SOUND EFFECTS

Introduction
Outside of the musical score, movies rely on three kinds of sound to tell their stories:

Dialog
Voiceover

Sound Effects

Sound Effects and the Writer
While voiceover and dialog are well understood to be writers' tools, few screenwriters approach sound effects with the same certainty. Yet sound effects are as much the purview of the writer as are visual symbols. In the same way a writer can create an extended visual metaphor, sound effects can also suggest an extended aural metaphor. They can add layers of meaning to a film that are hard to achieve in other ways.

Sound effects can be obvious or quite subtle. They can intentionally draw attention to themselves, or manipulate with stealth. They can expose, disguise, suggest, establish, or reveal. They can also be tagged to specific events or characters.

Kinds of Sound Effects
Sound that is organic to a scene is often called diegetic sound. These sound effects can be realistic or altered for effect. External sound effects, those not logically heard in the scene, can also be added for dramatic value. These external sound effects, that is, those not part of the story world, are called non-diegetic.

For our purposes we can divide sound effects into four categories as follows.

Realistic
This is any sound effect that one could naturally expect to hear if situated in the filmed scene. The source of the sound might be on screen or off screen. Adding the most common sound effects like a car honking, a metronome, or a buzzing mosquito can greatly change the feeling of a scene.

Expressive
For our purposes an expressive sound effect is one that is realistic, but has been altered. This might mean that a phone's ring starts out normally and suddenly gets louder and louder. The sound comes from the scene but has been manipulated for effect.

Surreal
Sound effects are often enlisted to externalize a character's inner thoughts, nightmares, hallucinations, dreams, or wishes. We might hear, for example, the laughter of a child as a woman picks up a doll from childhood. This gives the scene a surreal feeling. This effect is often called meta-diegetic.

External
This is a sound effect that clearly does not come from the scene. It is an effect that is not heard or responded to by the characters. For example, if a character is making his last walk down death row, and slowly the audience hears a church bell, and we know there is no church for miles, we consider this sound external to the story world. The purpose of the sound effect is to signal the audience to the meaning of the scene. This kind of effect is known as non-diegetic.
Although the sound editors contribute the bulk of these effects in most movies, a writer can suggest an aural metaphor or the tone of the audio world. These effects should be used sparingly and should not dominate the writing. The director might add to these ideas or alter them as he or she would do with any other part of the script. However, when used purposefully they are as potent a storytelling tool as a movie's dialog or visuals.

Here are some ideas to consider when thinking about the use of sound effects:

— they can be used as an important “prop” or plot point
— sound and picture don’t have to match
— realistic sound can be altered to behave expressively
— sound effects can be used to express internal thoughts of characters
— they can be used as a character’s signature, or remind us of an event.
— they can be entirely external to the scene
— two sound effects, like a match cut in picture, can be placed side by side and generate an entirely new third idea (see Audio Transitions).

Here are the examples we will look at in this section:

**Film Elements**

35. Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Character)  
*Klute*

36. Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Emotional Response)  
*ET*

37. Expressive Sound (Diegetic) (Outer World)  
*Barton Fink*

38. Surreal Sound (Meta-Diegetic) (Inner World)  
*Barton Fink*
Film Element: Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Character)

Realistic sound, also known as diegetic sound, is sound that would logically exist in the audio world depicted on the screen. In the critically acclaimed Klute, scripted by Andy and Dave Lewis, diegetic sound is cleverly used to reveal character.

Script Example: Klute
In Act Three, former call girl Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) unknowingly finds herself face-to-face with a murderer. When a nearby phone suddenly rings, Fonda notices that she has registered no reaction. The man's lack of response cues her that he is in fact the murderer. Although this scene was altered in the movie, sound was again used to reveal character. This time the drama was ratcheted up by replacing the sound of the ringing phone with the taped recording of a woman dying.

Film Example: Klute
In the filmed version, Jane Fonda is seated across from the antagonist. The antagonist forces her to listen to an audiotape he has brought with him. As the tape progresses, Fonda realizes she is listening to her friend's murder. When Fonda looks over at the man, Fonda sees that he is completely unmoved by the woman's screams. At that moment Fonda realizes that the tape is serving as foreplay to murder — and that she is the next victim.

Dramatic Value
In both cases, the antagonist's lack of response to a sound is used to reveal character. Suspense is created as we watch the protagonist decode the antagonist's response. The turning point occurs when the protagonist succeeds, prompting a new action.

Other Films
Seven (metronome)
ET (sound of the trucks)
Her black book, Jane McKenna's, her list of -- of persons. I was told you're negotiating for it on her behalf --

The PHONE RINGS, an explosive noise. Bree startles. It has been put on night-ring, to sound all over the loft, and the noise is deafening. But -- the most bizarre element is Cable's absolute lack of response to it. It rings and rings as he talks and talks -- in the same expository tone as before, without raising his voice. It drowns out most of his words -- at most we catch only odd phrases of all the following -- but he seems not to hear it any more than the clamor of other things torturing his soul.
Film Element: Realistic Sound (Diegetic) (Emotional Response)

Realistic sound, as explained in the previous page, can be exploited to code characters, add suspense to scenes, and/or tap into our subconscious. We don't suspect that we are being manipulated as these sounds appear to be organic to the scene. Yet, different sounds have long been used to evoke different emotional responses. The sound of knocking on wood is generally positive, the sound of metal against metal, negative.

In the celebrated script of ET, Melissa Mathison exploits our built-in bias against metallic sounds in creating the “key men,” ET’s first antagonists.

Film Example: ET

In the opening scenes of Act One, a gang of humans arrive in huge ominous trucks intent on capturing ET. When the humans emerge they are faceless, shot from the waist down. They carry huge keys on their waistbands that jangle as they rush out in pursuit of ET. The sound of the keys is immediately coded as the sound of the approaching antagonists. Notice how Mathison specifically names one of the antagonists “Keys” in the script excerpt that follows.

Dramatic Value

By giving the antagonists a sound tag, the audience can judge how close they are to their victim, whether they are closing in or losing ground, regardless if they appear on screen or not. This forces the audience to participate, mimicking the action of the victim, in carefully listening to sound cues so they can quantify what distance lies between the antagonist and the hero. In this way sound can encourage a heightened level of audience participation as well as raising suspense.

Other Films

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (keys)

Seven (metronome)

ET (sound of the trucks)
24. THE CREATURE’S POV: THE CAR DOOR
The car door opens and a man steps out. Seen only from the waist down are: dark pants, heavy boots and a huge ring of KEYS hanging from his belt.
The KEYS make a tremendous racket, displacing all other sounds of the night.

25. REVERSE: THE CREATURE
THE CREATURE slides under cover just as his RED LIGHT COMES ON. We see a glimmer of it through shrubbery. His hand moves in to cover it.

26. WIDER: MORE CARS
More cars converge on the scene. We SEE bright HEADLIGHTS and HEAR slamming doors, muffled voices. Then we HEAR THE CREATURE break a branch from a shrub. He holds it against his chest. THE SOUND OF KEYS.
The sudden shafts of flashlight beams encircle the road and shoot out into the trees.

THE CREATURE moves unnoticed along the hillside. He crosses the road.

27. EXT. RAVINE - NIGHT - LONG SHOT
We see shadows of men jumping the ravine and heading into the forest. THE CREATURE hides in the near end of the shallow ravine.

KEYS is the last to jump.
The SOUND of KEYS is hideous.
**Film Element: Expressive Sound (Diegetic) (Outer World)**

Expressive diegetic sound is sound that is organic to the scene but has been altered for dramatic effect. The example below is taken from the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink*.

**Film Example: Barton Fink**

As Barton waits to check in at a seedy hotel in L.A., he rings the bell on the unattended counter. At first the bell rings exactly as we would expect. But then the bell keeps ringing. Barton scans the lobby for some kind of explanation. Suddenly, Chet, the hotel's bell boy, pops up from a trap door behind the reception desk. The bell keeps ringing. Without acknowledging the strangeness of the ringing, Chet finally places a dirty finger on top of the bell, silencing it.

Here sound adds to the strangeness of the hotel and externalizes Barton's discomfort in his new location. The audience shares Barton's anxiety as they can't explain the bell either.

**Film Example: Barton Fink**

A few scenes later the Coen brothers use the same technique again. This time it's the hum of a mosquito. When Barton enters his room at the Hotel Earle, we hear humming. At first the sound is natural, but then it changes. The humming fades in and out as though the mosquito itself has an agenda. As the scene continues the mosquito seems to be intentionally taunting its guest.

**Dramatic Value**

By using two simple sounds expressively, those of a bell and a mosquito, the Coen brothers make us fear for the protagonist. By connecting the sound clues, along with other clues, the audience starts extrapolating. We wonder what "bad things" await.

**Script Note**

Script excerpts from both scenes are included on the accompanying page.

**Other Films**

*ET*
*Apocalypse Now*
*Psycho*
*Single White Female*
Ringing Bell Scene (Page 10)

Barton moves toward the front desk.

THE REVERSE

As Barton stops at the empty desk. He hits a small silver bell next to the register. Its ring-out goes on and on without losing volume.

After a long beat there is a dull scuffle of shoes on stairs. Barton, puzzled, looks around the empty lobby, then down at the floor behind the front desk.

A TRAP DOOR

It swings open and a young man in a faded maroon uniform, holding a shoebrush and a shoe - not one of his own - climbs up from the basement.

He closes the trap door, steps up to the desk and sticks his finger out to touch the small silver bell, finally muting it.

The lobby is now silent again.

Mosquito Scene (Page 15)

BARTON’S POV

A naked, peeling ceiling.

The hum - a mosquito, perhaps - stops.

BARTON

His eyes move this way and that. After a silent beat, he shuts them again.

After another silent beat, we hear - muffled, probably from an adjacent room - a brief, dying laugh. It is sighing and weary, like the end of a laughing fit, almost a sob.

Silence again.

We hear the rising mosquito hum.
38. **Film Element: Surreal Sound (Meta-Diegetic) (Inner World)**

*Meta-diegetic* is any sound that represents a character's inner world, such as nightmares, dreams, hallucinations, wishes, and so on. In this scene from *Barton Fink*, it appears that Barton is transferring an inner wish onto the scene depicted in a postcard.

**Film Example: Barton Fink**

When Barton enters his room at the Hotel Earle, he enters guardedly. His anxiety has already been set off in registering downstairs with Chet. As Barton enters his room, his anxiety is further heightened. Everything in the room, like the lobby, seems to be off kilter. The bed squeaks louder than expected, the windows don't open, and the wall paper oozes a gooey syrup, appearing almost organic.

Then Barton notices a postcard tacked to the wall. It's an iconic image of a California girl sunbathing on the beach.

Barton focuses on the postcard. Now we hear gulls and waves crashing. It is as though we have been transplanted to the beach. From the context and sound effects, we assume that Barton is projecting some kind of inner wish onto the scene.

When the phone rings, the audio returns to normal, signaling the daydream is over.

**Dramatic Value**

Once you cross the threshold and accept that sound does not need to be rooted in reality, that sound can be pulled from anywhere in expressing a character's thoughts, a huge creative door opens. The example, taken from *Barton Fink*, underscores that sound and picture do not need to match. In fact it's the mismatch that gives the scene heightened interest by suggesting we are hearing Barton's inner thoughts.
Barton Fink (1991)


HIS ROOM

As Barton enters.
The room is small and cheaply furnished. There is a lumpy bed with a worn-yellow coverlet, an old secretary table, and a wooden luggage stand.

As Barton crosses the room we follow to reveal a sink and wash basin, a house telephone on a rickety night stand, and a window with yellowing sheers looking on an air shaft.

Barton throws his valise onto the bed where it sinks, jittering. He shrugs off his jacket.

Pips of sweat stand out on Barton's brow. The room is hot.

He walks across the room, switches on an oscillating fan and struggles to throw open the window. After he strains at it for a moment, it slides open with a great wrenching sound.

Barton picks up his Underwood and places it on the secretary table. He gives the machine a casually affectionate pat.

Next to the typewriter are a few sheets of house stationery: THE HOTEL EARLE: A DAY OR A LIFETIME.

We pan up to a picture in a cheap wooden frame on the wall above the desk.

A bathing beauty sits on the beach under a cobalt blue sky. One hand shields her eyes from the sun as she looks out at a crashing surf.

The sound of the surf mixes up.

BARTON

Looking at the picture

TRACKING IN ON THE PICTURE

The surf mixes up louder. We hear a gull cry.
The sound snaps off with the ring of a telephone.
<table>
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<th>Chapter Credits By Film Element</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>35. Klute (1971)</strong></td>
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<td>Writer:</td>
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<td>Writer:</td>
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<td>Director:</td>
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| **36. ET (1982)**                |
| Writer:                          | Melissa Mathison (Screenplay) |
| Director:                        | Steven Spielberg          |
| Production Company:              | Amblin Entertainment      |
| Distributor:                     | Universal Pictures        |
| Distributor:                     | Columbia TriStar Home Video (USA) (DVD) |

| **37. Barton Fink (1991)**       |
| Writer:                          | Joel Coen (Screenplay) & |
| Writer:                          | Ethan Coen (Screenplay)  |
| Director:                        | Joel Coen                |
| Director:                        | Ethan Coen (Uncredited)  |
| Production Company:              | Circle Films Inc.        |
| Production Company:              | Working Title Films      |
| Distributor:                     | 20th Century Fox Film Corporation |

| **38. Barton Fink (1991)**       |
| Same as above.                   |