Silence: The Fourth Stem

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sound Design

at

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This thesis will explore the use of silence as a narrative tool in motion pictures. In this thesis we will consider five films that deliberately deprive the audience of sound by using silence as a design element. In these films silence effectively aids the narrative, when others think it does not; it is in these instances when we, the audience, have to be aware and try to figure out why it works. Would the scenes have the same effect if various elements of sound design were present?

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1 Elisabeth Weis, and John Belton, *Film Sound Theory and Practice*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 323.
The filmgoer’s experience and the neglect of sound:

George Lucas is noted for saying that “sound is fifty percent of the film experience,” however, various filmmakers and critics often focus heavily on the visual. The sum of visual and sonic elements in the cinematic experience is greater than the parts. A few great films support this concept of added value by not only providing visual strength, but by also strategically utilizing sound and silence in their auditory storytelling, deeply enriching the soundtracks while adding subtexts. According to George Prochnick, silence draws our attention, as we have less auditory distractions. Silence is present in our everyday lives, and the cinema draws from it to create realism.

The fourth stem:

Post production mixers commonly divide sound in film into three stems: dialogue, music, and effects, known collectively as the soundtrack. Together, these stems have a significant impact on the overall narrative by providing the audience with a rich and varied aural experience. But perhaps there is a fourth stem of film sound for the mixers to consider, the silence that occurs in the spaces where the others are inactive. Silence is rarely perceived or considered as a design element. We experience silence in all films, but is that silence purposeful? Can the almost imperceptible background sound of air moving through a room make a statement?

Silence defined:

Individuals can perceive silence in a multitude of ways. To a child, silence can be terrifying, yet to an adult that same silence might represent the calmest moment of their day. The

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perception of silence is contextual and influenced by our subjective reality. On one hand, silence can be comforting; enjoying a loved one’s company without any vocal interjection. On the other hand, it is the discomfort felt when standing next to a stranger in an elevator without music, provoking physical and psychological unrest. For the purposes of this study, an examination of the use of silence in film will be considered as the absence of Dialogue, BGs, SFX, PFX, Foley and score. The one exception, however, is the use of limited BG’s stripped to minimalistic room tone, which is always present in the narrative of live action because its absence is disruptive to the audiences’ experience.

According to Michel Chion, “the impression of silence in a film does not simply come from an absence of noise. It can only be produced as a result of context and preparation...silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we've heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast.”

This contrast is of great value to the few films that use silence to their advantage; by setting the scene, the absence of sound draws us in and keeps us alert, allowing us to focus on the narrative. In this thesis we will consider five films that use silence as a design element, effectively aiding the narrative. That is when we, the audience, are given the opportunity to discover deeper meaning in subtextual character and narrative development.

Rififi:

*Rififi*, a landmark ‘heist’ film, effectively uses silent moments to enrich its soundtrack. One might anticipate that the rising action of this film’s plot would be supported with a typical tension building soundscape and score in the primary heist sequence. Instead the Sound design of this primary heist demonstrates the power of production sound. The sequence utilizes minimal

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Foley, and no dialogue, allowing silence to play a larger role. So much so that the DVD release includes specific instruction, “Do not adjust your volume.”

*Rififi*, like most heist films, portrays the usual archetypes: the ex-con, the family man, the ladies man, the rival alpha male, the French sex kitten and the best friend. The story opens with an ex-con (Tony), who is trying to stay out of trouble, in a world that is trying to draw him in. Disappointed that his longtime girlfriend has moved on, and feeling like he has nothing to lose, Tony reverts back to his criminal behavior. He proposes a burglary of a jewelry store safe to his friends as one last heist in order to acquire the necessary money to start a new life. He invites an Italian-speaking member (Cesar) to the team, whose actions eventually jeopardize the group. This leads to a kidnapping and ransom demands for Tony’s godson. The array of plot points progresses the narrative, but it is the use of sound in *Rififi* that elevates the film to a notable level.

In an interview, Jules Dassin, the director of *Rififi* said “Professional guys who do heists and work in mischief are used to working in silence.” Silence is used to bring the viewer closer to the action, as the characters tread lightly to avoid being exposed. The subtle details are emphasized and the audience is experiencing the scene through the ears of the thieves. Diegetic sounds could jeopardize the mission of acquiring the contents of the safe. Sound and silence work symbiotically, producing a protagonistic and antagonistic relationship and creating a whole new layer of subtext. This narrative provides crucial information on how the thieves work in silence by employing methods of noise suppression. Further, this aesthetic approach was followed through the production design. Even wardrobe selection such as ballet slippers was

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5 Ibid.
used to emphasize the point. Dassin also used muffled tools in the process to keep the noise level down. For example: the thieves gingerly hammer their way through the ceiling with a cushioned hammer, and muffle the motor of the power drill with a hand towel. While all of the tools in the film make noise, the characters’ take action to mask the noise. The silence forces the audience to listen through the ears of the thieves. This was all in an effort to make the audience more directly involved. Placing the audience right in the thick of the burglary, surrounded by silence broken only by the muffled percussive noises that are the pulse of the scene.

Music cues were written at the request of the composer, but both composer and director mutually agreed to leave the music out to preserve the concept of silence. For almost thirty minutes the audience hears nothing but the room tone and minimal “taps, breathing, plaster falling into an umbrella…muffled coughs, and the screech of the drills used to cut into the safe.” Dassin’s inspired directorial choices ultimately embellish the suspense by using the unacknowledged fourth stem of sound design as a narrative element.

In this scene, silence is a shadowy cloak the protagonists hide behind. It engages the audience, sonically manipulating the aesthetic distance as they strain to hear. The constant struggle between sound and the serene layer of silence is the primary source of conflict throughout the sequence.

*Rififi’s transition from the adrenaline of a heist to reality:

Transitions are important to storytellers because they guide the audience through the thread of plot points, preserving the continuity of the narrative. Silence, if improperly used in transitions, can draw the audience out of the narrative. However it seems the director and sound designers for *Rififi* effectively use silence as a transitional element to advance the narrative.

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6 Ibid.
In many films when footsteps are not captured well in production audio, they are recreated in Foley to add reality to the scene. It appears that for Rififi this was an unnecessary task, as it was unneeded to support the narrative concept of stealth. As the characters move around the space, every step they take is seen but not heard. The absence of footsteps during the heist plays against the convention of cinema. This silence is finally broken as Tony leaves the jewelry store and enters the outside world; the sound of his dress shoes echo on the wet sidewalks of Paris. It appears to be a conscious choice by Dassin to provide the audience with relief from silence.

Jules Dassin won the Best Director Award for his work on Rififi at the Cannes Film Festival in 1955. Many critics and fans of the film reference Rififi as a template for heist films. In this thirty-minute scene, silence plays a major role. Though this sequence could have been easily scored in a traditional Hollywood production style, Dassin made a conscious effort to use silence to create tension.

**Babel:**

*Babel* is a multicultural drama directed by Alejandro Gonzales Niraaitu. The film follows the trials of four families from around the world that are linked by a commonality. One story in particular highlights a deaf–mute Japanese girl named Chieko, who struggles with a variety of issues that make her overly self-conscious. We witness the world through her eyes and ears but as she is deaf, the audience does not hear any sound. In a club sequence (Niraaitu 2006,1:08:05-1:14:20), we experience Chieko’s interaction with a group of her peers who all have hearing. This is an exceptional example of a subjective moment, as substance abuse is influencing the character’s perception. As Chieko and her retinue enter a bustling club, the film’s underscore
smoothly crossfades into the source with the song “September” by Earth Wind & Fire (Inarritu, November 2006); it begins muffled and crescendos to full resolution. We are provided with a tempo visually by colored strobe lights and our attention is drawn to the protagonist who rhythmically moves only because of the visual tempo. The picture and sound then suddenly cut to Chieko’s point of view (POV); we are brashly removed from the environment by absolute silence, creating a sterile reality without room tone. The deaf “point of audition”\(^7\) (as defined by Rick Altman) is being used to allow the audience to experience her world. The director uses absence of sonic stimuli to help the audience better empathize with the character. Throughout the sequence contrasting cuts are used to emphasize the difference in Chieko’s perception. Harsh sonic displacement with the music leaves a void, creating empathy for the character and reinforcing the reality of her isolation.

The scene continues as Chieko enviously watches her best friend kissing Chieko’s love interest. This silence introduces the audience to the vivid reality of Chieko’s reaction. A silent glance can speak volumes and is more expressive. We feel its weight, its menace, its tension, and action is not interrupted.\(^8\) The audience is more involved at this moment because they are exposed to the raw emotional core of the character without being bombarded by music or dialogue. The director’s distinct use of body language as subtext is effectively used to communicate elements that otherwise would be lost to Chieko. Our personal connection to Chieko strengthens as she flees the club in despair. Chieko remains in isolation even as she enters a busy street filled with people and musicians. The tension of the scene is maintained as Chieko is forced to remain in her sterile environment. Upon entering Chieko’s housing complex,


\(^8\)Elisabeth Weis and John Belton, *Film Sound Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 119.
we immediately reemerge into a world full of sound, emphasizing a jarring contrast to the previous scene.

The silence in this sequence is powerful as it portrays the isolation for Chieko and her environment, allowing the audience to connect with her on a raw personal level. In contrast, if we were to introduce a score during the scene, it would telegraph the character’s emotional state. The composer’s interpretation of the sequence would act as an emotional buffer, creating an increased aesthetic distance.

**Transitional silence in intertwined stories:**

A crucial piece of sound design begins with a graphic scene (Inarritu 2006, 43:40-44:45) where an American tourist named Susan has been shot in Morocco and is in need of urgent care. She is taken to a nearby village where the local veterinarian has to mend her wound to prevent her from bleeding out. As the scene progresses, her husband Richard restrains Susan as she struggles in fear of the needle. As the needle pierces Susan’s collar bone area, a loud agonizing scream is abruptly muted as we transition to Tokyo, where we see a mouthing of words without sound. We soon realize that we are seeing and hearing the environment through the eyes and ears of Chieko. As our auditory senses adjust to the stark contrast, the silence helps ease us into Chieko’s perspective. We then reassume a voyeuristic perspective with a jarring return of sound.

In this film, silence is uniquely used as an element to help the audience empathize with a character’s physical disability in a way that they may not have considered.
No Country For Old Men:

_No Country for Old Men_, a film by the Coen Brothers, is recognized for its many attributes, including its sound design and particularly its use of silence. As Dennis Lim states, “…[it is] not a popcorn movie, it is especially ill-suited to the crunching of snacks or the crinkling of wrappers…” The film opens in rural Texas, when hunter Llewelyn Moss discovers a massacre of several drug runners who have killed each other in a violent exchange. Moss decides to take two million dollars found at the scene for himself rather than report it to the authorities; he then becomes the target of Anton Chigurh, a ruthless psychopathic killer, and the town’s sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, both in hot pursuit, leading to an unusual chase.

Various scenes in the film contain “suffocating silence” (Lim January 06, 2008). One scene in particular begins inside a hotel room when Moss awakens in the dead of night (Coen 2007, 56:38-1:01:00). He reaches to the nightstand and then we hear the click of the lamp. Hyper-realistic sound of money being flipped is heard as he inspects the contents of the briefcase by going through the stacks of money. The silence allows the audience to focus on the details, guiding our attention to what the director wants us to hear. Moss is suddenly surprised when he locates a tracking device within one of the stacks. At this point, the sound of his environment comes to the forefront, and we as the audience hold our breath waiting for the next sound. Moss slowly places the tracker on the nightstand and reaches for the telephone to call the lobby. We faintly hear ringing in the distance. No one answers. Moss slowly hangs up the phone and the bed squeaks as he stands, cautiously walking to the door of his room. All the nuances of the wood creeks are heard as he bends down to listen from the sliver beneath the door. He grabs his

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sawed-off shotgun from a bag by the door and returns to the bed, turns off the bedside lamp and waits in silence. We hear him as he apprehensively takes a deep breath while footsteps approach from the wooden hallway. “The beeps of Chigurh’s tracking device increased in frequency.” (Lim January 06, 2008). Moss quietly pulls back the hammer on his shotgun in preparation for his pursuer. Chigurh then takes a few more steps outside the door; “only when the sliver of light under the door vanishes is it clear that a light bulb has been carefully unscrewed.”

In reference to this scene, Ethan Coen said, “Josh’s character (Moss) is straining to hear, and you want to be in his point of view, likewise straining to hear.” This places the audience in a vulnerable position, operating blindly. We are hyper-focused on the deadbolt of the hotel room door. In this moment we are enveloped in the environment and assume the psychological state of the protagonist. The silence is then interrupted by the loud “phuump” of Chigurh’s cattle gun. The audience has a sense of foreboding preceding the incipient conflict. The deadbolt strikes Moss in the chest, who in turn shoots at the door, grabs the briefcase and jumps out of the window. The two gunshots are significant to the idea that we are placed on the same sonic plane as Moss; everything he hears, we hear. “The essence of sound is felt in both motion and silence, it passes from existence to non-existent. When there is no sound, it is said that there is no hearing, but that doesn’t mean that hearing has lost its preparedness. Indeed, when there is no sound, hearing is most alert, and when there is sound the hearing nature is least developed.”

The tension created by perception of the aural subtleties encourages the audience to listen attentively and, as a result, pulls the participant deeper into the film. Silence is such a ubiquitous form that it can assume

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
different roles as both protagonist and antagonist for each of the characters, as is evident in its startling and stress-filled escalation from padded footsteps to abrasive gunshots.

If one were to score this scene, the audience would be rendered as a voyeur rather than a participant in the film experience. This use of silence as a design element involves the audience in such a way that they are left with anticipation of the action to come.

Ethan Coen said in a recent interview, “…people think the sound is minimal…it’s actually maximal in terms of the effects and how they’re handled.” In this maximal collaboration between sound designers, composer and film director, silence was used by design in a non-conventional way. The narrative was implemented by using silence to drive the feeling of foreboding, tension and anticipation, giving the film an eerie grounding that may have otherwise been glossed over.

**There Will Be Blood:**

Silence is a creative component in the effective delivery of dialogue. This is especially relevant to jokes, where it is all about timing and timing is referring to silence. The words and the silence between the words create critical rhythms that contain subtextual meaning. It is an opportunity to involve the audience in the story because they are challenged to interpret what the spaces mean. *There Will Be Blood* justifies the concept of silence and the ways in which it aids the development of psychological tension, fear, intrigue and character development.

Silence in this sequence is fueled by sullen and dissimilar views on the way of life. This character-driven film by Paul Thomas Anderson follows the life of “Daniel Plainview and son, who are independent oil men, looking for prospects in California at the turn of the 20th Century.

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They are challenged by a young preacher, Eli Sunday, whose own ambition is matched by Plainview’s. Their battle forms the center of a scary, darkly-comic historical journey into an abyss of madness.\textsuperscript{14} The intersecting life stories of Daniel Plainview and a religious leader, Eli Sunday, collide in many scenes where pregnant silence is used to show the tension between the two power figures of the film.

The first scene that utilizes silence occurs after supper when Daniel asks Abel Sunday if they can discuss a matter in private (Anderson 2007, 32:50-36:25). As Daniel speaks to Abel about acquiring his ranch, Eli interjects and the emotional context of the scene escalates. Daniel asks Eli, “What would you like Eli?” Eli answers, “Ten thousand dollars.” Daniel counters, “For what?” Eli replies, “For my church.” The soundtrack then goes silent as Eli looks at Daniel through his dark eyes and the camera angle changes to reflect Eli’s point of view, with Daniel staring down at him with his penetrating eyes for a solid twelve seconds as we sit in silence. Hostility and internal rage is established in Daniel’s eyes and hints at his need for control and power. Here silence establishes the relationship between the two powerhouses of the film. The atmosphere is set for a negotiation and toward the end of the scene, the two agree on terms. Daniel goes in for a handshake from Abel, and then from Eli, who holds onto his hand and bows his head initiating prayer. It is in this quiet pause that heightened tension is added to the scene prior to the addition of Johnny Greenwood’s unnerving score. However, this pause abruptly ends as Daniel forcefully jerks his hand away, leaving Eli disappointed by cutting off this fulfillment in his proselytizing.

This same silent pause, a defining sonic motif of the two characters, is repeated later in the finale when Daniel and Eli meet yet again, years after the initial supper. For the audience, this silence is recurring, creating a feeling of conflict and enmity between the two characters.

\textsuperscript{14} Anderson, Paul, "There Will Be Blood," DVD.
In this scene, Daniel Plainview is passed out in his private bowling alley as his butler tries to wake him for the arrival of Eli Sunday (Anderson 2007, 2:16:25-2:30:45). Eli gives the butler instructions to leave them and with a soft-spoken voice, then tries to wake the snoring Daniel. When he fails, he begins yelling and then returns to his soft voice. Eli utters, “Brother Daniel, …pause…it’s Eli”. Daniel’s snore comes to a halt and we are suspended silently for a few seconds anticipating what is to happen next.

This quiet moment provides the audience with an opportunity to develop their own thoughts regarding Eli. The silent pause rhythmically helps with the delivery of the subtext. The Haggard Daniel Plainview transforms into a functional human being as he wakes from his slumber. The scene continues with Eli yapping in a one-way conversation with Daniel. Daniel maintains his silence as he intently eats a cold piece of steak; he gnaws and chews as his seemingly animalistic character comes to life. Eli continues his rant by giving Daniel the sad news that an old mutual friend, Mr. Bandy, has passed away, and that the Church of The Third Revelation wants to go into business with Daniel to drill on Mr. Bandy’s land. Daniel replies that he has one condition for Eli to work with him: “I like you to tell me that you are and have been a false profit and God is a superstition.”15 There are a few moments of silent pause, as the camera focuses on Eli.

The audience is forced to wait in anticipation for Eli’s vocal response. Chion describes a similar scenario, full of silence, as "...in the same way that the human face is not just an image like the others...Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchizes everything around it...in the torrent of sounds our attention fastens first onto this other us that is the voice of

15 Ibid.
another...Human listening is naturally vococentrist, and so is the talking cinema by and large.\textsuperscript{16} Eli is unable to respond, but Daniel persists. This pushes the audience to the edge of their ears, focusing heavily on dialogue, siding with one or the other in this verbal battle of wit and stubbornness. As the scene escalates, we are no longer in silence, but instead are pulled into a new world filled with the release of pent up frustration and anger displayed by Daniel’s violent attack on Eli. The scene ends with a joyous anempathetic score as Daniel ends the film with the line “I am finished.”\textsuperscript{17}

If these scenes had additional sound design elements they would have subsequently lacked the delivery and rhythm that provided us with a raw pent up subtextual delivery within the narrative. The sound design of the final scene of this film, with its powerful and unnerving silences, leaves the audience with a satisfying sense of closure.

In There Will Be Blood silence is utilized most often in dialogue sequences, and is specifically effective in the laying of subtextual groundwork in order to progress the narrative. Silence is used as a tool to define the character motifs throughout the film adding another layer to the elaborate sound design.

\textbf{Inglorious Basterds:}

\textit{Inglorious Basterds} is an award-winning film directed by Quentin Tarantino. The film takes place once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France, where Colonel Hans Landa is hunting Jews. A young Jewish refugee, Shosanna Dreyfus, witnesses the massacre of her family by the Colonel and escapes as the only survivor; she then plots her revenge. Several years later she is


\textsuperscript{17} Anderson, Paul, "There Will Be Blood," DVD.
courted by a German war hero, Fredrick Zoller, who falls in love with her and arranges a movie premiere at the theater she owns. With the promise of every major Nazi officer in attendance, the event catches the attention of the "Basterds," a group of Jewish-American guerilla soldiers led by Lieutenant Aldo Raine. As the Basterds’ and Shosanna’s plans come to fruition their paths will cross for one fateful evening. (Tarantino, Quentin, "Inglourious Basterds," DVD.).

The silence in the film effectively guides the audience towards the subtle details of the soundtrack. The silence is followed by sounds, which create tension and release. The impression of "silence," an intense quiet created through the use of finely detailed sound design, arises through prominently articulated Foley and dialogue. Chion explains film’s use of silence and its equivalent, "faraway animal calls, clocks in an adjoining room, rustlings, and all the intimate noises of immediate space." Significant pauses in conversation are used to emphasize this "silence" in order to create awkwardness and build tension.

A pivotal scene in the film contains subtle, dramatic crescendos punctuated by brief, overwhelmingly tense and/or violent climaxes (Tarantino 2009, 1:13:25-1:33:00). In the story, the Basterds have to meet a German actress named Bridget von Hammersmark, who is an intelligence agent siding with the allies. She arranges to meet the Basterds, disguised as Nazi officers, at a pub populated with numerous Nazi soldiers who are drunk and laughing about. As one of the Staff Sergeants notices the famous actress, he approaches her to ask for an autograph. He over-stays his welcome and begins to question the German dialect of the lead Basterd officer. We are presented with silence, as Sergeant Hugo Stiglitz, who is with the “Basterds,” manhandles the Nazi Staff Sergeant and threatens his comrades, warning them that if they don’t remove him from the officers’ table they will all be held responsible. Two of his comrades stand

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and are about to grab him as we hear a German voice from the adjacent room say, “Might I inquire?” Then, all goes silent except for a hissing noise with cracks and little tiny pops (vinyl noise). As Major Hillstrom walks over we see the record player spinning with the needle off the actual record, tying the noise to the source. Major Hillstrom turns and faces the pub full of uniformed men, and as silence and suspense fills the air we wonder if the “Basterds” will be discovered? This is the moment of suspended silence in which we, the audience, are experiencing the film as participants rather than voyeurs.

Our interest peaks as we listen to the ensuing dialogue. Major Hillstrom walks over and begins discussing regional dialect. The only dialect he does not recognize is that of Archie Hicox, a British officer undercover with the Basterds. The room freezes in time as Hicox answers the question regarding his accent. Our aural focus is on Hicox’s answer and a few moments pass as we anticipate his answer in German. With the help of Bridget von Hammersmark, Hicox appeases Hillstrom, and the Major joins their table. This first part of the scene builds the tension and release of silence as it perpetuates the suspense of the scene using deliberately paced words spoken in German but depicted by English subtitles.

The second half of the scene encompasses more dialogue as well as room tone, BGs, and Foley from the other table: beer mug clinks, chair squeaks and unintelligible pub walla. The officers go on to play a game of “Who am I?” and as the Staff Sergeant over Stayed his welcome so does Major Hillstrom. Captain Hicox mentions Major Hillstrom’s intrusion and the scene goes quiet again, placing the audience uncomfortably awaiting confrontation. Hillstrom plays it off and offers to refill their drinks before he adjourns. As he calls for the whisky shots, Hicox gives himself away by using a non-German hand gesture for the number three. Major Hillstrom catches on and we hear and see the tension between the two characters. During the distraction of
taking shots, Major Hillstrom draws his handgun under the table. We hear it and see it cock. The tension is as if one had a piece of twine and was tugging at it at both ends, causing the threads to break one by one until there was only a single thread left. As Major Hillstrom points his gun at Hicox under the table, the silence between them grows and we discover Hicox is also pointing his gun at Hillstrom. Hugo joins in by placing his gun on Hillstrom genitals.

This perceived silence that is intermittent with dialogue is dynamically juxtaposed with the ensuing gun battle. It is an assault on our ears with an array of loud and sporadic gunshots and screams. The audience is taken by surprise by the sudden flooding of the aural barrage, breaking the silence of the chaotic finale. The scene returns to silence, as the Staff Sergeant is the last man left standing.

In *Inglorious Basterds*, silence is used as a contrasting element to emphasize dramatic pivotal beats in the plot. The narrative is aided by silence to focus the audience’s attention to specific parts of the plot. By using silence to accentuate the contrast in sonic variance between loud and soft, the director manipulates the aesthetic distance between the audience and characters.

**Conclusion:**

The successful use of silence in these five films is innovative and serves as a powerful tool that is effectively utilized in their soundtracks. Filmmakers must have a clear understanding of silence in order to take full advantage of its invaluable use as a design element. The fourth stem can only be established when purposeful silence is allowed to serve as a critical component within the soundtrack.
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