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Trauma Versus Sound: Is Diegetic Sound More Impactful?

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I lost my grandmother on my sixteenth birthday. Even though I am twenty years old now, I still feel dejected for a while on my birthday. And while I know that my grandma didn't mean to die on my birthday, it created a traumatic feeling for that date. Trauma can come from any experience in your life. An accident, a conversation with a family member, or even a natural disaster can cause an experience to turn traumatic. On the screen, it can be difficult to recreate the feeling that comes with a traumatic experience. Since various emotions can be connected to a traumatic experience such as anger or sadness, it might be hard to fully encapsulate the emotion through dialogue or camera techniques.

That does not mean that directors or companies haven't tried. Because trauma can create such a strong emotion in a person, it could be the right plotline to a film when you want your audience to connect deeply with the characters you have made. Since trauma is not reserved to a specific type of person, showing trauma is not reserved to a specific type of film genre. However, there are differences in how films want to show trauma. Sometimes a traumatic moment is spared of dialogue and taken over by a musical queue. Other times, a film focuses solely on the dialogue of the character going through their traumatic moment. Another version can be to only create a scene with the raw sound we hear in our daily lives. The question between these types of ideas comes to be: is one more impactful than the other? After studying multiple films that deal with trauma, I've deduced that diegetic sound is more impactful in invoking an emotional response within their audience. *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Bridge to Terabithia* (2007), and *Room* (2015) are films that deal with trauma, but only use diegetic sound when the significant point of the trauma becomes apparent to the storyline.

Little Miss Sunshine, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, follows a family taking their daughter to the "Little Miss Sunshine" beauty pageant in Redondo Beach, California.

What starts off as a lighthearted adventure between a dysfunctional family quickly becomes a story on how to deal with grief in various settings. The first character we see that seems to be going through something heavy is Steve Carell's character Frank, brother of Sheryl, who is in the hospital looking out a window. As the film progresses, we learn that Frank was in the hospital for trying to commit suicide. From being cheated on, to losing his title of being the number one Proust scholar, and ultimately losing his job, Frank does not seem to envision much for his future. The next person we see that is going through something emotionally is Dwayne Hoover, the teenage son. Dwayne desperately wants to become a pilot, so he has taken a vow of silence until he gets into the academy. His sister, Olive is the little girl who is trying to win the "Little Miss Sunshine" pageant but does not feel like she is pretty enough to win because she is not as skinny as the other girls. Trying to help her win the pageant is her grandpa Edwin who was evicted from his retirement facility and is addicted to snorting heroin. Someone who seems to never be on Olive's side is her father Richard who wants to become a life coach and a motivational speaker on how to "become a winner". At the heart of it all, Sheryl Hoover is the mother of this family who takes on the responsibility of every person under her roof.

The first traumatic scene that starts the film is when we see Frank in the hospital. We hear from the doctor offscreen that he tried to commit suicide while he looks outside the window of his room sort of in a haze. As Sheryl takes him home to be supervised, this is the first glimpse we get at all of the family members in the film, and this is where Frank tells Olive about what suicide is. Since she is so young, she does not fully understand the reasons behind why Frank wanted to die, but she does understand that he was sad. With a somewhat obvious plot point of everyone having to take Olive to the pageant, the whole family packs up their yellow Volkswagen van and travels all the way from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Redondo Beach,

California. When the family finally rests at a motel after experiencing terrible car troubles is where we get our second traumatic experience between the family and not from someone outside bringing it in. After Sheryl and Richard argue about their financial situations and rest, Olive comes into their room the next morning to tell them that Edwin won't wake up. What happened is that he snorted too much heroin and seemed to overdose in his sleep. Going back on the road after finishing at the hospital, Olive tries to play games with her brother to lighten the mood and forget about the road trip. As she shows him a brochure with color blind tests, the family realizes that Dwayne is colorblind. Because he is colorblind, he cannot become a pilot, which makes Dwayne have a complete meltdown on the side of the road. The film ends with Olive competing at the "Little Miss Sunshine" pageant, but she does not win the title. Instead, her entire family comes onstage with her and dances, realizing that throughout this entire journey that they only need each other and are content with what they have.

Bridge to Terabithia, directed by Gábor Csupó is a story that revolves around Jesse Aarons and his life as a twelve-year-old in Lark Creek. One day during his school year, Jesse meets a new girl names Leslie Burke. Although they do not become friends right away, Jesse and Leslie form a bond over a fictional world they create together called Terabithia. Terabithia is in the woods behind both of their houses where they must cross a creek with one long string of rope tied around a tree branch. As the film progresses, Jesse and Leslie become even closer, and keep going to Terabithia almost every day while still going to school. At school, Leslie, and Jesse both get bullied by numerous people, but Leslie tries to see the good in the people who are trying to do her harm. One of her bullies, Janice tells Leslie that she acts this way because she is abused at home by her father. This traumatic reveal allows Janice to show her true colors and allows Leslie and Janice to become friends. One day, Jesse's music teacher Ms. Edmunds tell him about a field

trip she would like him to go on. After getting permission to go while his mom is half asleep, he spends the entire day with his teacher at the field trip. As he comes home is when the entire movie shifts, and Jesse goes through the trauma of losing his best friend. As he was out, Leslie went to Terabithia by herself. As she was crossing over the creek, the rope broke, which threw her into the creek that was overflowed from rainwater.

As he is coming to terms with grief at such a young age, Jesse lashes out at everyone around him. He even lashes out and blames himself for the death of Leslie since he did not ask her to go with him on the field trip. After going to Leslie's parents' house and paying their respects, Jesse learns just how important he was to her as Leslie's father says that he was "the best friend she ever had". This makes his grief and his guilt even worse, which makes him start to push everyone even further away and become violent. After he finally concludes that there was nothing he could do, he tries to still see Terabithia as a good place and a safe place for him to escape. The end of the film shows Jesse taking his sister May Belle into Terabithia for the first time where it finally becomes a place for them both.

Room, directed by Lenny Abrahamson, follows the kidnapping of Joy Newsome when she was fifteen. For numerous years, Joy is kept locked in a shed by her attacker and eventually has his kid who she names Jack. At his fifth birthday, Joy comes up with a plan for them to escape the shed they are in, called "room" by Jack, and hopefully be free from her attacker. She decides to lie to "Old Nick", her kidnapper, and tell him that Jack is very sick and she does not know what to do. As she screams at him to go buy medicine to help him feel better, Joy and Jack practice Jack staying still inside a rug which Old Nick will carry. Joy does this to pretend that Jack died, and now Old Nick needs to go bury him. As he puts Jack in the back of his truck, Jack slowly starts to shimmy out of the rug and waits for the perfect opportunity to jump out of the

truck and run for help. At first Old Nick realizes that he is alive and tries to take him back, but he isn't successful. Old Nick gets back in his truck, and heads back to his house. As Jack is taken into police custody, the police ask him if he can retrace his steps enough back to where Room is. With his help, Joy is free of the shed, and both her and Jack can go back home to her parents.

Even though Joy and Jack are safe, it does not mean that their troubles have ended. Joy comes to the realization that within the years of her being kidnapped, all her friends have graduated and moved away, her parents divorced, and both are living separate lives. This makes Joy feel disconnected from her family, which in turn makes her spend even more time with Jack. Jack seems to be having it worse because he is becoming accustomed to everything around him. Since he was born in Room, all he knows is Room. The sunshine is new to him, likewise the feeling of grass on his toes, and meeting new people. As he tries to adjust the best way he can since he is only five, Joy starts to argue with herself on if leaving Room was the best decision for them both. Feeling like it was a terrible choice, Joy locks herself in the bathroom and tries to commit suicide. Jack finds her anyhow and alerts her parents to take her to the hospital. Finally being apart from each other allows both of them to grow individually, and learn more about the world they are in since it seems foreign to them both. After Joy is discharged from the hospital and realizes that she did the right thing, Jack and her start their journey on becoming everyday citizens and trying to put the past behind them. The film ends with both Joy and Jack going back to the shed where they were held in for so many years. Since he has learned so much of the world since then, Jack realizes that Room is small and did not have much for him to do. As he looks all around the shed, he says goodbye to everything he saw, which shows that he is letting go of the place he used to call home and ready to start anew with his mom and her family.

Now, what do these films have in common? All have trauma, grief, and acceptance. All deal with this idea of trauma within children if you are wanting to look at a deeper meaning of trauma in film and the connection it has with adolescence. The commonality that stands out the most between these films is how they use sound within these traumatic experiences between the characters. Although these films have a musical score in the background of scenes, it is not what drives the film. The biggest points of trauma within these films do not rely on a soundtrack. They instead rely on diegetic sound, which is what you can hear around you in your daily life. Trauma in real life does not have a musical queue so you know when to be sad, or angry, or content. If you are trying to convey this emotion in the purest form you can so your audience will connect with your storyline deeper, why should you add music? If you look back at the addition of sound in film, you realize that it is somewhat of a new phenomenon. Sound in films first appeared through a technology called sound-on-disc produced by Western Electric in 1919. This technology was made before the famous film *The Jazz Singer*, which everyone regards as the first film that had sound. “It was not the first sound film. It was not even Al Jolson’s first appearance for Vitaphone; he uttered his newly prophetic catch phrase, ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet’ in the 1926 short, *A Plantation Act*” (Grant). On the other hand, the *Jazz Singer* was the first film to show synchronized sound, which is in every film since.

Knowing this information addresses this question of why every film uses sound and a score. Not only is it a technological advancement that can further push your storyline, but it can help immerse your audience in the story you’re trying to tell in a better way than if it was a silent film. Despite that, do you need to have a musical queue to have your audience connect to your characters and your storyline, or can you do it through other means? Author Amedeo D’Adamo discusses that we don’t. “Like emotional detectives we are trained to look for clues, finding them

planted in production design, in lighting, in music, in dialogue, and then we use that information to understand that space's narrative nature and role and depth and what might happen next" (D'Amado). Despite the fact that the music could make the scene more impactful, you do not need it for every traumatic moment. In some instances, the music could take away the connection of the audience to the film because the sound could be overpowering the emotion that is trying to be displayed. Sbravatti Valerio brings up this discourse of how diegetic sound versus a score could create the same feeling. "in the same way, if music in a given film seems to emanate from the diegesis-even if there is no concrete and realistic source-we are allowed to believe that, according to the rules of that film narrative world, music can emanate directly from a character" (Sbravatti p. 21). The major scenes between these films that I think show off this notion of not needing non-diegetic sound to convey emotion is when Dwyane realizes he is colorblind, Jesse punches one of his classmates who is belittling the death of Leslie, and when Jack finds Joy in the bathroom. All these scenes depict a negative emotion in different ways. Dwyane screams out loud to himself and starts to sob into the ground; Jesse resorts to violence because of his anger, and Jack calls out for help since he knows that he cannot do much. A study done by Inna Arnaudova and Muriel A. Hagenaars shows how much a film showing a negative emotion, or anything that resembles negativity, can physically disrupt an audience member. Through their study of using four different types of films to illicit an emotional response, the films they deemed negative showed data where heart rate changes can happen depending on the individual and the specific trauma depicted. Additionally, various types of feelings were higher while watching the negative films such as immobility, embarrassment, and disgust (Arnaudova). Although a director might not want such a psychical reaction to their film, this does aid in the idea that you do not need music specifically to create an emotional response in your audience.

Music can be beneficial to a film's story line. If we look at this study in a different light, perhaps no film maker wants to have their audience members react psychically to what they are showing at all. Because of that, if they still want to show something traumatic and connect with their audience emotionally, they can still show a scene that deals with something traumatic but have music take over the dialogue. This is done within all the films I have picked in different scenes. As I have stated before, all these films rely on both their diegetic and non-diegetic sounds to tell their story. Both have the diegetic and non-diegetic sound creates a style that follows with the story rather than taking away from it. Only having non-diegetic sound could take away from the narrative of the story because the film might not be using the style of sound to the fullest. "It is this pretense that is responsible for the illusion of the 'reality' of the diegesis and the boundary between what is diegetic and what is not, and for the resulting illusion that music is located on one side of the divide or the other, and that it can move across it in a variety of ways" (Heldt, pp.54). Looking at Heldt's idea of diegetic and non-diegetic sound can connect to this idea that a film might not be fully realized by their audience if it does not have both. Within the context of trauma onscreen, if both soundscapes are not present your audience might not connect to what you are showing as much as they would if both were heard. For example, in other traumatic events in all the films I picked there is a score that comes in later within the scene. This shows that music can impact an audience just as much as having dialogue only. The difference between these scenes nonetheless could show the style of the story at this moment, and the impact it could have on their audience members.

One idea that people can forget is that having no score is a style. Yes, the style might seem more fleshed out if there is music involved, but if a film crew does a respectable job of showing off the style of the story and can connect emotionally to their audience, they do not need

a music queue. “Winters argues that this view is bound to the erroneous assumption that the experience of characters and their imaginary worlds is much like our real-world experience, where we do not live and act to a soundtrack, and where the music or sound that we hear has a discernible source” (Yacavone pp. 22-23). This quote ties back the idea on how films are supposed to depict real life, while still having an idea of escapism. For the feeling of escapism, you do not need music to connect to the idea of wanting to get away. The dialogue, a camera shot, lighting, and various other techniques could show an audience that this story is real, but it is also fantastical. *Little Miss Sunshine* shows this with the family dancing together at the pageant and finally connecting as a family. *Bridge to Terabithia* shows this with special effects of the world of Terabithia so you can feel like you are there, and these characters are real. *Room* shows this with the camera movements that follow Jack’s awed perception of the world.

At the end of the day, the connection of the emotional effect of a movie to its audience relies on the individual. This does not mean that film makers don’t try different ways to connect deeper with their audience members. One way you can do that is to show an emotion in its rawest form like how it could be felt in reality. No music, no extravagant camera change, no lighting difference. Just pure, raw feelings shown on screen through different characters. Although music can make a difference to a scene, so can the acting, or the camera movement, or any other aspect of the film. Judging the music alone cannot give you the satisfaction of understanding a film, just as focusing on the lighting cannot do the same. Despite needing every facet of a film to make a conclusion of your feelings towards it, there are ways that a film can make you experience it differently than if it was not there such as having non-diegetic traumatic scenes.

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