

An Audio-visual Analysis of the ‘Unravelling’ sequence in *Shame* (2011, McQueen)

Steve McQueen’s *Shame* (2011) follows Brandon, a business executive whose life is thrown into disarray. My chosen sequence (the ‘Unravelling’ sequence) is a non-chronological montage featuring Brandon on a train (Event position 5/5, the present) recalling via flashbacks a night of hedonistic pursuits after arguing with his younger sibling, Sissy. Following a flirtation with a woman, whose boyfriend subsequently beats him (Event 1), Brandon is refused entry to another bar and instead follows a stranger (Event 2) into a gay club to receive oral sex (Event 3). Finally, Brandon listens to a voicemail from Sissy before having a threesome with two prostitutes (Event 4). This essay shall assess the emotional value provided by Harry Escott’s score, and the reciprocal relationship between this music and the sequence’s visual components. Unpacking complexities of the scene as they are presented, I shall also consider the role of other elements of sound including voice and sound effects. As an analytical evaluation of this scene, the approach here is one of description and observation, and one that shall employ terminology from Michel Chion’s ‘Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen’ (1994).

It may be useful to outline two of McQueen’s possible intentions with my chosen sequence; (A) to demonstrate emotional devastation occurring from the protagonist’s inability to repress his addictive tendencies; (B) puzzle the spectator with an initially jarring narration featuring temporal displacement, gradually granting clarity over the chronology of events. Both enterprises operate concurrently and reciprocally, relying on Escott’s score for emotive impact and spectator disorientation. One way this is achieved is with the score’s recurrence: Perhaps reflecting the cyclicity of Brandon’s sexual addiction, the main leitmotif established during the film’s opening moments (simply entitled “Brandon”) reprises in the ‘Unravelling’ sequence. These two scenes that employ similar musical cues are the only occasions in the film that are told through non-chronological narration, and are the only scenes that use non-diegetic music in such a pronounced way. Both cues share certain characteristics, namely an extensive dynamic range in volume (from grand crescendos to sombre diminuendos) as well as timbral and tonal congruencies that establish a sense of unity and continuity across each sequence respectively and the film as a whole. However, this ostensibly similar reprisal (officially titled “Unravelling”) features several variations that deviate from the original composition, which shall be detailed later. Beginning with a close-up of Brandon’s bruised face (Event 5) [**image 1**], a gap in narration urges the spectator to question the source of this injury. Here the familiar ‘ticking’ and strings fade in, initiating the first of four sections of the piece. It is first felt that the ticking is synchronous with the strings, as the progression may be counted in a 5/4 time signature using the ticking as a metronomic reference. However, the piece begins to move with rubato phrasing, deviating from any rhythmic consistency (which was already in a jarring odd meter).

Playing at a low register with *lento* tempo (around 60bpm), the harmonious but rhythmically inconsistent chords comprise a *pesante* (heavy, dragging) movement, establishing a bleak and melancholy tone.

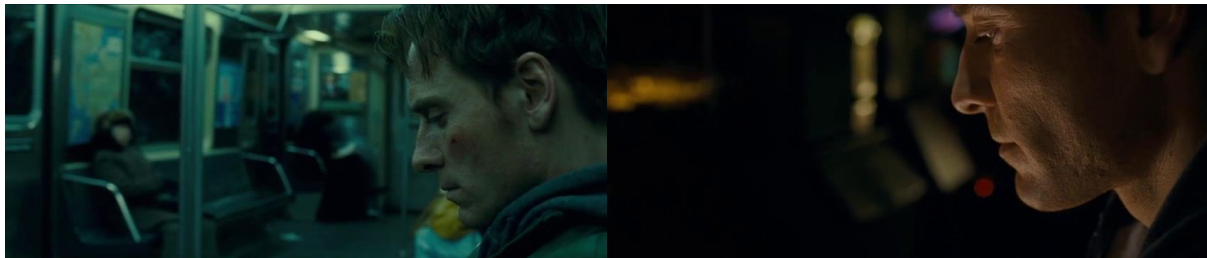


Image 1

Image 2

Cutting to a close-up [**image 2**] of Brandon similar to the earlier image, another gap is established. Diegetic music and a brief exchange of dialogue can be heard over the score, which (with the warm, low-key lighting) situates the spectator in a contemporary bar (Event 1). Jumping again, now to Brandon walking along a sidewalk (Event 2), traffic ambience and city hubbub resides low in the mix, establishing spatial references for the spectator. At this moment, for the first time in the sequence, the chord progression from “Brandon” is reiterated. I shall here unpack the theoretical complexities of Escott’s composition. One way that “Unravelling” affects the spectator’s emotional engagement with this scene is with variations of tempo *ritardando* and *accelerando* complicating its rhythmic perception, as mentioned above. Similarly, yet paradoxically, the 10-bar progression displaces the spectator whilst also anchoring one’s perception of the scene’s musicality: In the key of G-minor, the cue’s chords ascend the scale each bar, from a Dm (root), to a Gm, a Bb, then C, reaching the Dm octave before a slightly higher Eb on the sixth bar. These fifth and sixth bars present further rhythmic complexity. The spectator would initially anticipate the higher Dm to be a resolution (and thus a marker for a reiteration) of a standard 4-bar progression. The sixth bar, however, continues the pitch ascension to an Eb and diverges from this anticipation, displacing and disorienting the viewer. Following this, though, Escott descends to the Gm chord, then to F, and again to Eb and before returning to the F chord, adequately resolving the progression (the F-major chord is the perfect fourth harmony of D in the Gm scale). This chord progression is reiterated again in the second and shortest section of the piece. The third section, however, complicates things further by descending a once more to the Eb chord on an added 11th bar, again diverging from the anticipated standard. Michel Chion would consider such formal, tonal and (aforementioned) dynamic properties attributes of “empathetic music” (p.8, 1994), as these qualities reflect the “mood... of the action on-screen” (p.222).

Employing a rather classical approach to sound editing, McQueen underscores Brandon flirting with a woman when the sequence returns to the bar by reducing the volume of non-diegetic music during dialogue. Furthermore, the strings recede entirely during a heated monologue with the woman's partner and when Brandon is refused entry into another bar later in the sequence. This prioritises voice, reminiscent of Chion's description of cinema as "a verbocentric phenomenon." (1994, p.5) It is worth noting that the other sounds, rather than take priority in the mix, reside lower than the music to create a subtle soundscape of Brandon's memories: The spatio-temporal jumps almost always contain diegetic sounds that fade from one shot to the next, including bar music, subway train brakes, and music from a gay club that Brandon enters pursuing a mysterious man previously sighted on the street. I suggest that this amplifies the spectator's temporal displacement by creating a dichotomy between the sonic and visual continuities.

As the sequence continues, Brandon explores a men's club (Event 3) with continuous cross-cutting to the present on the subway train. At this moment, the third section of Escott's score progresses towards its climax with a shift in timbral qualities, accumulating instrumentation with a higher-register (violins) and warmer timbre (bass brass). Now in a consistent 4/4 time signature, the score reaches a crescendo upon Brandon's sexual climax with the stranger before receding in a diminuendo once again. This heightens the emotive power of Brandon's sexual pursuits and eventual humility - another example of empathetic music. After this, a radical shift in mood occurs. Where the previous 3 events had been presented in a completely non-chronological order with extensive cross-cutting to-and-from the present, Event 4 is presented in a linear order without any further cuts to Event 5. In this segment of the sequence, Brandon listens to a voicemail from Sissy before engaging in a threesome with two prostitutes. As Escott's score moves toward its fourth and final section, "Unravelling" changes key to Ab Minor, and alternates between pianissimo and fortissimo dynamics congruent with those heard in the first two sections of the piece. The chords heard are harmonious but are, again, rhythmically disparate, and reach pitches so high that they come close to atonal. Just as Brandon (and the film) approaches climax [image 3], the strings sustain on a Db for several bars before finally and perfectly resolving [image 4] with the Ab tonic chord, emphasizing its own tonal centre and the finality of the sequence with lower octaves of the root note played also.



Image 3



Image 4

Lasting almost 4 minutes, this segment abandons the use of any ambient noise, leaving only Escott's emotive score and Sissy's off-screen voicemail while Brandon engages with the two prostitutes. A review of Chion's literature on different listening modes may be useful, as I consider the use of voicemail to be exemplary of McQueen representing the cyclical humility of sex addiction. Contrary to the mode of *causal listening* (which arguably dominated the listening practise earlier in the sequence) whereby one listens to a sound to determine its cause, one now must listen to Sissy's words and eventually only the arrhythmic strings, pertaining to *semantic* and *reduced* listening (Chion, 1994, pp.25-29). Many interpretations of the semantics of this are possible, but the ambiguous and difficult emotional state of this final event is certainly evident, and I argue that the complexities of Brandon's addiction are apparent due to what Chion calls the "[r]eciprocity of Added Value," where sounds and images each influence and reproject meanings onto one-another (1994, p.21). Sissy's tearful message, for instance, may have otherwise been perceived simply as a dramatic and sorrowful monologue. The omission of Brandon's reaction to her message, however, forces the viewer to instead witness his sexual activity, with forceful and timely attention paid to the strenuous strings to communicate far more complex implications of guilt and, ultimately, shame. Moreover, Sissy speaking through voicemail is a motif in the film, as she is similarly heard (and ignored) by Brandon during the film's opening moments that, as mentioned, also feature Escott's score "Brandon". These examples demonstrate an employment of semantic listening during this sequence, and a reduced listening would, again, pertain to empathetic music reflecting the sombre mood of the scene.

Shame's 'Unravelling' sequence is dense and replete with integrated audio-visual components that work to initially displace the viewer in a non-chronological narration, without ever compromising on the emotional severity demanded by the protagonist's actions. It is hoped that the reader will recognise the vital role that Escott's composition plays in delivering such emotive impact, and its position in a larger audio-visual landscape created by McQueen in this pivotal narrative point.

Word count: 1650

References

Chion, M (1994). *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.5, 8, 21, 25-29, 222.

Shame. (2011). [film] Directed by S. McQueen. Momentum Theatrical.