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**Deconstructing How Sound and Visuals Amplify Emotional Response in
*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World***

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Throughout the quarter, we have analyzed how films employ a number of formal elements in order to construct everything from their implicit meaning to how they engage emotionally with audiences. Because of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World's* striking stylistic choices, in this paper, the focus will be on how the film implements distinctive elements of sound and unconventional framing techniques in order to better understand how it exaggerates its emotional meaning during any given shot or scene.

On the surface, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010) is a story about a seemingly normal guy, Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera), falling in love with an intriguing new girl, Ramona Flowers (Mary Elizabeth Taylor), who just moved from the United States to his hometown in Canada. While the film is a fast-paced rollercoaster of various emotions, the film ultimately is not about how Scott and Ramona fall in love. Rather, it tells a story that reveals the subtly nuanced personality of Scott that is not immediately apparent, mainly regarding his tendencies to flip-flop between pleasing others and indulging his own selfish desires. In the end, Scott not only gets the girl, but he learns how to respect and appreciate himself and others in a way that he didn't before.

From the opening seconds of the movie, the soundtrack is utilized to set the tone of the film's scene while creating new expectations for the viewer. Consider the introductory Universal Pictures logo animation, which breaks the viewer's expectation from the beginning; instead of playing the standard animation, Wright opts for a version of the logo that is both animated like an old 8-bit style video game and is accompanied by a chiptune version of the animation's theme. By making such a bold move from the start, viewers are not only primed for the video game nature of the film, but are also

made aware that the rest of the film that proceeds is likely to use an unconventional style, given the unfamiliar style of the music. Leaving the viewer without a sense of direction further excites them for the film, making the unique logo an effective tool for engaging audiences from the start.

Furthermore, let's deconstruct Wright's use of soundtrack in the film itself. During the scene in which Scott and his band participate in the "Battle of the Bands," they play a song entitled "Threshold." In it, the chorus repeats the line "reaching my threshold" on multiple occasions. Consider the fact that the entire soundtrack for this film was created from scratch, meaning that each song was carefully crafted to fit into each particular scene it is used in. Additionally, at this point in the film, Ramona had stop talking to Scott over his frustration about fighting all her evil exes. In a scene shortly before the competition begins, Scott remarks that he is in a "bad mood" and that he wants to "take them [the next exes he has to face] apart." So, considering these factors, the lines of the song "Threshold" are written to exemplify his current feelings of being fed up with his current predicament. There is a duality to the word: he is on the "threshold" of dating Ramona because he has so few exes left to fight, which, in addition to seeing Ramona with one of her evil exes at the battle, fuels his determination. It also illustrates how he is on the "threshold" of his patience for these battles, further building on the sense of Scott's rage conveyed to the viewer. Finally, it represents his newfound goal to defeat the exes as a personal achievement, rather than to just win over Ramona, considering they are no longer speaking to each other by this scene.

While the individualized soundtrack of the film already subverts viewer expectations and exaggerates the meaning of each scene, Wright also cleverly implements the use of sound bridges to achieve the same goal. Consider the following scene: Scott, in a dream, is roaming the halls of a high school, when suddenly, one of the halls leads to an image of Ramona standing outside his door. Quickly, the camera cuts to his face in the hall while also using a cross cut of Scott waking up at the exact same time. During this transition, there is a faint doorbell sound that gets slightly louder each time it is repeated, along with angelic (non-diegetic) music that builds up with it. This sound bridge serves two purposes that are largely invisible to the viewer: it both marks the moment that the camera transitions from Scott's dream to the real world and serves as an auditory metaphor for how Scott idolizes Ramona. That is why these two sounds are used in parallel; the doorbell simply transitions to a grounding in reality, while the angelic music is used in both the dream and reality (until he answers the door) because it is, at the time, a dream of Scott's to be with Ramona (hence the music in the dream), but one that is foreshadowed to come true by her mere presence at his door.

Finally, for additional sound effects, Wright commonly uses small non-diegetic sound effects to emphasize actions or dialogue that contribute to the tone of a scene. About halfway through the film, Scott decides to breakup with his current girlfriend, Knives Chau (Ellen Wong), in a local music store. Right after he tells her that they should breakup, the background music fades out. For the remainder of their interaction, there is simply a non-diegetic sound of wind blowing in the background, despite them being indoors. The sound of wind blowing conveys the perception of Scott being selfish

and cold hearted towards Knives. It emphasizes Scott's habit of leading girls on, only to move on from them later, something that is further expanded upon at different points of the film. Considering that he is only dumping her so that he can pursue Ramona, the wind works in tandem with the dialogue to exaggerate his unfair betrayal.

Building on the aforementioned scene, we can analyze how Wright uses various visual elements and editing styles to construct meaning in scenes. As noted by Luke Harbur of *Filmic*, Wright "emphasize[s] the visuals over words" to tell the story of this film.¹ While the wind blowing was used to characterize Scott's actions, Knives' emotional state within the scene is expressed via visual choices. The moment after Scott tells Knives that they should breakup, the entire background behind both of them becomes devoid of color for the remainder of the scene, leaving them against a blank canvas. The first time the viewer sees this high contrast background (in this case, chiaroscuro) is when the camera cuts back to Knives. The impression of seeing it around Knives first is that it represents her emotional state after hearing Scott tell her such a hurtful suggestion; her pain is so substantial that it makes the rest of the world around her seem to disappear. Furthermore, the choice of a black background conveys a sense of void or bleakness, an emotion fitting of a breakup scene, since Scott has left an emotional void inside Knives' heart.



Fig. 1. Scott and Knives in the first two montage boxes (Universal Pictures, 2010)



Fig. 2. Scott and Knives in the second two montage boxes (Universal Pictures, 2010)

Right after Scott exits the screen, the scene switches to a short shot of a bus, which Scott is riding, driving down the road. For the next ten seconds or so, Wright uses a montage to inform the audience about how Scott is feeling, in addition to what exactly is running through his head. It is a segment of narrow boxes that plays from right-to-left across the screen, alternating between Knives or Ramona on a high contrast background and Scott sitting on the bus. For the purposes of length, we will focus just on his thoughts regarding Knives. The first four boxes adhere to the following sequence: the first box is an American shot of Scott looking mostly unconcerned, the second box is a medium close up, chiaroscuro shot of Knives looking incredibly heartbroken, the third box is an extreme close up of Scott holding his head in disappointment/guilt, and the

fourth box is the same shot of Knives but zoomed in as a close up/closed frame (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). The purpose of having the boxes scroll across the screen is that it simulates a passage of time, indicating Scott's emotions and thought process over the duration of the bus ride. Using images of Knives between each of Scott's boxes cements the idea that he is thinking about how much he betrayed her by leading her on like that. The zoom in on each of their faces both increases the amount by which Scott's guilt builds over the bus ride (as also indicated by his more concerned look in the second box) and emphasizes how the look on Knives face is something solidified in his mind that he can't get over. It gives the scene an overall semblance of regret and gloom.

Finally, Wright carefully constructs the mise-en-scène of each scene in such a way that it contributes to the implicit emotional meaning of it. For example, we'll examine a scene early in the film in which Scott and the band play at the local bar to qualify for the "Battle of the Bands" competition. Recall that lyrics for each song in the film have a specific purpose for the scene in which it is played. In this scene, the song "Garbage Truck" is played, which is an auditory metaphor for wanting to find a girl to treat like a queen (ex. lines such as "I'll be your garbage man" and "I'll never throw you away"). As Scott sings the line "You know you wanna ride, on my garbage truck," the camera switches to a slightly low angle shot of the stands from behind Scott's head that simulates his point-of-view of by using a wide depth of field to blur the back of his head. In this shot, Ramona sticks out in the crowd because of her distinctly colored hair. In this case, the line of the song matches up with the shot made to focus on Ramona to

communicate to the viewer that Scott is singing the song to/about Ramona, even if it wasn't the original intention when written. In a way, the song is Scott's personal tribute to Ramona. While this is only one example, it exemplifies how Ramona's colored hair is implemented as a marker for the viewer to focus on her as a standout from the crowd, which simulates Scott's romantic view of her.

Throughout the film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* uses its peculiar style and formal visual/auditory elements to construct a film in which viewers experience a wide range of emotions, both as they identify with characters and as an outsider looking in. Music and sounds are leveraged to accentuate the perception of key moments/actions in an invisible manner. Contrastly, the film's bold visuals make it a point to clearly set the tone of each scene. At the same time, the film's story also uses these elements, in conjunction with narrative, to present the viewer with a comprehensive look at how Scott acts and grows as a person. In the end, the film's distinctive style lends it a timeless feeling that is sure to keep audiences emotionally engaged, regardless of when they see it.

References:

1. Harbur, Luke. "ANALYZE THIS: Scott Pilgrim vs. the World." *Filmic*, 9 October 2016, <https://filmicmag.com/2015/10/09/scott-pilgrim-vs-the-world/>