

WHO LISTENS TO THE *WATCHMEN*?
A SOUND STUDY ON THE FILMIC ADAPTATION *WATCHMEN*

QUEM ESCUTA OS *WATCHMEN*?
UM ESTUDO DE SOM NA ADAPTAÇÃO FÍLMICA *WATCHMEN*

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RESUMO: Analisar a função dos sons nos filmes pode revelar-se complicado. Ao assistir um filme, os indivíduos tendem a prestar mais atenção aos aspectos visuais. Assim, o som é geralmente esquecido e tomado como um simples pano de fundo para a encenação e a narrativa. A presente discussão foca na importância do som no filme *Watchmen* (2009), adaptado da história em quadrinhos epônima. A análise do som baseada na teoria de Bordwell e Thompson (1996) revela: 1) a importância do som para os filmes; 2) o uso de músicas para ilustrar certas situações históricas do enredo; 3) melhor entendimento do uso dos sons diegéticos e não-diegéticos na ficção.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Watchmen*. Análise sonora. Adaptação fílmica. História em quadrinhos.

ABSTRACT: Sound can be a tricky aspect in film analysis. Upon watching a movie, people tend to pay attention to visual aspects. Thus, sound is generally forgotten, observed as a merely background to *mise-en-scène* and narrative. The present discussion raises the relevance of sound in the film *Watchmen* (2009), adapted from the eponymous graphic novel. The sound analysis based on Bordwell and Thompson's theory (1996) suggests that the observation of such aspect unveils: (1) the importance of sound phenomenon to the movies; (2) the use of songs to illustrate certain historical situations; (3) a better understanding of the different use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in fiction.

KEYWORDS: *Watchmen*. Sound study. Filmic adaptation. Graphic novel.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the talking movies in the 1920's, the use of sound changed profoundly the aesthetics of movies. The filmic language would not be the same without this technological change in motion picture. From that time on, images started to be synchronized with sound, discourses and music which somehow represented the reality as such. One can see that the use of sound is a historical mark and this happening occurred as Martin points out:

[...] cinema became *sound-on-film*, and after all *spoken*, a little by accident in 1926, when an American filmmaker producer, Warner, was going bankrupt, tried it as a desperate solution, in front of other

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companies that were moving back by fearing a commercial failure (Martin 2003: 108, *our translation*).

The use of sound was received with certain skepticism by some critics and movie makers and with enthusiasm by the general public. It seems that the use of sound revolutionized the language of movies that even Chaplin was one of those who resisted to such a new concept. He once said that “the *talkies*? I hate them. They are going to put an end to the oldest art in the world, the pantomimic art. They wiped out the great beauty of silence” (Martin 2003: 109, *our translation*). While Chaplin still considered the use of gesture the best artifact of film, the Russian filmmakers Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, in 1928, took a historical position to express their view on the matter. They proclaimed that the use of sound was not as incompatible as some critics argued, but it was a resourcefulness opportunity. At that time, in their famous manifest they wrote: “the sound-on-film is a double-edged sword, and it is likely that it has been used according to the law of least effort, i.e., simply to satisfy the curiosity of the public” (Martin 2003: 109, *our translation*).

Over the years, and especially in the 21st century, sound has become an indispensable power and has portrayed faithfully cultural and contextual aspects to films. One can see that the introduction of this new language goes beyond the sound expression itself; it has expressed values and ideologies through the use of music, noise and sound effect bringing a real sense to the motion picture.

Sound is a tricky aspect in film analysis, because as Bordwell and Thompson (1996: 315) explain, “sound can achieve very strong effects and yet remain quite unnoticeable”. When watching a movie, people tend to pay attention to visual aspects. Thus, sound is generally forgotten, and observed as a merely background to the *mise-en-scène* and the narrative. The present discussion raises the importance of sound in the film *Watchmen* (2009), adapted from the eponymous graphic novel, written by Alan Moore. The film director is the American Zack Snyder, the music is from Tyler Bates, and the mix studio is Universal Studios. Sound analysis in this study is divided in two main aspects: non-diegetic sound focusing on music and diegetic sound.

2. ANALYZING DIEGETIC AND NON-DIEGETIC SOUND IN THE MOVIE

Non-diegetic sound is defined by Bordwell and Thompson (1996: 30) as “[...] coming from a source outside the story world”. In addition to this, they suggest that “music added to enhance the film’s action is the most common type of nondiegetic sound” (1996: 330). The songs used in the film are mostly from the 1960’s: Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” (1965), Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are a-Changin’” (1964), “Desolation Row” (1965), and “All Along the Watchtower” (1967), and most of them have some reference in the graphic novel. The songs used in the film are more than simply background to the scenes. They add meanings and context to the film.

An interesting example of meaningful and contextualizing music is the folk song “The Times They Are a-Changin’”, that is played in the beginning of the story within the credits (00:05:43). While we, as viewers, are presented with a brief summary of the *Watchmen*’s group story, Bob Dylan’s song comes in a nondiegetic way, mixed with diegetic sound. This music is full of significance. Its title resumes its content, the times

are changing, and people should change through it, if they do not want to “sink like a stone”, as the music alerts; which is precisely what is observed in this song’s scene. The first group of Watchmen heroes is gradually disintegrated and their altruism starts to be questioned by the society. This group is then replaced by the main characters of the film, the second Watchmen group. This latter group, in the present diegesis of the film, is already disintegrated, and is no longer saving lives.

It is important to highlight that this same song can also be ironical. Elements of the image may suggest that in fact some things are not changing, as the song says. As a brief story review, this scene is intertwined with moments of the Watchmen members, and real history facts. On the one hand, the characters’ lives are changing; on the other hand, the historical events are quite similar. Thus, a reference to the World War II appears in a newspaper, announcing the Japanese surrender. The scene continues showing the disintegration of the first Watchmen group, and a new prop appears, also in a newspaper, in which the heading announces: “Russ Have a Bomb”, this time a clear reference to the Cold War. Then, it starts revealing moments of the second group of vigilantes, and a close-up on a television screen exposes news from the Vietnam War. The shot ends with the television showing the reelection of Nixon for the third time. In short, while the Watchmen group is suffering changes, history may be repeating itself with three following wars and with the three reelections of Nixon.

Not only is the graphic from the film similar to the comic novel, but also the songs used. Sound is not really a strong element in graphic novels, but *Watchmen*, in particular, makes extensive connections to songs which are meaningful to the plot. “Times They Are a-Changin” appears in an ad slogan of a perfume called Nostalgia (00:11:32) in the graphic novel. This song is also the title of this chapter. Its climax is the revelation that Adrian is behind the Comedian’s and other characters’ death. In the first scene, the Comedian is watching a quite sensual advertisement on the television, the song being played is “Unforgettable” by Nat King Cole and the product is the same Nostalgia perfume. The song creates an atmosphere of calmness, which is suddenly interrupted by a stranger, who abruptly crashes the door. While the Comedian and the stranger fight, the song is unrealistically lowered in the Comedian’s lines. Besides, after shooting the television, the song continues even louder than before. Thus, in this particular scene, the music begins as diegetic, but along the scene it becomes nondiegetic.

“Unforgettable” also appears in the graphic novel (00:07:13), but in another scene. The lyrics are also shown as coming from a Nostalgia perfume commercial on television, but it is during Dan and Laurie’s first attempt at making love. This attempt does not have any kind of background music in the film; most probably because it was used in the fight scene from the beginning, and it may also be because it is an attempt; Dan fails to have sex with her. Thus, the lack of music would expose his lack of interest in that moment. Later on in the film, when they do accomplish their deed (01:44:46), the nondiegetic music is “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen. This music in itself is quite ironic due to its combination of sexuality with religious references: “Hallelujah”, “You say I took the name in vain”, among others. This same ironic tone is transferred to the film scene; their success in having sex is emphasized by the music as an ironic miracle.

Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” adds an interesting view to this nondiegetic music analysis. In the film, the song appears in Rorschach and Dan’s flying scene to Antarctica (02:09:13), when trying to save the world. But it begins in a previous scene, anticipating the events, besides linking the scenes. This song version is

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played by Jimi Hendrix, who is another pretty iconic figure from the 1960's. The music describes that "All along the watchtower, princes kept the view" and also that "Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl,/ Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl". Then Rorschach and Dan might be the representation of the two riders approaching. This same scene appears in the graphic novel in chapter 10, titled "Two Riders Were Approaching..." whose title is also a reference to Bob Dylan's song.

The first chapter entitled "At midnight, all the agents..." in the graphic novel is a reference to Bob Dylan's song "Desolation Row". The title is one of the one hundred and twenty lines of this song. It is quite an extensive song. Thus, one could easily discuss heavily on the possible meanings of this song to the graphic novel. The present discussion only emphasizes the stanza in which the title appears. This stanza describes a "superhuman crew" that "Come out and round up everyone/ That knows more than they do"; that is the theme of *Watchmen*. They are superhumans, who work as vigilantes, but who are not necessarily doing good to society, they may sometimes come, round people up, and scar them; that is the reason why Rorschach starts investigating the death of one of the Watchmen. These ideas are central in both graphic novel and film. Just to mention, in the film, this song appears only in the end with the credits, in a new version by My Chemical Romance. These five songs discussed above show that the film frequently attempts to approach the graphic novel, despite their different use of the songs.



(Moore 1986: chapter 1, page 6)

Diegetic sound, in opposition to nondiegetic, “has a source in the story world”, and “is often hard to notice as such. It may seem to come naturally from the world of the film” (Bordwell & Thompson 1996: 330). The diegetic music from the film, “Me and Bobby McGee”, does not appear in the graphic novel, but it is worth mentioning. The scene is placed in a Vietnam bar. After helping the United States win the Vietnam War, Doctor Manhattan and the Comedian are talking when a Vietnam pregnant girl comes telling the Comedian that they should talk about their baby. The scene ends with Doctor Manhattan brooding over the girl’s dead body. Throughout this scene, “Me and Bobby McGee” is realistically heard within other diegetic sounds, such as noises of other people talking and walking, and glasses being broken. It is also important to note that the music helps contextualizing the scene. Written by Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster, it became success in Janis Joplin’s voice in the beginning of the 1970’s. The Vietnam War started in 1955, and ended in 1975. Thus, the music is coherent to the period presented in the scene. Besides, it may also indicate how the American culture was already present in Vietnam, impairing not only warlike and economic aspects, but also the cultural aspects.

Janis Joplin’s music is also an offscreen sound, because the viewers do not see the source of the sound, which is probably coming from a radio or a jukebox. Further, Bordwell and Thompson add that “offscreen sound can suggest place extending beyond the visible action” (1996: 331). That is what happens in the before mentioned scene. The viewer might perceive that the bar is bigger than the place the characters are interacting, because the viewer hears offscreen noises.

Diegetic sound is divided by Bordwell and Thompson in other categories. It can be offscreen or onscreen, as it was already mentioned, and internal or external. The authors explain that “external diegetic sound is that which we as spectators take to have a physical source in the scene”, and continue clarifying that “internal diegetic sound is that which comes from ‘inside’ the mind of a character; it is subjective” (1996: 333). External diegetic sounds are very common, and most of the time unnoticeable, since they are quite ordinary. The bar scene in Vietnam, for instance, is full of external sounds, such as the glasses’ sound, people talking, the music, among others.

3. CHARACTERS & SOUND IN THE FILM AND IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

The film is told by a subjective narrator, Rorschach. Thus, many moments of the film are seen through his point of view. But as a character, he is not omniscient, and then other scenes are seen through other characters’ point of view, or even by an omniscient camera point of view. The story is basically told by Rorschach’s journal. Therefore, the second scene begins with his voice saying: “Rorschach’s journal, October 12th, 1985”. The references to his journal are progressive along the narration, which ends up when Rorschach is already dead, and the viewer discovers that his journals were sent to a newspaper. As a result, the scenes narrated by Rorschach have an internal diegetic sound, since they are from a character’s mind, or even his journals, since they are quite subjective. This narration adds suspense to the plot, because the viewer unveils the story within Rorschach, actually through Rorschach’s view. The same happens in the graphic novel, since right in its first panel, the readers have the indication that he is the narrator.

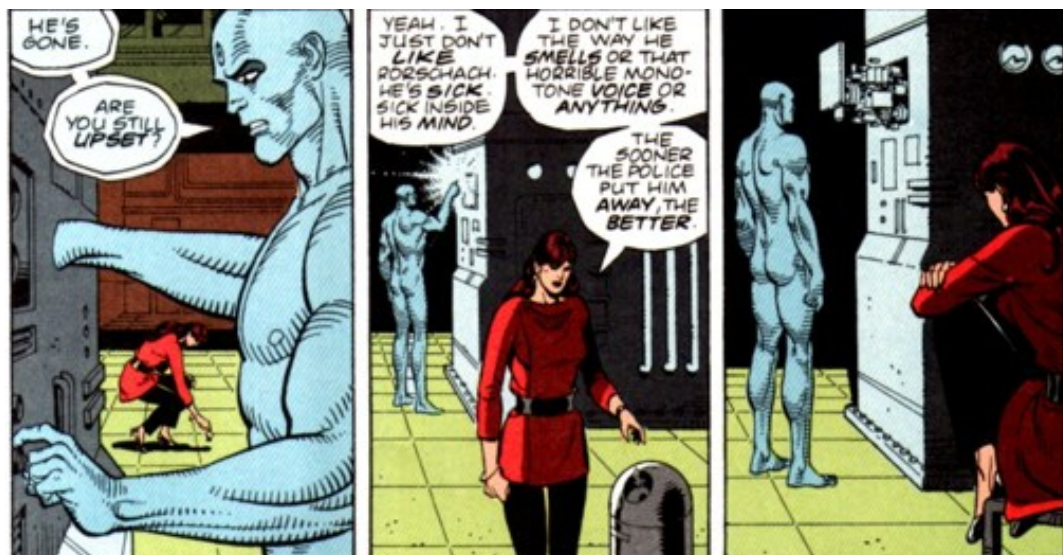


(Moore 1986: chapter 1, page 1)

Rorschach's voice is quite particular. In the graphic novel, the author chose to express his peculiar voice by having cracks on his speech balloons, as can be seen in the first two panels. The last panel is one example of how Rorschach's voice changes within his identity. When he uses the mask his voice becomes particular, expressed by the cracks in his voice boxes (see panels 1 and 2). The exceptions happen when Rorschach does not use his mask, his voice becomes ordinary (see panel 3). This only happens three times in the graphic novel, when he screams to Jon (Dr. Manhattan) to kill him (chapter 12: 24) (panel 3), when he is talking to the psychiatrist (chapter 6: 02), and when he is a child in his flashback (chapter 6: 03). When he loses the mask he is Walter Joseph Kovacs, and has an ordinary voice. Despite of this peculiarity, Laurie is the only character who mentions him, she makes reference to his voice, "I don't like the way he smells or that horrible monotone voice or anything" (chapter 1: 23). The monotone voice is expressed by never having his words in bold, even Dr Manhattan needs it. With the mask on, he becomes Rorschach, and the squiggly (visually in the graphic novel) and monotone (as described by Laurie) is present, as a feature of the character. In the film, Rorschach's voice is also peculiar. As it is a different medium, the film does not need to explain his voice visually. The cracked voice boxes and the bold letters from the graphic novel are substituted by a unique voice timbre.



(Moore, 1986: chapter 12, page 24)



(Moore 1986: chapter 1, page 23)

Internal diegetic sound is also observed in the character Jon, or Doctor Manhattan. He was a physicist, and because of an accident in his laboratory he was taken outside physical realm, gaining the power to manipulate any kind of material. Along time, Jon starts distancing himself from humanity; he no longer understands humans' feelings and reactions. When he isolates himself on Mars, and reflects about his past life while he was still a human being (00:01:04), the viewer hears his voice narrating his story, also in a subject, and consequently internal diegetic sound.

The character Jon also carries another interesting aspect. According to Scott Hecker, the film's supervising sound editor, some of Jon's sounds are whale sounds:

The "electric" Dr. Manhattan character was another sonic challenge, Hecker says. "He's tortured and conflicted and he has human emotions, but he's trapped in this god-like [form], so we tried to articulate his feelings with various different sounds that would convey his emotions, whether they be happy, sad or angry." Among the sounds that were used

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for the character were moaning whales. “But I hate to even say that,” Hecker continues, “because I don't want people sitting there listening for whale sounds. They've been worked with, modulated and pitched and what not, and it's very subtle. I don't want the audience thinking about it; you want them to tune into the emotional quality you're going for throughout the film. (Jackson 2010: *website*)

This kind of sound fits in Bordwell and Thompson's explanations that “the filmmaker must select sounds that will fulfill a particular function” (1996: 321). But, as Hecker emphasizes, he does not wish the public to hear whales. He wanted to create a specific emotional atmosphere. Bordwell and Thompson remember that “sound can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image” (1996: 316). In order to shape the viewer's perception of the image, the whale sound had to be manipulated, so that the public would not notice it, but perceive it as a diegetic sound. As a result, what could sound unrealistic, ends up being quite adequate to that particular character and scenes.

An interesting scene in relation to sound is Jon's television interview (01:01:00). While Jon is on a television studio saying that the world is dangerous despite the wars Laurie, his girlfriend, and Dan are fighting on the street with gangsters. The images are superimposed, proving that Jon is right, and that danger is really everywhere. Besides the violence, sound is also present in both images. While we are seeing the fight, we continue hearing Jon's speech on violence. This superimposition of sound gives emphasis, and adds meaning to Jon's words.

Bordwell and Thompson also point out that “the sound cue for some visual element may anticipate that element and relay our attention to it” (1996: 316). The scene in which Laurie is teleported by Doctor Manhattan (00:32:35) illustrates Bordwell and Thompson's remark. The scene is placed in an unknown bathroom, we hear a lighting sound, and suddenly Laurie appears on the screen. We hear her being teleported before she actually appears on the screen. The same happens when Rorschach is at Moloch's place, an enemy from the past, and is discovered by the police (01:22:50). The scream of the police officer demanding Rorschach's surrender is heard before we see the policemen. As Rorschach, we are also surprised with the police.

Diegetic offscreen sound is interesting because it may direct the viewer's attention, and also place the characters on the scene. The viewer may not see the characters or the objects, but by their noise, the viewer may perceive where they may be. That was lightly discussed in the Vietnam bar scene. Moreover, this is observed in Dan's house (01:33:06). His fire alarm rings, and the viewer is seeing Dan in the kitchen cooking. Hence, the viewer is as surprised as Dan, and the former attention is guided to the surprising noise. But, a previous shot showed Laurie sneaking on Dan's machines, and then the attentive viewer may link the shots, and anticipate the cause of the fire alarm. This situation also happens when Adrian, considered the most intelligent man of the planet and an ex-vigilante from the *Watchmen*, is in a meeting with important petroleum owners. The elevator ring interrupts the scene, announcing the arrival of someone relevant. The scene goes in a slow motion. The elevator sound creates suspense, and guides the viewer's attention to the elevator. When the door opens, the viewer already expects what may be coming: a man with a gun shooting everybody. Before the shooting sound begins, a raising music intensifies the scene, and a girl's scream gives an abrupt shift of volume, adding emotion to the scene.

4. SONGS REFERENCES ON THE GRAPHIC NOVEL NOT PORTRAYED IN THE FILM

Chapter 1 also makes another song reference, as it portrays someone on the street with a portable sound system listening to Iggy Pop's "Neighborhood Thread" (panel 5), the excerpt from the lyrics here seems to introduce the reader to the unstable situation on the story.



(Moore 1986: chapter 1, page 10)

The second chapter also makes reference to a song on its title, which is "Absent Friends". As the drawing portrays a burial, the meaning of the title becomes obvious, but not the song reference, which will only be clear at the end of the chapter, when the song is cited again and expresses Dan's feelings.



ABSENT FRIENDS

(Moore 1986: chapter 2, page 3)



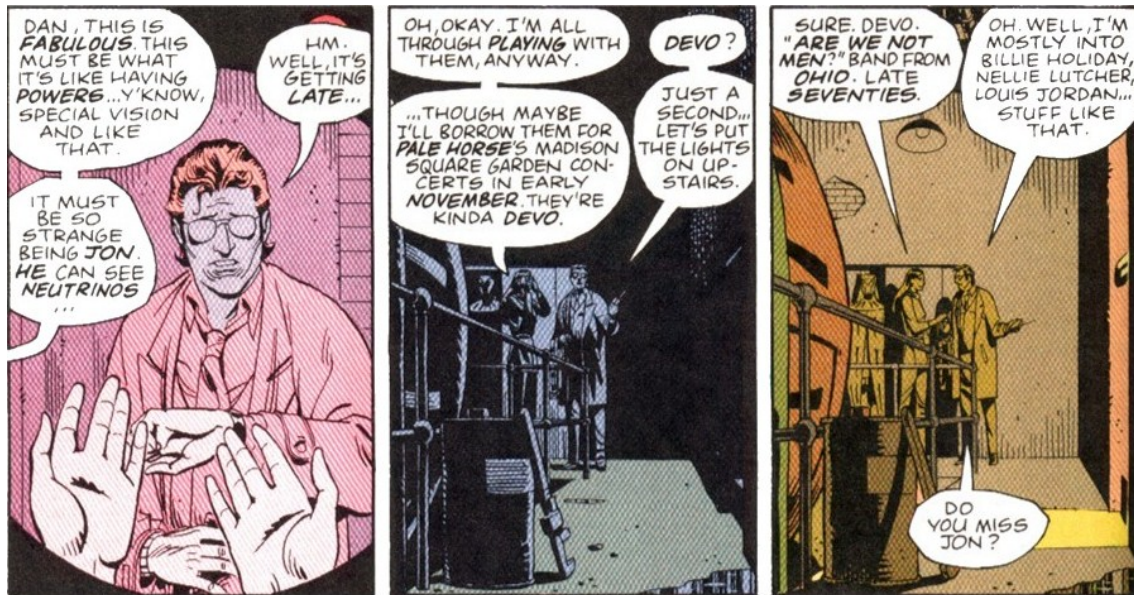
(Moore 1986: chapter 2, page 28)

In chapter 3, the author makes another reference to a song, we have someone painting Dr. Manhattan's door singing "Walking On The Moon", from The Police. The reference is interesting considering he is painting, and is interrupted, by the only man who can easily walk on the moon.

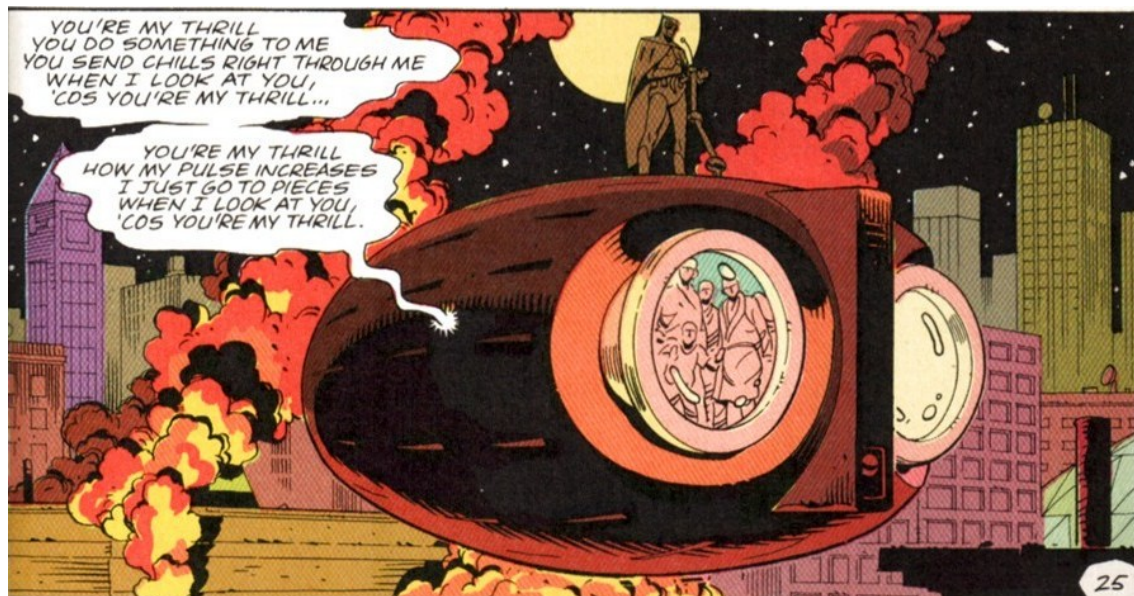


(Moore 1986: chapter 3, page 19)

In chapter 7, Laurie makes a reference to a DEVO's album, "Are we not men?", illustrating how her musical taste differs from Dan's, who cites as his favorites Billy Holliday, Nellie Lutcher and Lois Jordan, artists symbol of a decade before DEVO. In this chapter, Dan and Laurie have a special moment, reviving their old thrills as Watchmen. The author chose Billie Holliday's "You're My Thrill" to play along the scene, representing all the emotions the characters were experiencing at that moment.



(Moore 1986: chapter 7, page 10)



(Moore 1986: chapter 7, page 25)

The last chapter, 12, similarly to chapter 10, also has a song naming it (panel 11) and the same song as a citation at the end (panel 12): John Cale's "Sanities", the final message and last words on *Watchmen*.



A STRONGER LOVING WORLD

(Moore 1986: chapter 12, page 6)



(Moore 1986: chapter 12, page 32)

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF SILENCE

Finally, the last remark on sound is about silence. In this action film, silence transmits the feeling of calmness. This aspect can be observed following Doctor Manhattan's interview scene. He is disturbed by the view of his last girlfriend having

cancer, possibly because of his powers, and also because of the journalists surrounding him with intense questions and accusations. This is a scene with dense sounds, creating the perception of a confusing environment. The scene is cut to the Mars's surface in completely silence, contrasting heavily with the tumultuous scene showed before. Then, the camera shows Doctor Manhattan on Mars, all alone and peaceful.

6. FINAL REMARKS

As it could be seen along the article, the analysis of sound in a film requires much attention, since it proved to be a tricky aspect. More than paying attention to the sound, it is required attention as well to the visual features and to the context in which the film was produced. As one can see, the latter are intimately related to the use of music and they have a direct connection to the meaning of lyrics. This relation could be perceived through a close listening to the songs and other sound phenomena used in the movie *Watchmen* based on the theory of Bordwell and Thompson. As a matter of fact and interest, we researched more about the use of sound in the graphic novel intended to find more clues on the use of sound in the filmic adaptation. The study of the graphic novel and its relation to the sound shown to be very reasonable since most of the adapted films leave out some parts of the plot or even the use of other elements, such as sound phenomena itself. And in this case, the director of the movie seemed to be very accurate when using the songs and the sounds from the graphic novel.

We sought to demonstrate the importance of sound phenomena: be it silence to express calmness, be it lots of noises as glasses breaking to better portray an action scene, or the reliable use of shots to show the war period.

Besides, we tried to show how songs may be used to illustrate historical moments, to place readers/viewers in a specific context. They definitely represented the changes throughout the plot related to time and they faithfully translated personal attitudes and feelings of the characters.

Finally, we intended to shed some light on the different use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds and how these aspects can help the director/author reach objectives and can contribute to a better understanding of the plot.

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