

**SCREEN SCOTLAND**  
**SGRÌN ALBA**



**SCREENING  
SHORTS**

# Sound

**An Introduction to Screen Language**

# Sound

- Film is seen as a visual medium, but even in the early days of cinema it was clear that sound was an vital part of the whole experience - this is why musicians were employed to play live music alongside silent films.
- Sound used on screen might not always register – but you’d notice if it wasn’t there.
- It has a strong influence on our experience of a film, helping to:
  - **establish time, place, character, genre, tone, mood...**
  - **immerse the audience in the film’s “reality”**
  - **aid narrative continuity**
  - **provoke an emotional response from the viewer**
  - **elevate the film beyond the visual or narrative alone, connecting with the viewer on a sensory level.**

# Three Areas of Film Sound

There are three areas of sound:

1. **Dialogue and recorded sound:** diegetic sound which accompanies the action on screen.
2. **Sound effects:** both on and offscreen; tend to be diegetic, though they may be artificially created in a Foley studio or exaggerated in post-production.
3. **Music:** can be diegetic (e.g. from a car radio) but is more often non-diegetic.

- **Diegetic sound:** sound motivated by the action in film (i.e. sound the characters **can** hear).
- **Non-diegetic sound:** sound not directly connected to the action on screen (i.e. sound the characters **cannot** hear, typically music which is added on).

# Dialogue and Recorded Sound

- Sound recorded at a location doesn't sound how it is really heard (our ears are good at selecting what sounds we actually take in) or how a filmmaker needs it to be heard.
- **Be silent, close your eyes - and listen. What noises can you hear that you weren't aware of before?**
- When making a film you usually need to place the microphone close to the speaker to collect clean dialogue and lessen unwanted sound in the background - but this might not be realistic!
- Mixing sound is a complex area of post-production; sound designers must create a **believable but emotive** soundscape.



# Mixing Sound

- Sound must be cleaned up so it's **clear and distinct**. If audio recorded on set/location is not satisfactory, editors may need to re-record and dub new dialogue, have Foley artists create sound effects, or remove unwanted noises.
- To control **volume**, all sounds (dialogue, effects, background sound, room tone, music) are laid out on a variety of tracks in the computer to be adjusted and mixed.
- This is why you can still hear characters speak even when there are explosions all around them!



# Sound Effects

Sound effects (FX) are added in post-production and can be used to:

- help move the narrative forward
- punctuate and reinforce action
- guide audience attention
- motivate reactions or cuts
- bridge scenes
- build pace
- establish time and place
- establish genre
- enhance mood



# Sound effects can be...

- **Diegetic and realistic:** fit the 'real world', even if they are not recorded at the same time as the film.
  - e.g. the sound of a book being dropped or horses coming up a road.
- **Diegetic and realistic but exaggerated:** often used in children's films to help them understand the action.
  - e.g. the tinkle of a bell.
- **Diegetic and non-realistic:** meet our expectations of sound - even when no sound would actually be there.
  - e.g. the sound of a ghost, horses' hooves on sand or a spaceship travelling through empty space.
- **Non-diegetic:** like how speed marks are used in a comic book to suggest movement.
  - e.g. travelling back in time, or an inner response from a character to the action, like having a 'lightbulb moment'.

# Sound Activity: Sound On/Vision Off

- Listen to the **sound only** from the first minute of a film.
- Write down everything you hear as precisely as possible and ideally in order.
- What can you learn about...
  - **where?** (inside/outside? rural/urban? what country?)
  - **when?** (day/night? past/present/future?)
  - **who?** (age? gender? how many characters?)
  - **what?** (clues to actions/events)
  - **mood/tone?** (happy/sad? calm/tense?)
  - **genre?** (horror, adventure, comedy...?)
  - **style?** (colour/b&w? animation/live action? visual style?)
- What do you hear that makes you think these things?

# Sound On/Vision Off Scribble Pad

Where? (inside/outside? rural/urban? what country?)

When? (day/night? past/present/future?)

Who? (age? gender? how many characters?)

What? (clues to actions/events)

Mood/Tone? (happy/sad? calm/tense?)

Genre? (horror, adventure, comedy...?)

Style? (colour/b&w? animation/live action? visual style?)

Any other notes

# Ambient Sound

- **Ambient sound** is sound that is natural to the setting (e.g. birds tweeting in a forest or wind rustling leaves on trees).
- It can be recorded when filming but it might be unclear or too loud. This means effects need to be added during post-production.
- Ambient sound makes a film realistic so we believe what we see, but it can also create **atmosphere** – it might make a house seem like it's in an isolated place, when in reality it was next to a busy motorway!



# Sound Activity: Ambient Sound

- Film a location in a single shot for about 30 seconds.
  - It could be the classroom, the playground, the street, a park, the school canteen...
- You can stay in one position or slowly **pan** (move) the camera around the location .
- Remove the original sound, then add appropriate ambient sound from an effects library like [Free Sounds Library](#).
- You could even try adding different effects (like an owl hooting - or a scream!) to see how they change the atmosphere.



# Sound: Foley Artists

- The **Foley track** is made up of effects created using sources other than those shown on screen.
  - Named after Jack Donovan Foley who invented many techniques for creating film sound effects.
- **Foley artists** create both the sound effects and the sound **props** specifically for the film. This controls volume, so crunching footsteps don't cover dialogue and so on.



# Foley Artists in the Studio

- Sound is recorded live to the picture, using tools and props.
- Studios might have a floor built-in, made of different surfaces - cement, gravel, dirt, different types of wood, linoleum, smooth concrete...
- Foley artists have huge collections of shoes, masses of cooking utensils, stationery, crockery, fabrics, jewellery, boxes and more.
- All this ensures a perfect reality for the audience.



# The Soundscapes of Middle-Earth

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This video from the Foley artists behind the 'Lord of the Rings' films gives a fun overview of their work:

[The Soundscapes of Middle-Earth | The Lord of the Rings](#)



# Sound Effects Activity: Foley-ing Around

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- Gather a selection of objects that can create sound. Explore and play with them.
- **What sounds can they make?** How might you use them? Tap objects against each other, scrape them with your nails, rub them with some fabric...
  - Think creatively - a blown up hot water bottle squeaked along a table sounds like a car screeching round a corner!
- What sounds can you make with just your hands?
- Now play a short film without any sound and **provide appropriate sound effects.**



# Sound: Music

- Music is added to a film for similar reasons to sound effects:
  - **establish a mood, character or theme**
  - **heighten suspense**
  - **reinforce action**
  - **change pace**
  - **provide links**
- Music is there to help tell the screen story, not to be listened to in its own right - it might even barely be heard in the sound mix.
- It usually avoids drawing attention to itself (with exceptions - like musicals!)



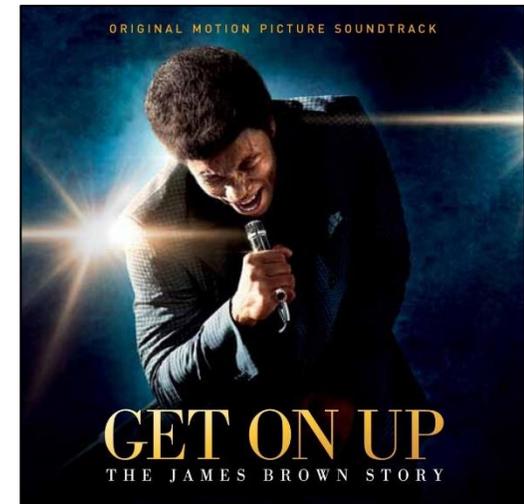
# Sound: Music

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Film music comes in two forms:

- **score** - instrumental music (mostly), written specifically for a film.
- **songs** - pre-existing or recorded for the film by popular music acts.
- Albums of film music are called motion picture soundtracks.
- But a film **soundtrack** is actually all the audio components of a film – dialogue, sound effects, music track...

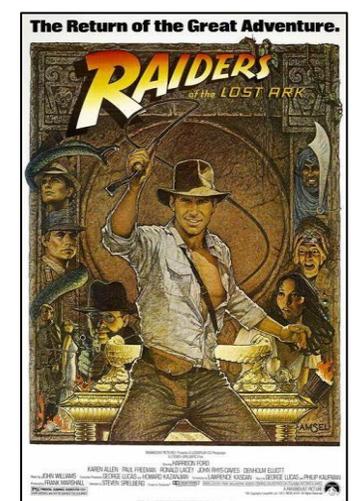
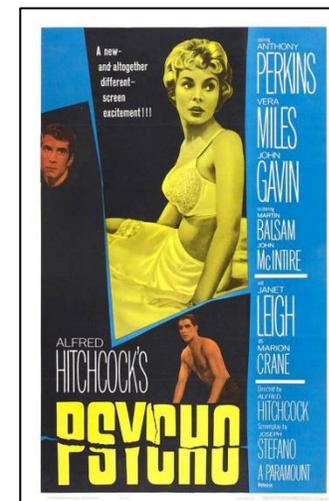
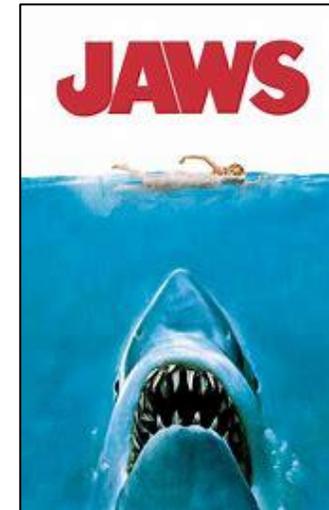


# Screen Scores

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- A screen **score** is composed specifically for a particular film, written to ensure it suits the story and creates an appropriate mood.
- The composer and musicians even record the music in a studio while watching the finished film so that it fits perfectly.
- And, of course, some scores become iconic and famous in their own right...
- Can you hum any of these scores?



# Sound Activity: Reading Film Music

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- Listen to **five** excerpts from different film scores.
- List words that **describe** the music (soft, loud, screechy...)
  - This word bank will help you: [Screening Shorts Writing About Film: Word Bank](#)
- Say what **genre** the music might belong to.
- Describe what you **imagine** might be happening onscreen when that piece of music is playing.
  - Use this worksheet to record your answers: [Screening Shorts Reading Film Music worksheet.pdf](#)
- When you've finished, find out what films the scores were from. Were any of your answers accurate in any way?

# Music Activity: Song Choice

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- Choose a **character** from a film or TV show then create their **ideal playlist**. Give reasons for your choices.
- Choose a **scene/moment** from a film or TV show that has great **emotional or dramatic impact**. Select a song for that scene/moment that fits well and play it over the film. Explain why you chose it.



# Credits

Resource developed by Gail Robertson on behalf of Screen Scotland.

For more information on Film Education resources and opportunities, go to [Home | Screen Scotland](#).

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