*[Star Wars “Darth Vader” Intro Plays]*

Some film scores like this are so memorable in a way that when we hear the music, we automatically think about a specific visualization or an emotion.

Often times, we forget the psychological effect of film scores and soundtracks have on enhancing the message the director is trying to deliver.

So what effects does film scores and soundtracks have on cinema?

*[Film score by Hans Zimmer]*

Before we start talking about the effects, first I must distinguish the difference a soundtrack and a score. A film score is written specifically for what is happening on the screen, while a soundtrack contains songs independent from the movie itself that weren’t made only for the movie. Most films make use of both.

To really understand the importance of the music, one should compare final cuts of the movie with the intended film score and cuts with removed music. The iconic shower scene in ‘Psycho’ is so much less frightening without its score.

*[Shower Scene with Score] (plays quieter in the background for the paragraph)*

*[Shower Scene without the Score]*

The reason why this scene where Marion Crane gets stabbed to death is so psychologically effective with the film score is because the screeching sound of the violin mimics sounds we biologically associate with stress and danger. This makes the scene significantly scarier and more unsettling.

*[Film Score of ‘Jaws’]*

Film score for ‘Jaws’ creates a different type of unsettlement. The anticipation of the danger is what makes each scene so scary because of the fact that the audience know that something bad is about to happen, but the characters in the movie don’t know, which adds suspense to the scene. We are warned of the danger through the film score and have no choice but to watch the horror unfold. As the music slowly speeds up, so does the camera, and the audience feel psychological terror from the disorder of the music and the anticipation of the inevitable.

*[‘Dunkirk’ Film Score continue into background music]*

Other than creating an unsettlement, film scores can also heighten the intensity of a scene, or an entire movie. The best example of this is demonstrated in Christopher Nolan’s ‘Dunkirk’. I remember watching this movie at the theater, and each scene with the film score always felt very intense. I just assumed it was the horrific visuals of war that made me feel tensed, but by researching online, I figured out that it was actually due to a sound illusion in the score.

In Dunkirk’s film score, ‘The Mole’, film score composer, Hans Zimmer takes advantage of an auditory illusion caused by something called a Shepard tone.

You may be asking, what’s a Shepard Tone?

*[Explanation of Shepard Tone] 20ish sec*

*[Playing Shepard Tone in ‘The Mole’ in background]*

The film score creates this sound of rising tension that carries the screenplay forward, leaving many audiences, including myself, cling on to the seat while watching the movie.

*[Some type of ambient noise]*

On the contrary, some scenes are able to enhance the emotions without any film score or soundtrack. Just the ambient noise is enough to capture the audience.

A great example of this comes from one of my personal favorite film, ‘Saving Private Ryan’. The opening scene is acclaimed for its accurate depiction of the horrific event on D-Day.

*[Saving Private Ryan scene]*

Instead of using any background music, sounds of gunshots, explosions, and cries for help overwhelms the audience’s auditory senses. This particular scene immerses each audience to feel as if they are actually at the battlefield.

*[Hans Zimmer background music]*

Our brains often subconsciously react differently to a visual given the music playing behind it. I think it is really interesting because of how subtle film scores can be, and yet how vital they are to a movie.

The psychology of music is one of the most important cinematic techniques in film. The emotional and thematic potential of these techniques is limitless and I have only scratched the surface.

Maybe you should watch your favorite film again, and pay closer attention to how the score or soundtrack enhances the film.

Thanks for listening.