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KILLING THE JOKE: SOUND DESIGN PRACTICES IN HORROR AND COMEDY FILM AS CONTEXT-INDEPENDENT TECHNIQUES

ABSTRACT

Genre films such as horror and comedy have developed a rich vocabulary of sound design practices, defined by both their semantic significance and their psychoacoustic effects. This paper argues that by analyzing and deconstructing these practices to understand the relationship they have to both semantic and psychoacoustic significance, and how they influence each other, they can then be applied to realistic filmmaking to achieve the intended affective state, i.e., fear and laughter, by isolating the context-independent aspects from their context-dependent (semantic) counterparts.

Practical application of these practices to two short films, one horror and the other a comedy, reveals that horror is more suited for context-independent applications of sound, due to reflexive responses that bypass cognition. Comedy, on the other hand, is more deeply tied to these semantics and semantic subversion, as the psychological mechanism of laughter necessitates cognitive understanding of said semantics to spot incongruities.

What this means for sound design practices is that there are some possibilities of applying sound design practices as context-independent, but they remain, however, forever bound to the respective genre semantics, as it always necessitates a degree of mitigation to achieve the intended affective state.

Further research might enlighten the degree to which these context-independent practices could be applied to other genres, and to what degree comedy relies on the subversion of overall film semantics that are not genre exclusive.