

Misaligned Audiovisual Relationship: Analysis Report of Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)

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Abstract: This study analyzes Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) to explore how deliberate audiovisual misalignment reshapes cinematic storytelling. Through close examination of diegetic sound design, research found that Leone subverts visual dominance by positioning sound as an autonomous narrative agent. Key sequences (e.g., the train station ambush and McBain massacre) demonstrate techniques such as anempathetic sound, synchresis, and repetitive musical themes that generate tension, foreshadow violence, and convey psychological depth independently of imagery. By dissynchronizing auditory and visual information, the film constructs a sonic architecture where dissonance redirects audience perception, challenges classical hierarchies, and enables sound to drive plot and build empathy. This redefines sound's role from subsidiary element to coequal narrative force in Western cinema.

1. Introduction

Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968)^[1] stands as a watershed in cinematic sound design, yet its radical subversion of audiovisual hierarchies remains underexplored. While scholarship acknowledges Ennio Morricone's iconic score, this study contends that Leone's deliberate misalignment of sound and image fundamentally reconfigures narrative agency. Challenging classical models privileging visual dominance, the film positions sound as an autonomous force driving tension, foreshadowing, and psychological depth.

Through close analysis of diegetic strategies, this research demonstrates how Leone's dissonant audiovisual architecture: (1) dissolves sensory hierarchies, enabling sound to independently advance plot and theme; (2) generates narrative anxiety by deferring source identification; (3) constructs an immersive ecology where environmental sounds supplant dialogue as primary narrative carriers.

Overall, this paper argues that *Once Upon a Time in the West* pioneers a paradigm where sound transcends accompaniment to become narrative ontology.

2. Soundtrack Analysis of Once Upon a Time in the West

This section conducts a granular examination of *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s soundscape. By

dissecting Leone's strategic deployment of audiovisual language, we demonstrate how acoustic elements (e.g., anempathetic effects, offscreen hermeneutics) function as primary narrative agents. The following close reading of key sequences validates that sonic autonomy, not auxiliary, drives the film's psychological tension and thematic resonance.

2.1 A Detailed Exposition of the Soundtrack

The film begins with an old wooden door slowly opening, making a squeaky sound. We can see that the source of the sound comes from the door, so it is *onscreen* and *diegetic sound*. The camera then shifts to an old man (the manager of the train station) writing on a blackboard in the room; the sound of chalk rubbing against the blackboard is simultaneous with the close-up of the writing, using *synchresis*. The sound of a windmill can be heard repeatedly, but the screen does not show the object of the sound source (it is not known at this point that the source of the sound comes from the windmill); therefore, it is *offscreen*^[2] and *diegetic sound*. The sound of the door or windmill does not disturb the old man, which suggests that this is *ambient sound* to which he is accustomed.

However, after a few seconds, there is a clear sound of footsteps accompanied by close-ups of legs and feet. Immediately after the image moves up to show the face and full body of a cowboy, *sound hermeneutic* is used here; that is, explaining where the sound occurs.^[3] The three cowboys close the old man in a wardrobe soon afterwards, and the camera transitions from the old man's perspective to the cowboys's perspective. Immediately after the sound of the door closing, the image turns black, but sound filling in the blanks of the video transitions.

Table 1 Sound design of the core scenes in the film.

Music/Sound Cues	Entry in Film (hour:min:sec)	Exit in Film (hour:min:sec)	Scene Details	Music notes
Door sound	00:00:04	00:00:09	A slowly opening door.	<i>Onscreen and diegetic sound</i> : The sound source comes from the door and is in the frame; <i>Foley</i> : Realistic windmill sounds produce <i>synchresis</i> .
Old windmill	00:02:48	00:03:56	The cowboys take over the old man's home and rest.	This is an <i>audio tracking shot</i> . The constant sound of windmill changes from <i>offscreen</i> to <i>onscreen</i> , and its volume from quiet to loud.
"Death Rattle"	00:11:15	00:12:01	'Harmonica' appears across from the three cowboys, playing his harmonica.	At first, the harmonica sounds are <i>offscreen and diegetic sound</i> . From 11:40, the mystery man appears, and the harmonica becomes <i>onscreen and diegetic sound</i> .
"The Man with a Harmonica"	00:21:14	00:24:12	Frank and his team burst into McBain's house and kill his entire family, including the animals.	The <i>original scoring (nondiegetic and offscreen)</i> occurs at 21:39, beginning with 'march-style' music, with a sustained snare drum beat and cello that accentuates the menace of the five cowboys. At 24:12, the sound of Frank shooting the child overlaps with the sound of a train's siren (<i>multitrack sound and onscreen</i>).
The suspense to be continued	00:24:12	00:24:34	Jill, who is married to McBain, arrives by train.	The train whistle travels from far to near, and the volume from quiet to loud (<i>onscreen and diegetic sound</i>) as if nothing had happened after the family died (<i>anempathetic sound</i>).

At 00:03:00, there is an *audio tracking shot*, during which the windmill continues to appear in the

image to explain the unknown source of the previous sound (became *onscreen*). When the distance of the windmill changes, the timbre is entirely different in each frame. As the train whistles (*onscreen and diegetic*), the cowboys turn around and the harmonica sound appears. However, the scene is obscured by sand and dust to engender a sense of suspense, and it is unclear from whom the sound came (*offscreen*). After a while, the camera first shows a close-up of the harmonica (*onscreen*), and then, the mysterious man with the harmonica slowly appears. A confrontation ensues, culminating in the mysterious man killing the three cowboys.

Next, the scene switches to a pleasant field (00:14:46), with the sounds of insects and birds creating a warm atmosphere. In five minutes, a little girl named Mary starts to sing (*internal sound*¹). After a while, the singing stops abruptly, and the scene cuts to Mary's point of view, indicating that the sound of birds in the distance distracted her (00:20:22). This sets the stage for a subsequent plot.

Predictably, a tragedy occurs (00:21:14). As the scene moves, it shows that McBain's entire family has been killed. A harmonica theme similar to the previous one reappears (*offscreen*), expresses the violence of the killers (*music expresses emotion*).

At the end of the extract, Frank kills McBain's son, and the sound of the gunshot and train whistle overlap (*multitrack sound and onscreen*), as if the boy's death did not affect anything, showing a sense of unconcern (*anempathetic sound*²).

For details on the film sound design, please refer to Table 1 above.

2.2 Assessment of Key Techniques and Approaches

In the *Once Upon a Time in the West*, audiovisual dislocation was used to cause mismatch, inconsistency or contradiction between visual information and auditory information, resulting in differences in time, space and content between what the audience or perceiver saw and heard, thus breaking the normal audiovisual perception experience. This approach is comparable to Michel Chion's hypothesis of "de-acousmatize"^[4]; that is, the partial body is first shown in the image. For example, sound of footsteps appears at the beginning of the film, however, the camera first focuses on a foot and then slowly moves up rather than directly indicating the object that made the sound. Here, the foot is not the source of the sound, the person who moves is. Furthermore, when the three cowboys are waiting for someone in the desert, the sound of a harmonica is heard first, with the presentation of the harmonica itself accompanied by gradual fading of the dust on the screen. Subsequently, the camera slowly moves away to provide a full view of the man playing the harmonica. Similar to the previous example, the harmonica here cannot create sound by itself, it is a man playing that did so.

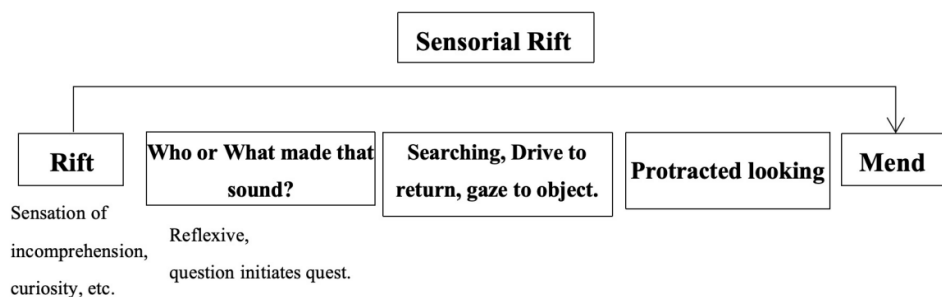


Figure 1: An outline of 'rift' to 'mend' structure.

¹Internal Sound: a sound that comes from a person or object in a movie.

²In movies, anempathetic sound is music or sounds that are indifferent to tragic or tragic events occurring in a scene. The role of this soundtrack is mainly to create an atmosphere that is not in harmony with the mood of the scene, thereby enhancing the tension and discomfort of the audience.

Durrand, from cognitive point of view, defines this approach as a "sensorial rift". He believes that 'audio-visual dislocations create a "rift" (Figure 1) within the intersensory relationship and invoke an anxiety-driven process aimed at mending the partnership by visually locating the source of the sound'.^[5]

This approach has two primary purposes. The first is to reduce the audience fatigue that occurs when auditioning for long periods of synchronisation. When the sound suddenly rings out while the corresponding content in the image has not yet appeared, it will immediately arouse questions in the audience's hearts and trigger curiosity. The audience is made to experience a sense of unease and tension by audiovisual dissonance, rather than monotony. As Nick Crossley stated, "audition desynchronisation causes one to experience a kind of anxiety that can be generated by the realisation that one is being watched".^[6] For instance, if the mysterious sound of harmonica is heard first, the audience will involuntarily wonder who or what situation has caused this sound. Thus, they will be full of expectations for the upcoming picture, and their attention will also be highly concentrated on the screen. Then they eagerly would like to obtain more information to answer the doubts. In this way, the director can direct the audience's attention to the key information or clues that the film wants to highlight in advance.

The second purpose is to achieve a sense of belonging by lengthy stay and expectations. Specifically, the appearance of the sound before the image gives the audience a short blank time for self-imagination and construction. The audience will imagine the possible image content in their minds according to the sound they hear. Each person's imagination may be different, which expands the audience's psychological space and makes them more actively participate in the interpretation of the film. Finally, when the image of sound source appears, whether it is consistent with the audience's imagination or not, it will bring the audience a satisfying or unexpected psychological experience.

In fact, there is a conventional viewpoint of hierarchy in audiovisual relationships in general film studies. As in Gorbman's previously expressed opinion "music should not be consciously heard, it should be subordinated to dialogue or vision, that is, to narrative".^[7] This is because most people consider sight more important than hearing, and the impact of what the eyes see is more impactful. Nevertheless, the audiovisual dislocation method enables the Leone to shift the narrative focus to the auditory part, changing the sounds of footsteps, windmills, and harmonica from offscreen to onscreen, which breaks the absolute dominance of vision over the creative space. He uses these sounds to construct another clue of the story or create an atmosphere different from the image, improving the status of the auditory sense in the narrative. Through dislocation, sound becomes an independent narrative and expressive element, equal to the image, and even dominating the narrative in some cases within this movie.

3. Phenomenological Interpretation of Music in Storytelling

From the perspective of music, the technique of *sound repetition* runs through the movie. Among them, harmonica's sound and its musical theme is played whenever the plot reaches a key point or a certain atmosphere needs to be created. Every time its voice appears, it is closely related to the development of the story, guiding the audience's emotions and understanding of the plot, helping the audience to sort out the storyline and make the narrative more coherent.

Entering the initial image of the film, the slow grinding sound of the old rotating windmill in the ambient sound is repeated. Since the scene is in the old captain's house near the station, the volume is low. As the camera lens gets closer to the sound source, the volume gradually increases. The sound of the windmill constantly repeating three tones, creates a strange atmosphere. It approaches the thematic motive of harmonica music, giving the audience a deeper impression of the structure of the three different pitches, and also providing an auditory foreshadowing of the impending conflict.

The harmonica theme is first presented after the appearance of a mysterious man known as "death rattle". Similarly, the three tones consist of multiple minor-second intervals (Figure 2), they form a group and keep repeating. Harmonica's harsh voice, full of mystery, echoes the temperament and experience of the protagonist. It is known that the man always plays harmonica music before each murder. As soon as the harmonica plays, the audience becomes aware of the protagonist's presence, even if he is not present in the picture for the moment. Therefore, the harmonica motif is a clue to the whole film, becoming an important narrative symbol for the audience to recognize the identity of the "death rattle".



Figure 2: Harmonica theme, *Once Upon a Time in the West*^[8]

The musical highlight occurs before Frank leads the team to kill the McBain's family. It is the famous revenge music sequence in this film – "Man with A Harmonica". Its musical material develops based on the harmonica theme that has appeared before. The three-pitch theme that was played earlier starts with the harmonica and French horn, followed by electric guitar and double bass playing it (Figure 3). In the process of confrontation between the two sides, the tense drum rhythm is repeated, and the volume is gradually increased, which echoes the tense expression of the two sides and the gradually escalating confrontation on the screen. Finally, a choir, strings, and percussion join in, layering on top of each other as the melody shifts from E harmonic minor to A natural minor, and pushes the conflict plot step by step to the climax, presenting the majesty and power of Frank and his group. This theme is highly imaginative in its use of orchestration, distinguishing between plucked and brass instruments and grouping them in pairs. These distinctions stimulate auditory sensitivity, matching the bloodiness and violence on the screen. Thus, the sound repetition drives the film's narrative and heightens the tension and intensity of the conflict.

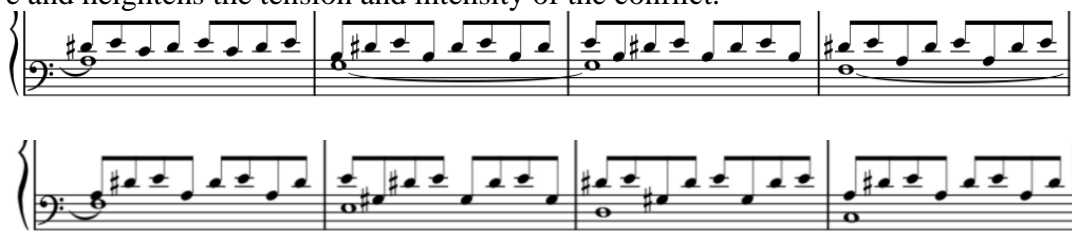


Figure 3: "Man with a Harmonica", *Once Upon a Time in the West*^[9]

4. The Establishment of the Autonomy of Sound Narration

After an in-depth analysis, the study found that Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) emerges as a pivotal work in cinematic history, not merely for its revisionist take on the Western genre, but for its radical reconfiguration of the audiovisual relationship. In an era where visual elements dominated narrative propulsion in Western cinema, Leone and collaborators—Ennio Morricone and Franco Arcalli—pioneered a new architecture where music or sound assumes a protagonist role, capable of constructing mood, advancing plot, and manipulating emotional registers independent of visual cues.

4.1 Sound as the Narrative Ontology: A Paradigm Revolution from "Accompaniment" to "Dominate"

First, Leone disrupts the conventional hierarchy by treating sound not as a supplementary layer but as a constitutive narrative force. Morricone's score, far from merely underscoring visuals, acts as a sonic protagonist. The harmonica motif, introduced in the film's iconic opening sequence, serves as both a character identifier and a structural foundation. Its deliberate repetition, dissonant chorus during violent confrontations—creates aural leitmotifs that construct thematic tensions between memory, vengeance, and moral ambiguity.

In addition, when the attack begins, gunshots are mixed to sound muffled and distant, despite their visual proximity, while the relentless train whistle (a recurring offscreen sound) drowns out human screams. This deliberate sonic flattening denies viewers the visceral catharsis of synchronized violence, instead evoking a sense of existential indifference—a hallmark of Leone's "anempathetic sound" strategy, which uses sound to highlight the insignificance of life and reflect the social tragedy of the Western development.

4.2 Poetics of 'Sensorial Rift': Narrative Efficacy of Audiovisual Dislocation

A central technique in the film's sound design is the "sensorial rift"—a term to describe the strategic misalignment of auditory and visual information to provoke cognitive dissonance. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the prolonged opening sequence, where three gunmen await their prey in a sun-baked train station. The soundtrack eschews traditional suspense-building through visual close-ups, instead focusing on hyper-realistic ambient sounds: the creak of windmill blades, the rhythmic panting of a harmonica player, and the metallic screech of an approaching train. When the gunmen's violent deaths occur, their screams are conspicuously absent; instead, the harmonica motif crescendos, transforming their demise into a musical event rather than a visual spectacle. So, this technique subverts Hitchcockian principles of suspense, which relies on close-ups or close shots to enhance visual cues.

4.3 The Construction of Immersive Auditory Ecology: From Dialogue Subtraction to Environmental Sound

Leone's radical diegetic reduction—notably the suppression of dialogue—elevates ambient sound to a primary component. Environmental elements like wind transcend naturalistic function, becoming symbolic agents. Its mournful howl mirrors emotional desolation in open landscapes, while abrupt silences foreshadow violence. Footsteps, too, are meticulously designed. The clatter of Harmonica's spurred boots in dusty streets establishes his enigmatic presence, contrasting with Frank's unnervingly soft tread during the final duel, sonically embodying moral ambivalence.

Eventually, this aural minimalism intensifies existential gravity, proving that ambient sound is capable enough to autonomously sculpt tension and character psychology.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, *Once Upon a Time in the West* challenges the foundational assumption that cinema is primarily a visual art. By elevating sound to a co-equal (and at times superior) narrative force, Leone demonstrates that auditory elements can perform functions traditionally reserved for visuals: establishing character, driving plot, and shaping emotional responses. The film's legacy lies not only in its influence on subsequent directors (Quentin Tarantino, Christopher Nolan) who prioritize sound design but in its theoretical implication for film studies. It calls for a rethinking of the "audiovisual"

as a symbiotic rather than hierarchical relationship, where sound is not just "what we hear while looking", but a dynamic system capable of independent signification.

As contemporary cinema increasingly embraces immersive sound technologies (Dolby Atmos, spatial audio), Leone's work serves as a prescient reminder of sound's untapped narrative potential. By decoding the film's sonic strategies, we gain not only a deeper appreciation for a genre classic but a framework for analyzing how sound can transcend its ancillary role, becoming, in its own right, a medium of cinematic storytelling. This study thus invites scholars to move beyond visual-centric analysis, advocating for a more balanced approach that acknowledges sound as a vital, autonomous narrative force in film.

Acknowledgements

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