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How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Have, I. (2016). The Ambiguous Voices of Possum. Short Film Studies, 6(1), 49-52. https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.6.1.49_1

Publication metadata

Title: The Ambiguous Voices of Possum
Author(s): Iben Have
Journal: Short Film Studies
DOI/Link: https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.6.1.49_1
Document version: Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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The Ambiguous Voices of Possum

Abstract: A categorization of the levels of the soundtrack will provide the foundation for analytical notions on how the soundtrack of Possum challenges the recipient by operating in a field between diegetic and nondiegetic, realistic and supernatural, and human and animal sounds.

Keywords: Soundtrack, voice, environmental sound, music, diegetic sound, nondiegetic sound.

The soundtrack of Possum is so rich and full of information that it is worth listening to in its own right. It can be compared to the experience of a piece of music: a 15-minute journey through tension and relief, and through recognizable as well as unrecognizable places and spaces. The uncertainties of Possum, which Mette Hjort has reflected on in relation to mood (Hjort, 1999), emerge to a large extent through the different layers of the soundtrack, taking the recipient from one emotional state to another and at the same time stimulating the search for contexts of meaning in the film.

The aim of this short article is to listen very closely to the soundtrack of Possum. First the sounds in Possum will be mapped by dividing the soundtrack into four categories, after which a succession of conspicuous elements from these categories will be discussed and analyzed in relation to how they function as drivers for the narrative, adding meaning and value to the film.

Roughly the soundtrack can be divided into four categories:

1) **Human voices:**
   a. Talk: dialogue between the characters and Little Man’s voiceover.
   b. Kid making animal sounds or screaming.

2) **Animal sounds:** dogs howling, birdsong, goats, crows, and the real animal sounds ‘coming from’ Kid.

3) **Environmental sounds:**
   a. In relation to human actions: scrambling, finger on the glass, washing dishes, footsteps etc.
   b. The howling wind and other sounds like crackling fire, raindrops etc.

4) **Music:** A slow piano tune with underscoring harmonies - sometimes appearing as single piano notes and drones. The musical box.
These categories are not divided in relation to how the sounds are produced, but reflect the reception of the soundtrack in relation to the content of the film, where voices and the contrast between human voices and animal sounds are essential themes. Across the categories, a distinction can be made between diegetic and nondiegetic sound. Diegetic sound has a source in story; it is the sound that the characters in the story can also hear. Nondiegetic sound, by contrast, comes from a source outside the story world: for instance underscore music or voiceover (Bordwell & Thompson 2010, 284). These concepts can be used to describe the relation between the sound and the visuals, which will be exemplified in some of the following analytical examples.

It is characteristic for the whole soundtrack that it uses reverberation to a large extent – not only on the music but also on the human voices. This effect creates a feeling of mismatch between the soundtrack and the reality of the cramped, low-ceilinged log cabin, where drier acoustics might be expected. And it makes not only Little Man’s voiceover but also the voices of the characters somewhat distant, detached from the physical environment, which disturbs the reception of many of the sounds as purely diegetic. In general the diegetic dialogue in Possum is sparse, with the most obvious feature being Missy’s voice in the scene where Kid is chasing her because Missy has teased her with the cat (from Shot 49).

“Kid got power from the howling wind”, we learn from Little Man’s whispering voiceover in Shot 34, and the wind blows throughout the entire film – sometimes howling and importunate, and sometimes weak and hardly audible. Like the reverberation effect, the sound of the wind does not realistically match the physical setting, since differences in the sound of the wind do not reveal whether we are outside or inside the wooden cabin, which again disturbs the conceptualization of a realistic setting. From a narrative point of view one might expect the sound of the wind to stop when Kid dies and ‘loses her power’. But the wind continues (albeit more in the background), which supports the hope, which Little Man is keeping alive by leaving a window open for Kid (cf. voiceover in Shot 179-180).

In a key scene, where Kid and the possum stare intensely at each other (from Shot 137), the sound of the wind dominates and morphs slowly into a more stable musical tone (Shot 139), maintaining a kind of suspense until it suddenly stops in Shot 146. The same happens in Shot 71 after Little Man has been talking about the
stray dogs outside. These are examples of how the categories above overlap when the
diegetic environmental sound of the wind morphs into a nondiegetic musical tone.

Together with the howling wind, the first sound we hear in *Possum* is croaks
from a crow: a fateful, foreboding stereotype just like the howling dogs (Shot 1 and
70). The sounds of animals are the most notable sound elements, adding different
kinds of meaning to the film. And when we first hear the real animal sounds coming
from Kid’s mouth, so obviously non-human, the expectations of realism are seriously
shattered. This rather radical break was not the intension of the director Brad
McGann, and he was surprised when his sound designer Chris Burt (who had been
given a rather free hand) came up with the idea:

I didn’t actually anticipate in the beginning that he was going to use real
animal noises. When I first saw it I must admit that I was a little bit reticent. I
remember thinking: Maybe that’s going a little bit too far. I always envisaged
that it was going to be her actual noises. And then I was going to mix in a little
bit of wild noise. But he actually used pure animal noises, which was sort of
interesting. It gave it a completely different interpretation and took it to a
different place. […] It’s better to try it and risk failing than being too safe and
too precious. (Raskin 1999, 6)

The use of real animal sounds instead of human animal sounds, however, is not
consistent, and there does not seem to be a pattern in which one is chosen over the
other. In the intense key scene mentioned above, where Kid ‘talks’ to the possum
outside the window (Shot 137-141), no real animal sound is used. Instead Kid, rather
precisely, imitates the rattling sound of a real possum (listen to the characteristic
sound of a brushtail possum in the YouTube link in the references). At this moment
the shared destinies of Kid and the possum are foreboded, referring back to the
possum in the trap at the beginning of the film (Shot 3), and Kid at the end (Shot
151).

Another scene where the pace is slow but the energy intense and sound really
seems to gather all the attention – both the attention of the characters and the
spectators – is when Missy makes the singing tone of the glass by moving a wet
finger around its brim (Shot 12-14). This is a very sensitive vibrating moment,
affording the conceptualization of Missy as an inciting character. The tone emerges
just after Little Man’s voiceover saying: “Once in a while Dad set a place for Mum so she won’t go hungry”, so the sound gives a kind of voice to the absent mother suddenly becoming present. The intense presence is maintained by the tone but is quickly punctured when Missy sticks her tongue out followed by Little Man’s forced laughter. The voice of the dead mother falls somewhere between the four categories listed above, but makes her present in the narrative, just like in Shot 86, where it is the diegetic sound of the musical box that represents her.

As a last example I will emphasize the role of the most dominant sound element in Possum, the voiceover of Little Man. It is placed up front in the soundtrack, as if his mouth were close to your ear. So you can clearly hear the variations in his trembling voice, sometimes whispering and sometimes almost crying. This creates a very intimate space affording sympathy and empathy for the boy and enhancing his point of view and tense emotions related to things he explains.

These few examples illustrate how the sounds of Possum function as nerve centers pointing out moments of attention and giving narrative clues (the wind, the glass, the possum sound, Little Man’s vulnerability). But Brad McGann’s strategy of taking risks rather than being safe with this soundtrack (cf. the quote above) also challenges the reception of the film. By playing in a field ranging between diegetic and nondiegetic sounds, between realistic and supernatural sounds and between human and animal sounds, the soundtrack challenges the natural search for narrative closure, leaving the recipient thoughtful and affected but without a clear message, just like a piece of music.

References:
