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Sound Dramaturgy

abstract

Sound dramaturgy as part of the aesthetic design of either a film or a Virtual Reality (VR) experience is invisible but most relevant, although often overlooked. As sound person and academic, I have long been interested in the dramaturgical relevance of sound design (Stutterheim 2022) and music used in film (Stutterheim 2018), and more recently in the importance of sound design in VR experiences (Stutterheim 2018). My chapter is structured in four parts, beginning with a short introduction to dramaturgy (Freilich 1964; Lessing 1768/69; Romanska 2016; Stutterheim 2015, 2019; Szatkowski 2019; Turkin 2007) and the importance of sound dramaturgy as such. The second part focusses on sound dramaturgy in film fiction, how sound and a dramaturgically sophisticated approach to using music contributes to the emotional impact of a movie –referring to examples as Shining (Kubrick US/UK 1980), Shutter Island (Scorsese US 2010. The third part will discuss sound dramaturgy for documentary films, as examples. Symphony of the Ursus Factory (Wójcik and Stokfiszewski, PL 2018), Um Dia na Rampa (dos Santos, BR 1960)and The Wale And The Raven (Leuze 2019). In part four, I outline similarities and differences referring to Kobold (2017) from Another World VR.

## Short Introduction Dramaturgy

When teaching dramaturgy, the first and most important task is to introduce dramaturgy as a theory derived from practice that feeds into practice. Dramaturgy has a long tradition, having been established long before film or media studies, or screenwriting theories, evolved. Teaching dramaturgy requires introducing such theory and scholarship, which represents knowledge derived from analysing professional practice and traditions of performative arts telling any kind of stories to an audience. Aware of different interpretations of the term dramaturgy, which as such is in most cases new to students, a brief definition will provide contextualisation here. Dramaturgy is a practice and equally an academic discipline of long tradition, as mentioned above already. As the latter, as academic discipline, it is a sub-discipline of aesthetics. Aesthetics though ‘is a particular historical regime of thinking about art and an idea of thought according to which things of art are things of thinking’ (Rancière 2006: 9, 2009: 5). One can describe dramaturgy also as the art of thoughtful comprehension and logical abstraction of pattern of performative storytelling as they evolved through time. It also can be characterised as a ‘practice-theory’ and as such also ‘a reflective theory’, ‘as production of and reflection on the communication of communications to society about society’ (Szatkowski 2019: 6). This definition often appears as being inspiring for many students interested in preparing meaningful professional work for their future and the future of society. As a regime of thinking within a philosophical approach, film dramaturgy applies to all departments contributing to the aesthetic composition of a narrative-performative work in its complexity – not only but starting from a treatment, screenplay, or concept. One most relevant and often underestimated part of it is sound dramaturgy.

A dramaturgical approach gives a stable ground to professional practice, since this holistic approach is dedicated to the whole work, not only the script. That way one makes sure all elements emerge in their best possible way to contribute to a final performative artwork. As dramaturg or scholar teaching dramaturgy, one always focusses on the aim of such work to be presented to an audience, visitor(s), or user(s). Thus, in the very first class, we discuss why or how dramaturgical knowledge can considerably support and facilitate the development, planning, and production of films, games, VR experiences, as it has proven for all performative art for centuries. Another aspect one can explore when discussing the relevance of dramaturgy is the fact that dramaturgical knowledge and advice can both save production time and enhance the overall quality of such productions resulting in acceptance by the audience, which I then explain in more detail by discussing projects I got involved with or be informed about. For the aim of connecting the discussion of concepts and theories with their practice, students are hence invited to discuss works they are impressed by or have questions about, or their own work and obstacles they face, and to describe as professional as possible the reasons for it. Such an introductory session allows to get an overview about productions the students are familiar with, curious about, or working on. Consequently, such introductory discussion allows to align or adjust examples for the module close to their horizon and interests. Nevertheless, involving students and asking about their opinions or first attempts of analyse depends on the level as well as the cultural and social context the teaching takes place.

## Teaching Sound Dramaturgy

At the beginning of this course, one can start at the explicit level and start from the most general or universal core of action. From this, one can discuss different models and design possibilities, inviting students to discover them themselves. This approach lends itself to the explicit level of dramaturgy, which considers conceptual knowledge about the structure and composition of artworks and aspects. For each work taking also into account local, historical, or technical impacts (cf. Romanska 2016; Szatkowski 2019, Elsaesser 2004) Dramaturgical traditions and patterns differ in different regions. These are shaped by local traditions as well as by the experience of reality determined by the environment. Another influence that should be considered is the cultural memory influencing our artistic interaction (cf. J. Assmann 2002, A. Assmann 2010). Any of such performative artworks – from theatre to movies, most games, and VR experiences – follow dramaturgically identifiable conventions, although one might not be able to detect them immediately (cf. Stutterheim 2015, 2019). After all, the goal of dramaturgy is to merge into the finished work and become invisible when it has fulfilled its purpose. This fact should be emphasised when teaching and leads over to the aspect of implicit dramaturgy. To develop an understanding of the significance of this implicit level, the first step may be to identify levels of meaning beyond the actual interaction of characters. What might be the underlying theme or motif of the plot for the authors and filmmakers? Is the work addressed to a particular audience? Is there a 'moral'? Are we being convinced of something or invited to rethink our assumptions about the world? These are all aspects of implied dramaturgy, as well as possible reflexivity.

Alternatively, one can refer to sacral works – to start with the *Thora/Old Testament* in contrast to the *New Testament*. Gertrude Stein once described the *Old Testament* as ‘permanently good reading (…) there was not really any succession of anything’ (Stein 2010: 19). Thus, it is a fitting example of a non-linear narrative, of an ‘open form’ and multi-perspective storytelling. The *Mahābhārata* works as an excellent example of epic narrative. Palestrina's compositions (1525-1594) are another European or Western World example. Countries in the Balkan and the Caucasus region, such as Bulgaria or Georgia, also have a rich tradition of polyphonic singing, which is continued today, e.g., by The Bulgarian Voices Angelite, an internationally acclaimed ensemble. UNESCO recognises Georgian polyphonic music as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO - Georgian polyphonic singing 2023). All these works can be understood as following non-linear and open-form principles. Leading voices and musical perspectives or hierarchies evolved in compositions in regions with emerging manufacturing and industrialisation. In this regard, is Claudio Monteverdi and his opera *Orfeo*, Beethoven, Mozart, Georg Friedrich Händel, or Berlioz’ *Symphony Fantastique* (Berlioz), can be considered the first dramatic symphony.

## Music and Sound as dramaturgical and hence narrative elements

A more contemporary work that combines music and sound to tell a story and acts as a good example of starting a discussion about sound dramaturgy is *Different Trains* by Steve Reich (Reich 1988). This is a piece for amplified string quartet, samples, spoken voices and multiple string quartet recordings. This piece was described as ‘the only adequate musical response—one of the few adequate artistic responses in any medium—to the Holocaust’ (Taruskin 2009: 102). Reich uses a dialectical conflict within an open form dramaturgy, when improvising on the Holocaust, in the form of the contrast of a train travel to New York with the trains that transported European Jews to concentration camps to be mass murdered. Reich based the melodic elements of his piece on recordings of speech fragments of Holocaust survivors and contrasting these to recordings of his governess. Reich begins with just a train motive as in an exposition, and then the train whistle starts to sing, a voice taking over – speaking. It is a recording, which is more a rhythmic repetition of the half sentence ‘From Chicago to New York’. Thus, he is tracing the speech rhythm of his childhood nanny. This goes back to a tradition inspired by Leoš Janáček (1854-1924) and Arnold Schönberg, especially *A Survivor from Warsaw for Narrator, Men’s Chorus and Orchestra* (Schönberg 1947). The principle as presented in Schönberg’s composition also resemble in the sound design of Ivans Childhood (Tarkovskij USSR 1962). In *Different Trains* though, Reich contrasts his childhood memory to trains that transported Jewish children and therefore he researched for recorded voices of Holocaust survivors. He adds sounds of sirens and trains from the late 1930s to give context to the fragments of spoken words. The piece is structured in three parts: it begins with the America of his childhood; the second part referring to Europe during the War; and the third part situates within the period after the War in which consequently the American voices and those of the survivor’s phase. In the final part, the end, he echoes the voices and multiplies them, in the meaning of open-form-dramaturgy emphasising the meaning, the theme, instead of offering a solution. In this sense, this piece works well as an example of how sound and music can be designed from a dramaturgical point of view. By doing so, I paraphrase Hanns Eisler’s dictum that music composed for film needs to support the film as unobtrusive as possible but could be listened to independently as a work in its own right (Adorno and Eisler 1947; Fasshauer 1998: 510). Eisler exemplified this theory with his composition for White Flood (Berman, USA 1940), Eisler’s music also known as *Opus 69* (Eisler, 1940). I understand this concept is elementary for a dramaturgical approach to performative work. From the dramaturgical point of view, sound design needs to be thoroughly ‘composed’ or ‘curated’ to support and not to illustrate such work. Therefore, every element needs to be related to the topic, the essence of meaning, and the story's acoustic or sonic part. Self-evidently, that includes ambient sounds relevant to understanding the situation, the circumstances, and sometimes also the perspective of a character or we, the audience/users, are situated within.

## Ambient sound within sound dramaturgy

The importance of ambient sound in this regard is often underestimated by students, in my experience. To give the students a better understanding of the dramaturgical significance of everyday sounds, I give them an assignment. I would ask students to start with this in their home – what sound do you hear when waking up? How do other sounds add up to this when you start moving, using the bathroom, prepare breakfast? How does ambient sound impact your mood and your ability to focus? What kind of sound makes you look at or for something? How does sound impact your ways of orientation? Often, when students produce their first short drama films, they take care of the actors and actresses, their voices, intonation, volume, and sometimes as well how they are positioned within a setting and hence addressing each other via spoken (or shouted or whispered) words. When this happens in a sterile studio, the ambient sound is missing. Understandably, when filming in such a situation, one should minimise any sound that might make editing difficult. However, the ambient sound also tells us about their circumstances, situation, and background. To give a better understanding of this, I sometimes use two different versions of Raging Bull (Scorsese, US 1980)– the original movie and the dubbed German version. After the title sequence one can observe Jake (Robert de Niro) in a flat having a dispute with his wife Vicky (Cathy Moriarty). He sits at the table. She prepares something in the kitchen. The window is open. There are lots of noises: from outdoors; neighbouring flats; the kitchen. Their dialogue is just part of it and impacted by that cacophony of sounds making it difficult to understand every word though. In the German dubbed version the dialogue is well recorded, and the noisy cacophony reduced in volume, thus, we can understand every word clearly, but perhaps we don’t get why he is so overreacting, since all the signs of social status and pressing circumstances are mixed away.

For the task – depending on where the teaching takes place – I would start early in the morning, in a park, then to go to a train or bus station, to understand the contrast and the different sounds that play into a soundscape. What do we hear in a park? Not only the birds, right? What else, what does these sounds tell us about the time, situation, relation to the urban spaces? When at a station, what else than the transportation vehicles play here into the soundscape? Again, what does these tell us about the situation and why is it dramaturgically important? How can we use these sounds, perhaps emphasising one or the other as part of a perspective or implicit information?

## Chronotopos and sound dramaturgy

Before discussing the sound and music design of chosen exemplary films in detail, it is necessary to introduce two other fundamental aspects of dramaturgy, relevant for sound design and the use of music. These are chronotopos and perspective. The term chronotopos defines the relationship between time and space within a narrative. Structure and chronotopos are interconnected, emphasising the importance of considering the contextual dimensions in which narratives are constructed and interpreted. The concept of chronotopos encompasses the interconnected relationship between the temporal and spatial dimensions in a narrative work, highlighting how they shape and influence the events, characters, and overall meaning of the narrative. Referring to Bakhtin's concept of chronotopos (Bachtin et al. 2008), in dramaturgical thinking, time and space are not treated as separate entities but are seen as intertwined and mutually constitutive. It provides a framework for understanding how a story's specific temporality and spatiality contribute to its overall structure, themes, and characterisation. It emphasises that the representation of time and space in a narrative is not arbitrary but has significant implications for the way the story unfolds and the meanings it conveys. As Thomas Mann wrote, the ‘narration has two kinds of time: its own, first, the musically real one, which determines its course, its appearance; secondly, however, that of its content, which is perspectival, and this to such different degrees that the imaginary time in the narration can almost, indeed completely, coincide with its musical one, but can also be starry-eyed away from it’[[1]](#footnote-1) (Mann, 1991: 239). One example of such a relationship is Um Dia na Rampa (dos Santos, BR 1960), a documentary from Brazil. (cf. Sadlier, 2022: chapter 3) In this film, contrasting music (by Berimbau e Bugalho) is used to observe the events that occur on a day at the harbour point beyond the immediate impression. On the one hand, the music allows the observation to be structured and gives the events a rhythm. On the other hand, the choice of music and its use conveys an implicit content that goes beyond temporal and spatial concreteness into the abstract and metaphorical, pointing beyond the day. Jazzy music, more in keeping with the Sixties, underlines the summer atmosphere, as well as that of life in the upper city of Salvador. This part of the two sides of this story gets represented by two white women who have driven to the market in their car to shop for fresh fish. The other is Capoeira, which stands for Brazilian dance-fight art and represents the context of the agricultural workers, the dock workers, and the culture of the lower city of Salvador.

One must be aware that our experience of temporal events is dynamic, although influenced by our own body experience of time and space. The passing of time is an elusive concept though. Sound Dramaturgy applies the above-described elements of dramaturgy onto the acoustic world of a narrative-performative work, as a film, installation, or VR experience. As Bela Balázs wrote, the sound in a film reveals ‘for us our acoustic environment, the acoustic landscape in which we live, the speech of things and the intimate whisperings of nature’ (Balázs 1985: 116). Often underestimated, sound design and hence sound dramaturgy is of high importance. Sound design, inclusive score, can support establishing the chronotopos for a story world within the exposition. Temporal ambiguity in our experience of the world and its representation in performative works is something of a paradox. One can easily give students an awareness of such dynamic experience, when asking them of how they remember events of last weekend, this morning, or important events in their life. How does the temporal structure of their memory relate to the time the events are situated within?

When constructing a cosmos for a performative work that might require to shorten the time events as they would happen in an experienced reality in relation to the runtime of a film (Becker 2004; cf. Emrich 2010, 2013) or otherwise performative work, the actual and the apparent, one can use sound and/or music to consolidate the temporal experience.

## Sound Dramaturgy and the use of a Leitmotif in The Shining

Let me exemplify these conceptual thoughts about chronotopos, establishing a perspective and the essence of meaning, with a shortened discussion of the use of sound and music in the exposition of The Shining (in more detail cf. Stutterheim, 2015: 50–55), as I would use in my teaching. To prepare themselves, I ask the students to ask students to watch the film (again). One can encourage them to pay attention to the sound design, music, and overall atmosphere created by the audio elements, and, ideally, to make a few notes. Thus, there is a good chance that some students already detected the relevant aspects, allowing to discuss these together and how they can apply the new knowledge to their own work.

The opening sequence immediately captures the audience's attention with its soundscape. This sound design has also an explicit and implicit level. Already in the first scene of the film, the theme of the film gets established via the sound design in correlation to the image level. In addition to relevant visual signs, it is especially relevant here that the motif of the *Dies Irae* is already heard with the first image. It is 'a quotation' from the fifth movement, the 'Witches' Sabbath', of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (Berlioz). Hector Berlioz gives the chorale in his symphony a very specific coloration through the instrumentation chosen and is well recognisable though. This ‘drama musical’ tells the story of a young artist who fell in love with a beautiful woman. Her image combined in his head with a particular melody, which formed an ‘idea fixe’, which also is a terminology for a delusion. In Berlioz's symphony, this melody is heard at the beginning of the first movement and is then repeated and developed in each movement. For the sound design of The Shining, Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind establish the *Dies Irae* – at request by Kubrick – at the very beginning of the movie, thus using this highly referential melody as sign for the ‘idea fixe’, and as relevant key for the implicit meaning, the essence of meaning of the embedded theme of the movie. In this first sequence, moreover, the central and haunting motif from Berlioz' symphony is repeated and enriched in memory with voices and wind sounds, giving it an additional eerie mood. Even if one does not recognise all the details associated with this melody, the chain reaction known as 'associative activation' can occur via rapid thinking, and unconscious, embodied knowledge can trigger an emotional response. The *Dies Irae* quoted here is considered one of the most important hymns of the Latin liturgy. Since the 14th century it has been a central part of masses for the dead, and since 1570 it has been a proven part of the Roman Catholic liturgy. Even though the arrangement may vary, the basic melody of the *Dies Irae* is always recognisable. It got already used in the score for Bergman’s Det sjunde inseglet (Bergman SE 1957) or The Exorcist (Friedkin). In this iconic Swedish film, directed by Bergman, the Dies Irae motif appears during the famous chess-playing scene between the knight Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) and Death (Bengt Ekerot). The use of the *Dies Irae* adds a haunting and contemplative atmosphere, underscoring the existential themes and the protagonist's struggle with mortality and the nature of faith. The lyrics of the hymn, most likely written by Thomas von Celano, a companion of Francis of Assisi, describe the Day of Judgment and thus includes the plea for mercy and forgiveness of sins. ‘The day wrath, O Day of mourning!’ Having established this music historical motif as *leitmotif* is relevant for the essence of meaning for the movie and its aesthetic design. Leitmotif is an element of sound dramaturgy commonly used in film scoring, in Hollywood movies. The leitmotif technique was invented by Richard Wagner to give the audience orientation and emotional impact in his operas with sprawling plot and a broad ensemble. Thus, main characters one needs to recognise may have their own distinctive musical theme that represents their personality, traits, or emotional journey, as for example, Ramin Djawadi used this technique as well for the main characters in Game of Thrones (HBO, US 2011-2019). When a character appears or is mentioned, their leitmotif can be subtly or prominently woven into the score, helping the audience connect and emotionally engage with the character. Leitmotifs can also evoke emotions and create a sense of continuity and familiarity throughout the story progressing. By re-introducing a leitmotif at strategic moments, sound designers trigger associative recall, reminding the audience of previous encounters or emotional connections. Thus, an identifiable musical motif or theme – as that of the *Dies Irae* – can be associated with a particular character, object, place, or idea throughout the film.

The combination of music and sound in this first sequence helps to establish the genre, it allows time to shorten for Jack’s (Jack Nicholson) travel and gives also meaning to the visual design of the sequence, it contributes to a feeling of unease. The reference to Berlioz’ Symphony gives the story a perspective, a key, given its dramatic story told as adaptation of *Doctor Faustus* (Goethe 1983), (in detail cf. Stutterheim, 2015: 49–78). The use of echoes and reverberations further adds to the sense of isolation and claustrophobia, setting the stage for the isolated and haunted Overlook Hotel. Music and sound are used overall in The Shining more as additional narrative or dramaturgical devices, not illustrative or underscoring. Thus, the chronotopos is established as related between an interpretation of a world that possible be existing but also not bound to real life experiences of time and space. With this exposition, we get an understanding of relativity of time and space, as of two perspectives we get introduced here – that of the protagonist, Jack, and that of an invisible entity which is of impact to the story enfolding. Kubrick structured the movie as a symphony, and hence also time progressing becomes more fluid and rhythmic than a tacked chronology.

## Sound Dramaturgy and the use of source music in Shutter Island

Another well-known and accessible movie can also provide a deeper understanding of the importance of sound design and the use of source music in this regard. With this example, although most of the students usually are familiar with this film, it is recommended that they watch it again before the lecture/analytical discussion. For Shutter Island (Concorde Filmverleih 2010), directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 2010, the sound design plays a significant role in enhancing the film's sophisticated dramaturgical design. Auditory cues in combination to visual hints help the viewers to immerse and find orientation in the shuttered world of the main character, Teddy Daniels (played by Leonardo DiCaprio). The film's ‘score’, as carefully selected pre-existing music as in The Shining, is a crucial element of the sound design. The music was expertly curated by Robbie Robertson and hence underscores dramaturgical relevant moments of the movie. I would like to discuss here too the opening sequence of the movie to exemplify this aspect more in detail, since the prelude and exposition are substantial to establish theme, genre, dramaturgical form as mode of addressing the audience, and for introducing the cosmos the protagonist(s) are going to act withing, as well as the chronotopos. When we listen to the first sound, what do we hear and how does it contribute to the dramaturgical quality of the movie? To support the visual level in giving an atmosphere to the situation, Scorsese and Robertson decided for *Fog Tropes* by Marshall Ingram (Marshall 2004), an American concert music, which dissolves into the sound of the fog siren from San Francisco Bay. With this combination the artificial aspect, emphasising the postmodern aesthetic of the movie, with a well-known and at the same time referential ambient sound, gives – in addition to the visual level, which is also abstract and referential at the same time – the situation an atmosphere combining the concrete and the conceptual. Here again, there is a correlation between a given temporal location on the explicit level, and a timelessness on the implicit level. This allows the movie to be relevant for an audience and its experience of today, and not the movie received as a mirror of some past before our time. Such double level temporal setting leads into the double perspective which is so relevant to the story.

Later, in the sequence combining the encounter with the ‘German’ Doctor Naehring (Max von Sydow), which triggered Teddy’s imagination of the liberation of Dachau, Gustav Mahler’s *Quartet for Strings And Piano In A Minor* (Mahler 1876) is of importance and impact. This sequence can be understood as that of *Anagnorisis* and *Peripetia*, also known as *Recognition* and *Reverse*, since this scene acts as a dramaturgical ‘vanishing point’ in Shutter Island. *Anagnorisis* describes the moment of recognition, and *peripeteia*, as the moment of changing the direction of the activity of the main character(s), of a reverse, are key concepts, constant elements, within explicit dramaturgy. It can also entail the moment the audience gets a new understanding of the story so far or a change of argumentation respective perspective. *Anagnorisis* and *Peripeteia* are inseparably linked and must be arranged close together in temporal terms. In some US-American textbooks, also known as screenwriting manuals, these are merged to a midpoint. In dramaturgical traditions though, these are two different situations linked to each other within a progressing action. The moment of *Anagnorisis* here starts with Teddy’s recognition of the music played – Mahler’s *Quartet for Strings and Piano in A Minor.* Although it was most likely written and first performed by Mahler in 1876, it was officially premiered in 1964 in New York City. Gustav Mahler was of Jewish ancestry to give the choice another implicit meaning. Given the situation, it is central to here. To position this music when a former soldier encounters a German or Austrian Doctor, supported by the sound of a thunderstorm, is of implicit relevance, here directly interconnected with the explicit action. Resulting from the identification of Mahler, not only for supporting the action but also – dramaturgically seen – to ensure the audience can position the music too, the dialogue refers to Teddy’s experience as a soldier and triggers his imagination of having been part of the liberation of Dachau. The imagination includes the same gramophone playing the identical piece of music – that of the death of a high-ranked Nazi officer in his office - which on its visual level is referential to Ivan’s Childhood by Tarkovsky. This imaginative sequence, which is not a flashback, refers to one of the other imaginative sequences in the first act, in which the conflict gets to be established (8 min). At the same time is foreboding to the sequence in which the thematic conflict gets solved in the confrontation with both doctors in the office in the light room. Resulting from the understanding of the background of Teddy and his beliefs given to us in this sequence, connected to the act of Lobotomy, for which the character Teddy/Andrew decides in the end. Given this moment of supporting the audience with some understanding that gives sense to the action so far and ongoing, there is also the moment of *Anagnorisis* for the protagonist embedded in this situation, which shifts his perspective from finding the missing person to a bigger goal, understanding the institution, and ‘detecting’ assumed Nazi-procedures to be happening on the island. All these aspects intensify the atmosphere of paranoia and what extreme paranoia does to the US society, which is the core theme and the essence of the movie's meaning. All of this bound together with Mahler’s quartet and the sound of thunderstorms and rain, thematically and implicitly, to be rounded up in the final scene by Max Richter’s *On the Nature of Daylight (Entropy)* (Richter 2004). The prominent musical motif of this piece was already heard briefly in the scene of the arrival on the island. Thus, it gives a dramaturgical arc to the action as it happened on the island. *On the Nature of Daylight,* an adaptation of Dinah Washington’s *This Bitter Earth*, is the centre piece of Max Richter’s Album *The Blue Notebooks.* ‘The record was written in 2004. It is a kind of protest album against the Iraq war, which was happening at that time. The piece is an attempt to make a kind of luminous music out of the darkest possible materials. and the piece is structured as a sort of palindrome. It has all sorts of internal geometrical symmetries, which comes from my studies in renaissance music’ (Richter). The palindrome is mirrored in the anagram of names used and revealed in the lighthouse sequence, as the reference to the renaissance music also gives an additional implicit meaning to the opening scene and the corresponding use of mirror and water. The above outlined elements are a just selection of examples to give an understanding of the relevance of sound and music dramaturgy in a movie as Shutter Island, which, when taking the gross of ticket and DVD sales into account, is the most successful movie made by Scorsese. The richness of dramaturgical considerations hopefully can give students an awareness of the importance of meaningful decisions when choosing sound and music but also the corresponding connections of the different aesthetic levels that make a movie, which is richer than a 'putting into work'[[2]](#footnote-2) of a text.

A similar discussion could be conducted around movies such as The Tracker (Heer AUS 2002), or others, depending on the region or topic the students are interested in and preparing themselves for.

## Sound Dramaturgy in Documentaries

In documentaries, sound dramaturgy is equally of high importance. The emphasis lays here, first, on atmospheric sound. Sound is permanent and recognisable, it is universal, more than visual signs. This aspect is most relevant for dramaturgical concepts in documentary films. To work in this field requires a more flexible but not less knowledgeable approach. Given the tradition of the documentary film genre and its aesthetic tradition, one must bridge the tradition of dramatic performative art with his genre. Documentaries here are understood as evolved from cinema tradition, documentaries as films – not TV features or reportage – thus narrative-performative art. One distinction might be described the way that a good documentary has a relevant universal level, that keeps it of relevance beyond the actual event it might relate to. Although these films refer to experienced reality, there are neither documents nor just mirroring experiences. Documentary films are conceptualised and primed by the director's perspective supported by the creative team, most recently increasingly depending on the expectations of funders or producers. Given the relevance of the themes and topics of the genre, audiences may expect a closeness to their everyday life experiences or some abstract understanding of a kind of truth or authenticity. As Erwin Leiser once wrote, the art of documentary requires that one cannot detect the art in the final film. As mentioned above, this attitude is core to dramaturgy. The challenge for a documentary filmmaker is thus to make a well structured and aesthetically captivating film by hiding their artistic abilities, intentions, and skills to produce a film that appears as if it would be mirroring a reality. One outstanding example to mention here is Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov USSR 1929), voted as one of number 9 of most relevant 100 movies of all time (BFI 2022: 74). It is also one of the most referred films in documentary courses too (as I found out in a survey I undertook a few years back). Given the above summarised discourse and expectations, sound dramaturgy needs to be close to the experienced reality of soundscapes. The sound of the wind or water, cracking ice, rain, for example, are almost similar all over the world. The same cannot be said for visual signs or colours, which might have different connotations in different regions. Hence, when developing the dramaturgy for a documentary film, the use of sound is as important as the visual level of narration. Sound dramaturgy is most relevant for giving a documentary its aesthetic appearance and hence emotional impact on the audience. Although music can enhance the emotional impact, in a documentary it can easily destroy the immersive atmosphere, when used as illustrative or/and to obvious targeting the emotions of the audience. Proper use of music, also when source music requires awareness of situation, time, and place, beyond its attractivity. One can illustrate this fact with Bataille sur le grand fleuve (Rouch and Rosfelder F 1950)*,* a documentary made by Jean Rouch and Roger Rosfelder. He and his team filmed men hunting hippos in Niger, but also some situations in the village, and recorded music they made. He edited the film and showed it the people in the village. They enjoyed the film, but commented on the unconvincing usage of the music, which Rouch used as illustrative background music to the hunting scene. They commented that the hippos would run away when the music would get played during the hunting (cf. Carrière 2003: 51) although it is meanwhile too often custom for TV formatted productions, one should reflect on the relevance for the story to be told when deciding for sound and music design. All the aspects mentioned above for conceptual relevance of sound dramaturgy supporting the overall experience is true for documentary films too. Additional music that is of no relevance to the event or the theme, might distance or irritate the audience.

Excellent examples to demonstrate of how sound design and a score can not only support but enrich the story to be told in a documentary are beyond such famous films as Man with a Movie Camera. One can mention here as well Song of Ceylon (Wright UK 1934), or Night Mail (Watt and Wright UK 1936), The End of Time by Peter Mettler (Mettler CN/CH 2012) and The Island of the Hungry Ghosts (Bradly G/UK/AU 2018). As I discussed elsewhere (cf. Stutterheim 2018; IV/2023), in Peter Mettler’s film The End of Time (Mettler CN/CH 2012)0F, sound and music play an important role in this film ‘about perception and awareness. It offers a challenge to see through our conceptual thinking’ (Mettler 2012: 5). Mettler discovers the perception and reception of time and how concepts of time influence our lives. The film was planned as an audio-visual composition (Entrevue 2012). The film tunes the viewer into concepts of time to begin with, to then inviting them through a series of situations that represent an experience of time, which is not unlike that of listening to music, with the intention to provoke a heightened awareness and associative thinking process (Mettler 2012). Sound and music give this film its narrative and dramaturgical stability and at the same time also provides surprises, intensifying our attention. The sound design enhances the spatial impression, conveys the dimension of time, and has within it a dramaturgical development that works into the overall dramaturgy of the film. Although he composes sound and music as a conceptual level of the narration, the exploration of the theme, the musical design gets concretely integrated into the plot. In that situation, also a moment of recognition and understanding get established. Altogether, the soundtrack of this film is a conceptual dramaturgically well-arranged framework, stabilising the dramaturgical concept within an open form.

Another example of the conceptual importance of sound design and music to the dramaturgical structure and the performative quality of a documentary is Symphony of the Ursus Factory (Wójcik and Stokfiszewski, PL 2018). The film is based on the concept of a symphony and is in the tradition of Polish documentary film. Jazz played an important role in this tradition for many years (Stutterheim 2013). The film begins with a prelude in which archive material is cut to music. When the protagonists are introduced in the next scene, this is accompanied only by atmos. This sonic change underlines the leap into the narrated reality of today's protagonists' lives and creates an acoustic and visual contrast. The individual characters are introduced and identified utilizing a special ambient sound. The old man who introduces himself as a former buyer for the factory, for example, is combined with a passing aeroplane, the mechanic with the sound of the power line. This power line seems to mark the way out of the city into the factory. Slowly, the voices are dissolved from the individual protagonists, forming a polyphonic corpus of former employees. When the plane is next seen, the shopper's car reaches the wasteland of the former factory. Chords get embedded in the soundscape of today, of a composition sound, which takes up and condenses the sound. The design also 'blows' in what seem to be sounds from the old factory. In minute 21, the transition to the second movement, we see the security guard get out of his car and perform a short choreography of his old work movements. These are accompanied by the sounds of his movements on the hard sandy floor. To this, he adds the sounds of the machines as he remembers them. In the end credits, one can see how the protagonists have been trained vocally. The sound design takes the rhythm and sound and develops it further. The next one takes over, and the music becomes more and more a compositional condensation of the remembered experience. Not only are other former workers, the sounds of their work more and more integrated, but also an orchestra of former employees. At 30 minutes, the sound has a new quality when women intonate the complex sound of a part of the factory's cacophony. This is the moment of Anagnorisis and Peripeteia, when the process of practicing for the merge of interviews to a performative response becomes explicit, marking the change from a more naturalistic documentary approach to a more poetic, artistic form. A symphony develops from the different performances of the workers, their everyday movements, with the imitated sounds they brought with them. The individuals become an entity. This development culminates in the final scene, in which various Ursus-tractors drive onto the site and give a performance, a kind of ballet. One can understand though that this documentary is basically structured from the sound concept, using the principles of a symphony to make that documentary an aesthetic response to an experienced reality, combining present and past.

A variation of this approach is essential for Gabrielle Brady’s hybrid documentary *The Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (Bradly, G/UK/AU 2018). For this production, Gabrielle Brady worked with sound designer Leo Dolgan and composer Aaron Cupples. Here too, the combination of original sounds and music composed for the film gives it its special expression and a condensed impression of experienced reality, as I elaborated elsewhere (Stutterheim IV/2023). Dolgan mentions that his biggest task when approaching ‘a film is to understand the story in all dramaturgy levels, so we can argue what sounds or what does not sound how this sound or silence are going to sound’ (Dolgan 2022). In this documentary, three levels of narration get merged: that of the main protagonist, the therapist; that of a group of migrants forming one representative character – dramaturgically speaking; and that of the Island with its nature and history. In this film, the sound design contributes to a dramaturgically convincing overall poetic effect.

The directors and their teams of these examples mentioned above, apply sound and music dramaturgy not only to give their films a musical structure and poetic effect, but also to organically merge episodes and levels of narrative as well as experienced reality and imagination into a performative work. Sound design informs about space and time and is part of implicit dramaturgy by combining ambient sound with sounds designed for referencing and adding metaphors, giving it an ‘overall thematic intent’ (Gianakaris 2009: 93).

Although such an approach within the sound design is partially true for the following example, the sound dramaturgy of The Whale and the Raven by Mirjam Leuze is of different relevance. Within this film, sound is central to the constellation of the central conflict the film is about - a planned tanker route through a bay where whales live, and which is described as a whale nursery. This route would not only threaten the whales physically, in the sense of running over them, but above all acoustically. Sound is part of the impetus, relevant to the initial incident causing the narration. The dialectic conflict here is demonstrated by the contrast of the whale’s singing and the sound of the tanker. The string of events observed by Leuze and her team results from that incident and collision of interests. Such an incident can be a particular challenge that neither the protagonists nor the narrators themselves have brought about or caused (Hegel 1971: 295). An incident not triggered by the protagonist but requiring their reaction/action, is the typical starting situation, dramaturgically speaking, for an epic, poetic narrative (Hegel 2003). Such a constellation is typical for a documentary as these are in most cases starting from an incident, as exception from an interpersonal conflict.

To summarise this section, sound dramaturgy in documentary films is a multi-layered approach that combines technical expertise with artistic intent. It requires careful planning, attention to detail, and collaboration between the director, sound designer/composer, and editor to effectively enhance the storytelling and create an immersive experience for the audience still to be received as a performative representation of experienced reality. Since often, in undergraduate levels, students are mostly familiar with TV productions, these examples might support students to understand the importance of sound dramaturgy and teamwork when planning and producing a documentary. In my experience, regardless of region, students are most likely socialised with Sir David Attenborough and similar, but as exception knowledgeable about the rich traditions of documentary films. Therefore, an introduction to works as those cited above helps to inspire them in their work.

## Sound Dramaturgy supporting orientation in Virtual Reality experiences

Sound dramaturgy in Virtual Reality (VR) productions play a crucial role in creating an immersive and emotionally engaging experience for the viewer. Sound design in VR differs from traditional media due to the unique characteristics of the VR medium, such as 360-degree spatial audio and the ability to track the viewer's movements. Hence, in Virtual Reality experiences, sound dramaturgy can give a relevant impact to the overall dramaturgy of this experience, as the story develops as a progression within a defined and designed space. This is due to the different physical experience, as the human body in a defined spatial setting resembling real life experience of space. Here, the participant is part of the stage-like spatial framing of the stories or event’s cosmos, the place the performative story takes place. Thus, the chronotopos is dependent of the user’s physical experience and their embedded knowledge about the relationship between space and time. Most important here is for students to understand the relation of embodied memory of a physical experience to the designed environment. When planning the progress for the participant within the story world, one should reflect on this aspect first and conceptually focus on the chronotopos as time-space-related construction to the story and experience. The task mentioned above of becoming more aware of daily environmental sounds can also be helpful here. The main thing is to pay attention to what kind of sounds or noises cause us to react. What quality do such sounds have? Usually, they are either shrill or of a lower pitch. They stand out from what is considered normal background noise. How can these non-ordinary and signal-like sounds guide the users through the spatially determined situation without feeling guided? Here, too, the basic dramaturgical rule applies that situations relevant to the story and its course or the experience of it should be prepared. Foreshadowing allows them to be perceived as probable and not to be too surprised, then to question them or to drop out of the immersive situation. Therefore, it is a good idea to prepare for upcoming changes or events via sound or use image and sound in combination.

One example to demonstrate these aspects could be Kobold (Isserlis and Sacker 2018). The experience starts when one takes over from where the detective disappeared as introduced by a short film, one goes up the stairs, which is a mental/physical challenge, and enters the reception area of a flat. The experience has a leitmotif, given through a modified children song, which is referential here. When one enters the flat, as place of action, one starts in a hallway. It is a typical German old building apartment, and so most rooms lead off the hallway, plus a corridor leading to the toilet in the back of the flat. Even though Kobold is designed as an experience that allows for variables in some areas, as open form, there are also some ordered, predetermined necessities as it is for such works to. For example, you must first put the fuses back in to get the phone connected again, have light in the rooms, be able to operate the slide carousel, and more. Most of these tasks are either following a logic or verbalised guidance. To find a fuse and hence switching the power back on allows to get a first understanding of the place. And, though the experience is guided by letters one finds here and there, one gets to know about the backstory and the incident that triggered the action leading us in here. The antagonist is an unknown ghost, impersonating a hidden past and knows the place better than us. It can disguise itself though too. Since the space gives multiple options of how to proceed, sound plays a relevant dramaturgical role here. The sound design by Takuro Sakamoto triggers the user to go to one room or the other, and it also warns of the increasing danger. The first of these warnings is a man shouting from below when one enters the kitchen. To keep the user in the game the phone in the corridor rings short after his call. That way, we are kept in the flat. And, the sound design gives hints too, about the nature of the experience as horror genre, of the ghost disguising, and more. Other sources guiding us through that flat and to discover the story are a TV set, an old projector and more. By placing important sounds strategically, they can draw the viewer's focus to specific elements or actions within the VR environment. This helps shape the viewer's perception and guides their exploration of the virtual world. In this context, it is important to understand which elements are most likely to be part of the environment one designs for the story to progress, and which elements are most likely to either attract the interest as form as irritation or unusual deviation from an everyday life experience.

## conclusion

Although the genre might differ, basic dramaturgical rules are generally relevant for sound dramaturgy. It contributes to a logic and probability of the story told or experienced. Sound dramaturgy supports the element of surprising within familiarity. It is relevant to establishing and maintaining the chronotopos and cosmos the action is situated within. It can support the dualism of being in the moment and referential at the same time as intertwining explicit and implicit dramaturgy. To be able to achieve and apply all these aspects of sound dramaturgy, students need to learn about the importance of sound, to identify sound and noise or sound defining noise, and basic aspects of musicality.

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1. Original: „Die Erzählung hat zweierlei Zeit: ihre eigene erstens, die musikalisch-reale, die ihren Ablauf, ihre Erscheinung bedingt; zweitens aber die ihres Inhalts, die perspektivisch ist, und zwar in so verschiedenem Maße, daß die imaginäre Zeit in der Erzählung fast, ja völlig, mit ihrer musikalischen zusammenfallen, sich aber auch sternenweit von ihr entfernen kann.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‚ins-Werk-setzen‘ Stegemann (6). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)