

Stephanie Lotzow [REDACTED]

Music and Manipulation: A Sound Experiment

Analyzing TV series or movies is not only about the visuals. In fact, one should also pay attention to the music and sound effects that are used, as they have the power to manipulate our understanding of the visuals (cf. Butler 2007: 235). Taking Butler's statement as a theoretical basis, I was curious to find out whether the understanding or interpretation of a scene changes by simply altering the music. To do so, I created a sound experiment, in which I edited the music of a selected scene, and presented it to the class to see if Butler's claim could be confirmed. Hence, this paper can be understood as a documentation of my sound experiment, starting with the selection of the visual and audio material, over the editing process and concluding with the analysis and interpretation of the edited scenes.

Since the class focused on analyzing *House of Cards* (since 2013), I used the pilot ("Chapter 1", SE01 E01) for my project and chose the scene in which Frank Underwood demands the Peter Russo's unquestioning loyalty (00:42:31-00:44:44). The choice of this scene was motivated by both its content and its form: On the one hand, it is a key scene, as Frank demonstrates his power by threatening Peter in order to win him over for his cruel intentions. On the other hand, the scene is almost entirely devoid of music and was thus easy to edit.

For my sound experiment I wanted to create three new versions of the scene: a scary version that suggests that the scene is part of a horror movie, an erotic version that suggests that it is part of a porn movie and a funny version that suggests that it is part of a sitcom. Before editing the scene, it was necessary to analyze the original version first to get an understanding of how the music works in this scene. Therefore, I used the following questions to analyze the form and function of the music in the original scene:

- a) When does the music start?
- b) Which atmosphere does the music create and why?
- c) What does the music emphasize?

The Original Scene¹

Besides environmental sounds such as a ring tone or footsteps, there is a deep bass sound right from the beginning of the scene. Deep bass sounds are typically used to create suspense and a threatening atmosphere, which thus causes stress within the viewer. This is because we unconsciously associate these frequencies with natural phenomena such as growling thunders (cf. Flückiger 2010: 210). This technique is often used in horror movies to foreshadow that something bad will happen. Through our experience and knowledge of this technique we already expect that nothing good is going to happen when Peter meets Frank.

After Peter has asked Frank about his demand, the camera switches to the latter, while a single, high-pitched piano tone appears and fades out quickly (01:37). This tone adds to the bass line (which is now getting louder) by emphasizing the threatening atmosphere and Frank's seriousness. The same piano tone is repeated four times in an irregular interval (01:44, 01:52, 02:02, 02:07), as can be seen in Figure 1:

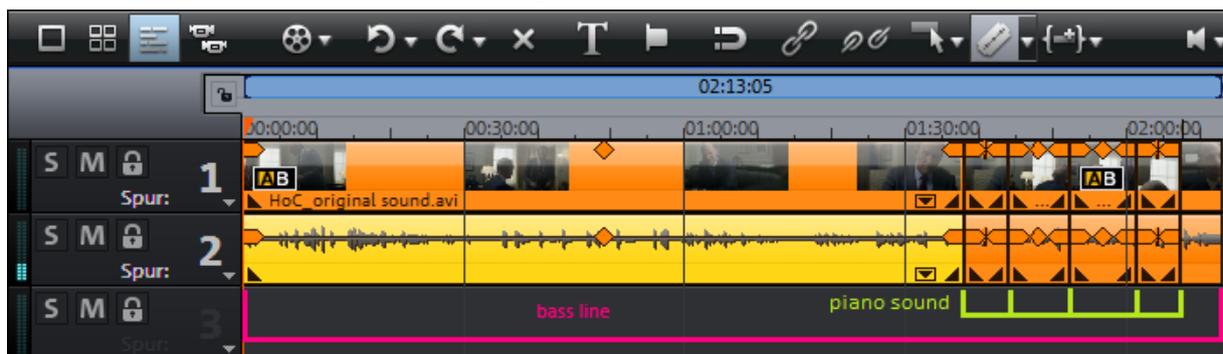


Figure 1: Sounds in the original scene

Frank's body language and facial expression are emphasized by the first, second and fourth piano sound, while Peter's body language and facial expression are emphasized by the third and the fifth one:



Figure 2: 1st Piano Sound

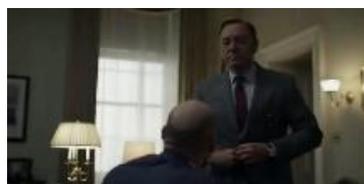


Figure 3: 2nd Piano Sound



Figure 4: 3rd Piano Sound

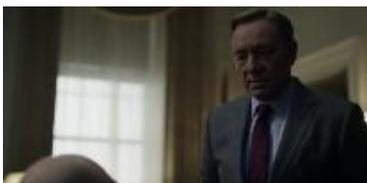


Figure 5: 4th Piano Sound



Figure 6: 5th Piano Sound

¹ The original scene starts at 00:42:31 and ends at 00:44:44. It can be found on the attached CD (file name: HoC_Original.avi).

The Scary Version²

After having understood how the music is used in the original scene, I was now able to edit it. To create the scary version, I decided to exaggerate the bass line right from the beginning. Therefore, I replaced it by dark and creepy music to create a scary atmosphere:

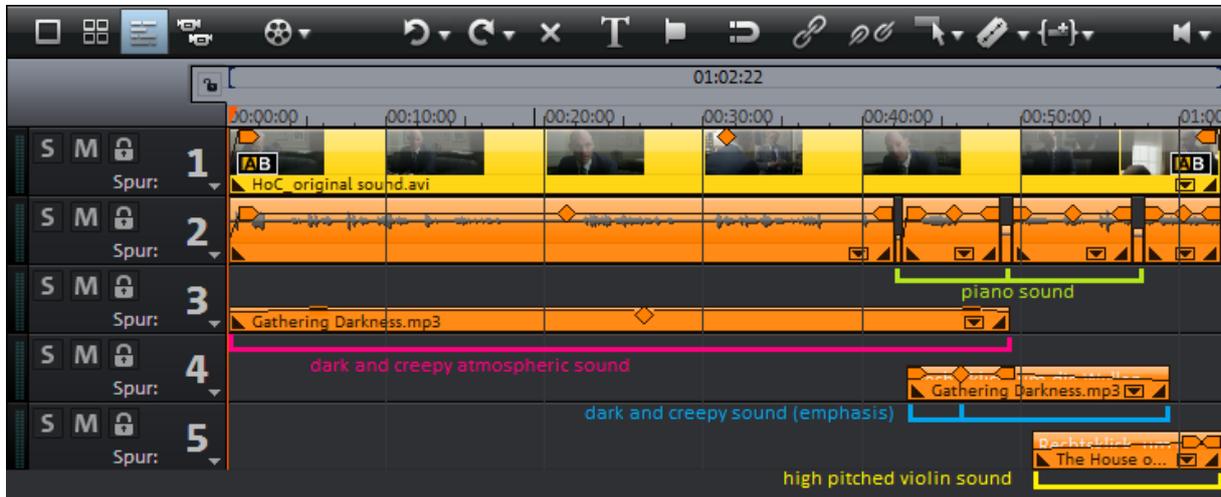


Figure 7: Sounds in the scary version

While it was easy to simply overlay the bass line with the dark and creepy atmospheric music, it was difficult to overlay the piano sound. Since I did not want to have any of the original sounds (besides the characters' voices) in the edited version, I cut the audio track shortly before and after the piano sounds occurred (only in three of five times the piano sound could still be heard) and lowered their volume (see figure 7).

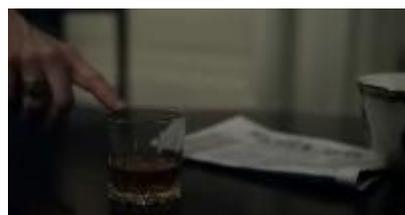


Figure 8: Taking away the glass

Since the part when Frank tells Peter what he demands is the most important part of the scene, which is also why it is emphasized by the piano sound, I decided to place emphasis on it in the scary version as well. Frank's first demand is not uttered verbally but only shown by his gesture, as he takes away the alcohol to demonstrate that he wants Peter to stop drinking (00:44-00:46, see also figure 8). I underlined this gesture with a loud, fading sound in order to highlight its importance (see figure 7).

As in the original, I emphasized Frank's body language from the moment when he stands up and looks down on Peter, thus demonstrating his power over him: according to the convention of the horror genre, I used a violin sound (that is getting increasingly higher) to create suspense, until it is finally closed with a drum sound that ends Frank's demand (see figure 7).

² Due to the limited time in the in-class presentation, I cut out parts of the beginning and the end of the original scene. The focus is now on the main part of the scene. It can be found on the attached CD (file name: HoC_Scary.avi).

The analysis of the scary version of the scene in class showed that its perception was in fact different. With the knowledge of genre conventions (including the use and functions of music in television/film), the audience could easily define the music as being part of a horror movie. Moreover, our experience with genre and music raises expectations: right from the beginning the music foreshadows that something bad is going to happen. In fact, the class called the edited scene 'the slaughter version' and was waiting for Frank to murder Peter. Although the music, especially the high pitched violin sound at the end, suggests that Frank in fact will murder Peter, our expectations were not met, since the visuals stayed the same.

The Erotic Version³

For the erotic version, I wanted to create a comfortable atmosphere with an erotic notion right from the beginning, so that the viewer can already guess that there is something going on between the two men. Thus, I chose bassy soft rock music, also referred to as 'porn groove', (cf. wikipedia.org) that is often used in erotic scenes:

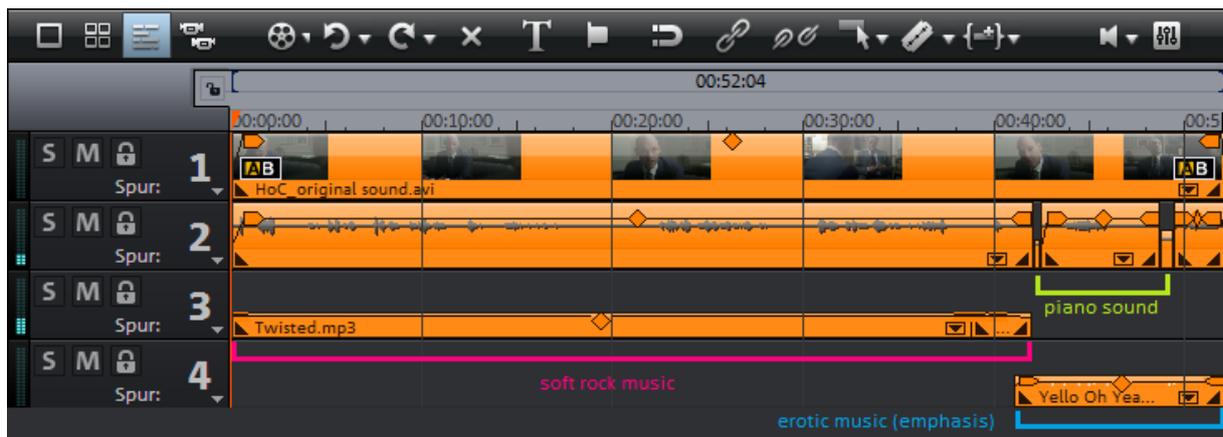


Figure 9: Sounds in the erotic version

Again, the piano sound was dominating, which is why I lowered its volume. In this version, I also emphasized Frank's part at the end of the scene. To emphasize the erotic atmosphere, I chose the song "Oh Yeah" by Yello, which is often featured in erotic scenes in movies and series and thus is associated with this kind of genre (cf. wikipedia.org).

Moreover, I highlighted Frank's first demand, as I did in the scary version: After Peter asked Frank what he wants, I let the soft rock music fade out to replace it by the song "Oh Yeah" by Yello. The song starts when the camera shows Frank and continues until the end of the edited scene. Because of the music, it now seems as if Frank wants sex from Peter, which is underlined by the lyrics saying "oh yeah".

³ Again, I cut out a part of the end of the original scene due to the limited time in the in-class presentation. The edited scene can be found on the attached CD (file name: HoC_Erotic.avi).

Presenting the erotic version to the class proved again that Butler's statement can be confirmed and that music shapes our understanding of the visuals. While in the beginning of the scene some fellow students thought that the atmosphere was simply relaxing, it became clear to them that there is something going on between Frank and Peter when the song by Yello set in. Due to their knowledge of genre conventions, they could easily identify the function of this song. Especially when Frank stands up and looks down on Peter, a fellow student mentioned that it looks as if Frank took off his jacket instead of buttoning it up because of the expectations raised by the music.

The Funny Version⁴

Lastly, I wanted to find out whether it is possible to turn this very serious scene into a funny sitcom. To do so, I needed to add typical elements of a sitcom: an instrumental intro/outro for the scene and noises from the audience (laugh tracks, cheering and clapping noises and interjections such as 'ooh' and 'ahh'). Those noises, especially laugh tracks, are used to "underscor[e] the image" (Butler 2007: 235) and to "inveigl[e] the viewer into responding as the synthetic audience is responding" (ibid.).

To indicate both the beginning and the end of the scene, I used a guitar sound together with the sound of a cheering and clapping audience that fades out quickly:

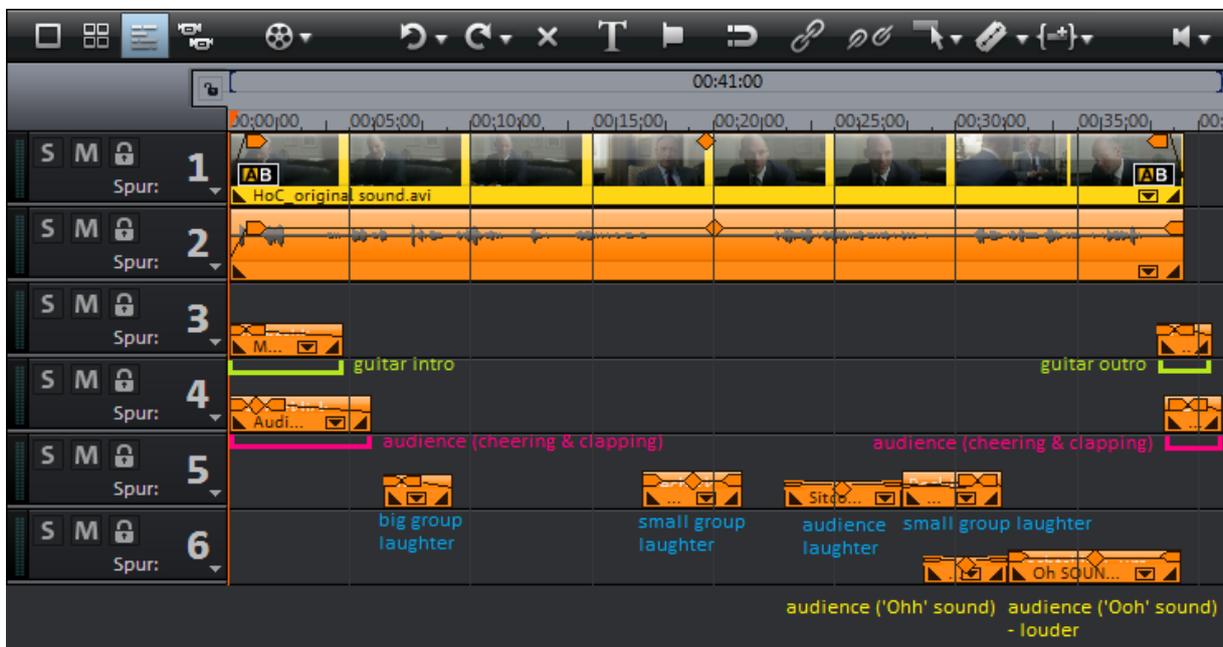


Figure 10: Sounds in the funny version

⁴ I cut out another part of the end of the original scene due to the limited time in the in-class presentation. The edited scene can be found on the attached CD (file name: HoC_Funny.avi).

In contrast to the previous versions, I did not only emphasize one part in particular, but several parts of the scene using noises from the audience: I used the first laugh track at 00:07 after Frank said "I'm the whip, it's my job to know", so that his comment seems funny (see figure 11).



Figure 11: Big group laughter



Figure 12: Small group laughter



Figure 13: Audience laughter



Figure 14: Laugh track + 'ooh' sound



Figure 15: 'ooh' sound

The next laugh track is used to underline Peter's puzzled look at 00:18 in order to make it seem funny as well (see figure 12). The same goes for the part in which Peter says "It was just this one time, Frank, I swear to God", when the next laugh track is used at 00:24, while Peter is still speaking. As can be seen in figure 10, I used different kinds of laugh tracks (big group laughter, small group laughter and audience laughter) to bring variety to the edited scene and to make it seem authentic.

To evaluate Peter's behavior, I additionally used an 'ooh' sound from the audience when Frank says that Peter was lying at 00:28 (see figure 14) and also when Frank lists the crimes Peter committed ("solicitation, controlled substances, driving under the influence") at 00:36. While the laugh tracks tell us when something is supposed to be funny and when to laugh, the 'ooh' sounds tell us when to judge something or somebody, as it is the case in the edited scene, when the 'ooh' sound is used to tell the audience that Peter's behavior is considered to be wrong.

Watching the funny version in class, the audience immediately knew that the edited scene was supposed to be a sitcom due to the laugh tracks that were added and due to their knowledge of genre conventions. However, although the sounds shape our understanding of the edited scene, fellow students argued that the dialogue between Frank and Peter was too serious for a sitcom and therefore does not fit to the sounds and to the genre. Moreover, they argued that the visuals did not fit either, since sitcoms are associated with bright colors. Regardless of the visuals and the spoken text, however, Butler's statement can be confirmed in the case of the third edited version as well.

Evaluation of the Sound Experiment

Presenting the sound experiment to the class showed that Butler's statement could be confirmed. In every edited version, the music raised expectations within the viewers due to their knowledge of genre conventions. Hence, the interpretation of each version changed according to the music that was used. Although the audience agreed with the fact that their understanding of the scene changed when they watched the edited versions, they still argued that the music did not completely fit to the visuals for several reasons:

Version	Scary Version	Erotic Version	Funny Version
Reason	a) the actions of the characters do not change (<i>Frank does not murder Peter</i>)	a) the actions of the characters do not change (<i>Frank does not have sexual intercourse with Peter</i>)	a) the spoken text does not fit to the visuals (<i>the situation/dialogue is too serious for a sitcom</i>)
	b) The color of the image does not fit (<i>it is not dark/atmospheric enough</i>)		b) The color and the lighting of the image does not fit (<i>it is not bright and warm enough</i>)

Table 1: Reasons why the music/sound does not completely fit to the visuals

Hence, there are two reasons why the viewers' expectations were not met, namely that the characters' actions or text did not fit to the visuals and that the color and the lighting of the image were not suitable in the respective version. It simultaneously shows how closely music and sound are connected to the visuals and our interpretation of them. Moreover, the named reasons mirror the awareness of genre conventions that come with numerous premises (e.g. sitcoms need to be funny; the color of the image needs be bright and warm). Thus, the audience could easily find solutions in order to make the music fit to the visuals:

Version	Scary Version	Erotic Version	Funny Version
Solution	a) change the actions of the characters (<i>Frank has to murder Peter</i>)	a) change the actions of the characters (<i>Frank and Peter need to have sexual intercourse</i>)	a) change the spoken text (<i>choose a funny topic/situation and change the text accordingly</i>)
	b) Change the color of the image (<i>use a blue/green filter that is typically used in horror/fantasy movies</i> → example 1)		b) Change the color and the lighting of the image (<i>turn up the brightness and use a yellow filter</i> → example 2)

Table 2: Solutions to make the music/sound fit to the visual

Besides changing the script in order to influence the actions and the spoken text of the characters, fellow students also suggested to change the color of the image and to adjust it to the respective genre. To demonstrate how it could look like, I adjusted the visuals of *House of Cards* accordingly and used screenshots from horror/fantasy movies and sitcoms as an orientation:

Example 1) Adjusting the color of the scary version



Figure 16: *The Ring* (2002)



Figure 17: *Twilight* (2008)



Figure 18: *House of Cards* (since 2013)

Example 2) Adjusting the color of the funny version



Figure 19: *Full House* (1987-1995)



Figure 20: *The Big Bang Theory* (since 2007)



Figure 21: *House of Cards* (since 2013)

As can be seen in the screenshots above, changing the color of the image helps to make the music fit to the visuals that it underlines.

In conclusion, the sound experiment proved that music and sound in fact do shape our understanding of the visuals. From a production perspective, I used my knowledge of genre conventions to create three alternative versions of the selected scene of *House of Cards*. From an analyst perspective, the presentation of the edited scenes in class showed that my intentions to create a scary, an erotic and a funny version could easily be identified. The music and sounds used in the edited scenes raised expectations that made it possible to guess what will happen in the scene (e.g. Peter will be murdered or Frank and Peter will engage in sexual intercourse). Yet, the expectations were not met, since the visuals as well as the spoken text were not changed according to the music. The analysis of the edited scenes in class revealed unconscious knowledge of genre conventions every one of us passively obtained over time by watching television or movies. This knowledge could finally be used to reflect on the edited scenes and to think of solutions of how to adjust the visuals to the music, so that the expectations raised by it could be met.

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"The House of Leaves". Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 3.0. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

"Twisted". Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 3.0. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

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Screenshots

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