but it is introduced gradually to the audience that somehow prepared them for it and we can say that the effect of silence is very gradual here and the type of silence that is used here is non - diegetic silence. As both Ruben and the Audience absorbs these small episodes of silence and finally accept the eternal silence.

The point here is this that this film is important as it is trying to make us understand the use of filmic silence with the help of both diegetic and non - diegetic sound and silence. The journey of a person who is losing his ability to hear. The audience of the film understands his problem by suffering through it with him and what he is going through as in diegetic silence. And at the same time the audience is listening to him and all others (characters) that is non - diegetic sound. These people are using lip reading and sign language methods to communicate whereas the audience is trying to interpret both of them at the same time (their speaking and not speaking and not listening). So, at various points we see that the silence is only for the characters. As in one of the scenes in the film, the audience is leaped into the silence when in reality all the kids in the school are laughing while playing on the ground and Ruben realizes that he cannot hear their laughter and suddenly the sound is gone, here the audience suddenly realizes what all the other people on the screen are facing. This is how the audience is made aware of the silence with the help of the sound. What is really important here is this that as an audience even though the sound is audible to us, we are trying to understand how Ruben and others are trying to deal with this state of obsolete silence.

Difference between Silent Movies and Sound of Metal

We should also focus on what Silent movies were as when we go on discussing silence as an element of cinema. As we

go back to silent films, we see that they were particularly not silent they have some sort of sound that will even will make a falling of a man comic. Whereas, when we use silence as an element in a film, we use it to create some sort of special effects on the part of the sensibility of the audience. One of the most popular ways in which silence is used is to create some sort of alienation and in this movie that is *Sound of Metal* the use of silence is more inclined towards philosophy and it actually tells the uneasiness that the character feels upon realizing the fact that he cannot hear anymore. And the silence that he felt was also felt by the audience and at the end we see that he discovers his own self and realizes that silence is his future and he doesn't accept it as the only option left but something he thought will give him eternal peace. And here we are talking about this silence –

“Rediscovering the spectrum of silence assisted in the creation of new aesthetic modalities, new ways of configuring alienation and fragmentation, absence and the synchronicities of being.” (O'Rowe 403)

Silence in Sound of Metal

In this film losing one's ability to hear is not considered as a problem by Joe he is actually helping people into realizing that a person can live his or her life without it. The same can be applied to the film, it has very limited sound effects in comparison to the films of commercial modern cinema. Throughout the film we see that there are very limited dialogues and we understand the film only with the respect to what is happening to Ruben. Lui another important character of the movie was the one who found out Joe's place for Ruben where there are many other people like Ruben who cannot hear and they live their life and communicate very peacefully. Here in this place one more scene occurs that makes the audience leap into silence, all the people of the care are eating their food during lunch and all of them talking but there is no sound at all, both the audience and Ruben here enter the silent world.

Silence in Modern Cinema and Sound of Metal

Silence, is something that is used very specifically in the modern cinema as compared to the cinema of 1930s where there were mimes and comedy depicted with silence. Now silence is used to depict many different aspects. If we see the ultimate difference between the silence of 1930s films and the modern films is this that in 1930s lack of dialogues was considered as silence and not sound. That is why this film is different as certain part of the film are completely silent, the filmmaker wants us to understand the plight of the characters and then there are other parts where Joe and Ruben are talking to each other as an audience we can hear them but creates confusion that both of them cannot hear each other at all and Ruben is still not good at lip reading. The actors have portrayed this very well. In Silent films there were no dialogues at all. That is why this film is very different from silent films. Silent films were very simple in fact for others to understand. According to Hemmeter, Hitchcock believed silent film was the purest form of film because they conveyed meaning through visuals instead of words (Hemmeter 32). And to some extent it is very true if Derrida's definition of language is taken here language is

actually very deceitful. As the audience watches this film they constantly move between the omnipresent narrator's view and Ruben's view. So, at one point they can hear everything whereas at other point they cannot hear anything at all and that is what differentiates 'silence' used as an element here in this film.

Joe and Ruben - Silent and Sound

Both of them have a very typical relationship with sound in past. Ruben and Joe are the two people in the film who would have not imagined their life without sound. Joe was in army and he had to go for a war, war is equivalent to a lot of sound traumatic sound and it was during a shellshock that Joe lost his hearing ability. So, he was left with the trauma that happened in his life because of the sound of the attack while Ruben is a metal drummer and for him sound is very important. So, Joe is left with a lot of traumas for going in war and losing his ability to hear. Whereas Ruben is in pain and anxiety because he now cannot hear what he himself is playing. We cannot come to any conclusion of how this background of both the characters helps with finding the techniques of sound and silence but philosophically they are very easily available for us to see, notice and understand how Joe is trying to figure out for others that they can live without any hearing aid whereas Ruben's anxiety leads him to a point where he uses a hearing aid.

Silence and Aesthetics

Generally, any art form especially performing arts will have a lot of importance of sound. From the time of Greek Theatre, we have seen that people have paid a great level of importance to sound of various forms. And Susan Santog has pointed it out that an artist needs to have silence along with the sound and it is an obligatory requirement for the modern artist. Language is something that cannot exist on its own and it is somehow the most important component of sound. Silent films were called silent films basically because of the lack of dialogues and not lack of sound. In *Sound of Metal*, a careful audience will try and understand the frustration that Ruben is facing due to his lack of understanding what he himself is saying. Joe on the other hand is someone who has overcome his problem. As Joe was in army and lost his ability of hearing because of shellshock near him and Ruben is a metal musician who couldn't tolerate that wild and loud music anymore. In Susan Santog's words

"Silence" never ceases to imply its opposite and to demand on its presence. Just as there can't be "up" without "down" or "left" without "right," so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence. Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but at any given silence takes its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound." (Santog)

So here in this particular film we see that sound and silence are very well connected to one another. As both of the characters from whom we understand silence are pathologically affected by it. So, they cannot choose anything else. Now, here the pathological silence of these

two characters imbibed in their life. It was aesthetic for the audience as they could hear the silence Ruben was going through so most of the audience was actually hearing and feeling the silence that he was going through. Ruben got an implant to get rid off the problem and Joe did not approve it as Joe said and he believed that silence can also become one's life if one sees and understands. Ruben comes back to the facility that Joe is working on but Joe doesn't allow him to stay any longer. Joe's not accepting Ruben back shows how he believes that there is a life in silence. Ruben was unable to come on terms with all these things and got an hearing aid and he realized after having it that it was his mistake he will not be able to hear anything anymore as the hearing aid is failed to provide any real life listening experience and he gradually and psychologically accepted that silence is much more better than the noise that was there in his life because of the hearing aid that he was using.

Here, the last part of the film is very important as the film takes an aesthetic turn in that part when Ruben realizes that silence is something that he needs to focus on. And after a particular point of time, he in fact realizes that this silence was something that he was actually focusing on trying to find out. In the end of the movie, he sits on the bench and removes his hearing aid and he experiences the same world in a completely different way. Ruben who in the beginning of the film was seen shouting and no one could hear him screaming he himself cannot hear it is seen to be relaxing in the same silence.

Silence as an element of Sound

As the name of the film itself is talking about sound that is of metal and how it is actually dealing with silence, we should get our first hint from here that sound is recognized only because of the silence that is there. And this is not from a philosophical point of view as Ruben thought he will not be able to cope up with what will come whereas he couldn't realize that silence was something that was equally looking for along with sound. A metal musician is always surrounded by sound and that maybe exhausting after sometime. Another important thing is that hearing aid is just a small help it cannot replace the sense of human body. Silence is not possible and we can take a classic example of John Cage's 4'33 where he has pointed out how people can still hear their own heartbeat in the room that is locked and doesn't have any exposure to any type of sound. So, obsolete silence is a rare possibility until in a case like that of Ruben and Joe, where one has lost his sense of hearing. And here in this film this pathological silence that is there in Ruben's world turned into aesthetic silence for artists and audience, who realized how inseparable these two things are from one another. As technically all of us can hear Ruben except for himself.

2. Conclusion

In this paper the focus is drawn towards the technical aspect of silence and cinema and how it is capable of creating some good level of impact on the audience. And how the word 'silence' as also taken a different turn in the cinematic universe. This paper has focused on 'Sound of Metal' as it is

a part of the modern cinema and has silence imbibed in it along with sound.

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