

**Nis Grøn**

# The Sound of Horror

## Silence & Sound Contrasts in Sci-Fi Horror Movies

### ABSTRACTS

The sound design of sci-fi horror movies plays a central role in creating the chilling pleasures produced by scary encounters with alien beings. Using *Alien* (1979) as a central example, this paper explores the idea that a specific stylistic element of the audiovisual design, designated as the (preliminary) shock point, constitutes a defining stylistic trait of the sci-fi horror genre's spectacle. This article will seek to show that this stylistic element functions as a priming mechanism, playing with spectators' expectations of the scary spectacle in sci-fi horror films as well as with their knowledge of the genre.

Lyddesign i sci-fi-horrorfilm spiller en væsentlig rolle i skabelsen af de uhyggelige og ophidsende fornøjelser som opstår i mødet med skræmmende monstre. Med *Alien* (1979) som et centralt eksempel, undersøger denne artikel ideen om at et bestemt stilistisk element, betegnet chok punktet, udgør et afgørende stilistisk træk indenfor sci-fi-horror genren. Det er intentionen at vise at dette stilistiske element fungerer som en priming mekaniske, som både formår at påvirke tilskuerens forventninger til det fatale mødet med den/det fremmede og desuden leger med tilskuerens forudgående kendskab til genren og dens konventioner.

### KEYWORDS:

Sci-fi Horror, *Alien*, Sound Contrasts, Priming, Shock Points.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1979, British director Ridley Scott set new standards for the use of sound in the science fiction movie genre with his chilling deep space encounter, *Alien*. Influenced by the rich back catalogue of sci-fi movies from the 1940s and 1950s and the development and implementation of the Dolby Sound System in the mid-1970s, the soundtrack would become a pivotal instrument by which filmmakers could prime and influence audience attention through multiple layers of meaning built into a combined audiovisual presentation. With the introduction of Dolby Stereo in 1975 and subsequently more advanced digital sound systems, cinematic storytelling in sci-fi movies shifted from a predominant focus on dialogue in the 1940s and 1950s to a new exploration of the possibilities of sound expressivity (Whittington 2007, 134). Developments within sound technology thus paved the way for new methods of effectively moulding audience experience in sci-fi movies.

In his book *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (2007), William Whittington documents the importance of *Alien* (1979) as a critical stepping stone in the development and importance of the soundtrack, especially for the expressionistic use of sound effects, ambient sound, and foley sounds in sci-fi movies (2007, Chapters 7 and 8). The new focus on sci-fi movies' aural dimensions led to a generic fusion of sci-fi and horror in the sense that sci-fi movies adapted the aggressive use of sound effects known from horror movies' attempts to startle their audiences and at the same time suggest a subtle, multilayered thematic. Music and sounds are thus intended to work on both visceral and intellectual levels, physically affecting the audience (scaring them) and more broadly reflecting the underlying and central motifs treated in sci-fi horror movies.

Whittington's analysis of *Alien* focuses on explaining how the movie develops a sound strategy by borrowing many of its crucial sound motifs from the horror genre. Recurring sound effects and foley sounds like heartbeats, heavy breathing, footsteps, and the movement of clothing are obvious examples of important sounds adapted from the horror genre. Whittington also explains the importance of ambient sound in establishing what he calls sonic geography and general atmosphere. Ambient sound works to create a unified filmic space in which the spectator can orientate herself and at the same time it generates an atmosphere that reflects the ongoing narrative tension. Whittington's main aim is to link certain expressionistic horror sound motifs to the sci-fi genre, showing how these different categories of sound create horrific pleasures for the audience.

When watching *Alien*, one can note the repeated changes in volume and quality of the sound between various shots. For example, there is a sharp contrast between the environmental sounds of the spaceship, a controlled and confined space,

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and the outside environmental sounds of the planet, out of control. The cuts from inside the spaceship to the outside convey a sudden and drastic jump in sound level and character. One can also note how sudden changes in the sound level within different shots, such as when the silence on the bridge of the spaceship *Nostromo* is suddenly broken by the initiation of the spaceship mainframe. These observations suggest that repeated aural contrasts both within and between shots play a crucial role as stylistic and expressionistic features in sci-fi movies, equivalent to the sounds mentioned above.

In the following, I wish to elaborate on the idea that *sound contrasts* function as an important stylistic sound strategy in *Alien* and later instances of the genre and that this strategy has become a prevalent aesthetic apparatus within the sci-fi horror genre. I will investigate the function of these sudden changes in sound level and character and, as a result of this analysis, suggest that *sound contrasts*, i.e. a dynamic structure between an established – and mostly silent – aural environment, followed by sudden sonic eruptions, function as priming mechanisms, playing with spectators' expectations of the scare in sci-fi horror films as well as with their knowledge of the genre. While Whittington emphasises certain sonic motifs and finds it ironic that “sound spectacle is achieved through silence” (2007, 134.), I wish to show that it is no coincidence that silence plays a pivotal role in creating the spectacle and horrific pleasures of watching sci-fi horror films.

Using *Alien* (1979) as a central example, I will expand the investigation of this idea to consider noteworthy examples from the sci-fi horror genre – such as *The Thing* (1982), *Event Horizon* (1997), and *Pandorum* (2009) – to show how different employments of sound contrast functions as a sound strategy of particular merit within the sci-fi horror genre.

### ***Viewing conditions: cinema vs. DVD***

Before analysing the dynamic sound contrasts in sci-fi horror movies, it is necessary to consider the importance of multi-channel sound with regards to the genre and the viewing conditions for the particular films in question. The movies mentioned in this paper have all had theatrical releases and are, as such, intended to be enjoyed in the cinema, on a big screen, and with a multi-channel sound speaker system. The transfer of these cinematic releases to DVD considerably changes the audiovisual conditions for consumption. With a smaller screen, fewer loudspeakers, and a potentially more distracting setting during home viewing, the sound mix is adjusted to compensate for the altered conditions for consumption. The result is that the volume of dialogue is mixed at a higher level to ensure intelligibility while music and ambient sound are lowered (Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer 2010, 395).

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The movies in question were all, with the exception of *Alien*, viewed on DVD and thus in less-than-ideal viewing conditions, which could be regarded as an obstacle to the specific approach of this paper. The intention, however, is to show – though recognising that the DVD sound mixes differ from those of the original theatrical releases – that the dynamic sound contrasts in these films are of such pivotal importance to the narrative drive that diminishing their presence would jeopardise the overall spectatorial pleasure of watching sci-fi horror. Revisiting *Alien* in the 2004 digitally remastered DVD version seems to confirm that dynamic sound contrasts do indeed carry over from theatrical release to DVD even if sound effects and music are sweetened. With these necessary considerations in mind, we will now analyse the different functions of dynamic sound contrast in sci-fi horror movies.

## THE DYNAMISM OF SOUND CONTRAST AND THE SHOCK POINT

As stated above, the central idea of this paper is to show that the main function of sound contrasts is to work as a priming mechanism central to the cinematic experience of the sci-fi horror genre. Whittington argues that the implementation of sonic genre motifs from the horror genre foregrounds psychosomatic stimulation and responses while decreasing the importance of narrative causality in sci-fi horror movies (2007, 131). It is, however, my intention to show that this particular means of constructing sound contrasts – a generic device that lends itself to the sci-fi horror genre – also works as a narrative driver. Here, I follow Noël Carroll, whose analysis of horror plots stresses the narrative importance of, among other things, the disclosure of the monster in horror fiction:

“Undoubtedly there can be horror stories that simply stage the struggle between humanity and some monster. (...) Nevertheless, admitting that there can be such stories, should not preclude the insight that most horror stories, including the most distinguished ones, tend to be elaborated in such a way that the discovery of the unknown (voluntarily or otherwise), the play of ratiocination, and the drama of proof are sustaining sources of narrative pleasure in the horror genre.” (Carroll 1990, 126)

The horror genre’s playful emphasis on “rendering the unknown known” (1990, 127), as Carroll puts it, makes the discovery of and subsequent confrontations with an evil menace a defining feature of the genre and central to plot development. Thus, when sci-fi movies build the narrative around this kind of setup, a central part of the audiovisual contract with the audience of sci-fi horror depends on creating pleasur-

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able shock points, understood as moments when the monster or other form of evil menace is revealed or attacks.

Filmmakers are given plenty of opportunity to construct a formal structure that plays with the spectator's anticipation of this encounter through the orchestration of the build up. Setting the mood and creating what Michel Chion calls a *temporal vectorization* (1990, 19) – i.e. using sound as the primary source for the creation of a mental state in spectators that primes them toward certain expectations concerning upcoming events – are the initial and necessary steps in building up to the crucial shock points. Music, ambient sound, and sound effects interact in creating the atmosphere of anticipation in progress.

The sound effects take on the function of distinct and punctual sounds – *elements of auditory settings* (1990, 54-55) – that, through their aural instantiation, guide the spectator in creating a mental map of the cinematic space. This guidance is not meant to create a realistic impression of the cinematic space but, rather, to enforce an expressionistic impression of the space on the viewer. Filmmakers have the power to control and restrict as they see fit the geographical information the spectator receives, thus maintaining the necessary degree of disorientation and narrative instability to furnish the (anticipated) shock events. This control has been further advanced by the introduction of Dolby sound and its ability to reduce white noise, thereby enabling the use of distinct sounds within a wider frequency range. Both softer, low-range sounds and higher pitched sounds can be put to use in the development of the sonic landscape in sci-fi horror movies, including the creation of distinct sound contrasts.

It is worth noting that the development and interplay of spatial sound markers is of special importance in sci-fi horror movies. While confined spaces may be considered a *semantic genre element*<sup>1</sup> of horror movies, it is not a defining trait in classic horror in the same sense as it is in the sci-fi horror genre, which is to a greater extent defined by its adherence to confined and enclosed spaces, usually typified by the spacecraft. It is thus a pivotal semantic element of the sci-fi horror genre that the setting is characterised by how it limits and confines the character's ability to act. As Whittington puts it, "Science fiction is ultimately about constructed spaces; therefore, sound ambience is crucial in supporting and commenting on spatial geography" (2007, 153). One might add that sci-fi horror is ultimately about the *confinement of characters* in constructed spaces. Although I have stressed the importance of distinct sound effects in this process, both ambient sound and music play into this construction of confined space.

Ambient noises contribute to this mental process of spatial mapping because they provide an aural backdrop that encloses the setting while simultaneously functioning, in collaboration with the music, to foreground the specific tone and di-

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1. Semantic elements being constituent parts such as certain objects, certain technical styles, or typical settings characterising and defining a genre, see Altman 1999, p. 89.

rection of the scene. In this sense, the interplay between the different categories of sound works not only to foster a visceral experience but just as importantly to uphold narrative drive. The idea that different sounds and the interplay between them also function as a narrative force in sci-fi movies is important with regards to my assertion that sound contrast plays a pivotal role in priming spectator expectation and response. This assertion will be supported and clarified through examples in the next section.

### ***The build up: preliminary shock points and their functions***

I will begin my investigation by looking at *Alien* and relating my analytical examples and the use of silence and sound contrast to later examples from the genre.

The first crucial shock point in *Alien* occurs 34 minutes into the movie<sup>2</sup> as crew member Kane (John Hurt) examines the extraterrestrial life form he encounters in an alien spaceship. The alien is awakened and attacks Kane with a piercing shriek. Although this is one of the crucial shock points in the movie since it constitutes the initial revelation of the alien life form through the action of the attack, I wish to stress the importance of the structure of the sound leading up to this shock moment and how the structure of the soundtrack functions as a priming mechanism, playing with audience expectation at both a subconscious and conscious level.

A particularly effective means of aurally priming the audience is to create what I will designate as a *preliminary shock point*. These preliminary shock points, heavily determined by their aural structures, are predominantly staged in scenes early on in the movie and anticipate and mirror the later crucial shock points in sci-fi horror movies. Early in the movie,<sup>3</sup> we are given a tour of the dormant spaceship, the *Nostromo*. The enclosed environmental ambiances of the spaceship are introduced and established in a montage sequence as the camera through tracking shots displays the ship's various corridors, quarters, and levels. A musical score oscillating in a regular pattern between rhythmically drifting flutes and a dramatic deep tone string tremolo accompanies the atmospheric rumble. The ambient sound and musical accompaniment fade out as the camera ends its tour around the ship in the cockpit, having thus established the first sonic markers of the filmic space and an unsettling but quiet mood. As the camera ends in a static framing of a pilot seat with a space helmet placed above it, the soundtrack becomes nearly silent. Over the course of a couple of seconds, only faint and indistinct sounds of the auditory setting are heard. This is followed by the introduction of a deep and low-volume hum as we cut between a medium shot of the navigational dashboard and a medium close up of the space helmet facing the dashboard. A sudden burst of sound disrupts the established low-volume sound environment as the spaceship's mainframe, MOTHER, turns on.

This sudden and apparently unmotivated sound burst, the instigation or awakening of the spaceship, is exactly what I characterise as a prototypical example of a

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2. DVD edition 2004, 20th Century Fox.

3. (TC 00:02:40- 00:04:39).



preliminary shock point. The effect of the preliminary shock point works as a generic priming mechanism because it is structured around a sound pattern similar to the one leading up to the central shock points of the film. The preliminary shocks thus playfully signal the more significant shock points to come, i.e. the disclosure of or later confrontations with the alien.

The acoustic structure of the sequence described above follows a sound pattern surrounding the preliminary shock point that can be loosely described as consisting of the following interconnected steps:

1. **Set-up:** Initially, ambient sound creates the sonic geography and character of the setting while the musical score creates a tensional mood. Ambient sound and the musical score then fade out, which creates a nearly silent soundscape prior to the shock, allowing room only for diegetic, low-volume sound effects.
2. **Pay-off:** The silence and general audiovisual inertia established in the preceding shots is broken by a sudden burst in sound levels and activation of visual movement, creating an audiovisual synch point that propels the plot forward.
3. **Fade-out:** The shock and embedded audiovisual action are often followed by a shot that momentarily re-establishes audiovisual inertia: a static shot and low sound level.

Returning to what I determined to be the first crucial shock point, Kane's encounter with the alien species,<sup>4</sup> we can see that the build-up to this crucial shock point follows the acoustic pattern outlined above.

As Kane approaches the alien eggs, we hear the sound of his footsteps and a high pitched humming noise, which seems to be triggered by the mist covering the eggs, following Kane's invasion of the environment. At the same time, the specific, oscillating musical score identified in the earlier sequence is applied once again, creating dramatic tension. Next, the musical score fades out, and the tension intensifies as the egg opens. The sound mix is at a minimum level, only foregrounding the diegetic sound effects of Kane's spacesuit belching out carbon dioxide and the organic sound of the alien coming to life. As Kane leans over the opening to get a better look, the silence of the moment is ruptured by the alien's sudden attack, creating an audiovisual synch point between the extremely high-pitched shriek and sudden movement of the alien. The shock of the attack is rendered with a high degree of efficiency due to this energised synch point, built upon the discrepancy between sound levels and qualities before and during the attack respectively.

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4. (TC 00:33:05 – 00:34:44).

The structure of the established soundscape primes the audience for the upcoming attack in two ways. First, it sets up the expectation that something unsettling, possibly horrific, is about to happen. The musical score plays a prominent role through its ability to temporally animate the image and create dramatic tension. Second, when the musical score fades out, a ubiquitous silence prevails. This shift in the degree of aural information available to the spectator seems to have two conflicting functions. As the dramatic tension of the musical score fades out, this would seem to imply that the danger is over. On the other hand, the generic function of the fade might signal that spectators should hold their breaths before the thrill of horror begins. The silence just before an anticipated confrontation thus plays with the hierarchy of knowledge, in which a moment of intense suspense is created, keeping the audience in the dark about how, precisely, to interpret the information of the soundtrack in relation to the unfolding action.

Similar examples of the employment of the preliminary shock effect can also be found in later instances of sci-fi horror movies. In Paul W.S. Anderson's *Event Horizon* (1997),<sup>5</sup> there are several instances of preliminary shocks points. In the beginning of the movie, the preliminary shocks occur most notably within the nightmares of Dr Weir (Sam Neill) or in conjunction with these dream sequences.

An example of a preliminary shock occurs when Dr Weir, the scientist behind experimentation with black holes, is apparently awoken from his state of hibernation by a woman's whisper<sup>6</sup>. As Dr Weir moves around the spaceship's living quarters trying to detect the origin of the initially acousmatic voice,<sup>7</sup> a cabinet behind him suddenly flies open. This event has no obvious narrative function but seems constructed solely to create a point of shock. The build up to this preliminary shock point follows the sound structure explicated above: the ambient noise of wind, so commonly associated with isolation in sci-fi horror (Whittington 2007, 137), intermingles with various fluctuating electronic tones and punctuated sound effects emulating the sound of the hull of the spaceship. A few seconds before the relatively loud sound of the cabinet is heard, the interplay of sounds momentarily fades down, creating an aural space that foregrounds the sonic impact of the sudden flying open of the cabinet.

The examples from *Alien* and *Event Horizon* show how the preliminary shocks are produced within single shots. The synchronisation of sudden movement and sound burst within an otherwise-preliminarily established audiovisual stasis generates an effective aural contrast, which furnishes the shock effect. The preliminary

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5. *Event Horizon* is a sci-fi horror about a rescue mission to investigate the sudden reappearance of a lost spaceship that seven years earlier experimented with the application of black holes in connection with time travel. DVD edition 1997, Paramount Pictures.

6. (TC 00:08:30 – 00:10:35).

7. The acousmatic voice, as defined by Chion, describes a phantasmic character that seems simultaneously absent and present (a disembodied voice), whose relationship to the screen and the world of the story involves a specific kind of ambiguity and oscillation (1990, 129-131).



shock point is, however, also obtained in another way: by using audiovisual cuts between shots. Here, the visual cuts between successive shots are simultaneous with a significant jump in sound level. Like the in-shot preliminary shock points, these on-the-cut sound jumps take place particularly in the early stages of the movies.

In *Alien*, this is predominant in a scene that crosscuts between shots of the interior of the spaceship and the hostile outside environment of the alien planet.<sup>8</sup> As crew members Dallas (Tom Skerritt), Lambert (Veronica Cartwright), and Kane leave the ship to investigate the alien spacecraft, the film crosscuts between shots of Ash (Ian Holm) monitoring their progress from a control room and shots of the crew members descending the *Nostromo* and approaching the alien spaceship in the hostile environment. The contrast in sound levels between the interior and exterior shots is significant. The shots of the interior are, in terms of sound, dominated by a low-level mix of mechanical and electronic sound effects while the high-level mixed sound of the roaring noise of a storm accompanies the exterior shots of the planet.

Returning to *Event Horizon*, in one scene, Dr Weir starts to shave in one shot, followed by a shot of the opening of the spaceship's shutters. This provides another good example of the preliminary shock point as an instance of an on-the-cut sound jump. Transitions between the shots are aurally characterised by a sound jump that is characterised in the preceding shot by a sustained, lower mixed sound. On the soundtrack, we hear the friction of the blade against Dr Weir's skin, followed in the next shot by the considerably higher mixed metallic and mechanical sound of the shutters opening. A similar instance of a preliminary shock point occurs early on in *Pandorum*.<sup>9</sup> This takes place in the cut between an initial dream sequence, which is accompanied by a low-level mixed ambient tone, and the subsequent high-level electronic sound of Bower (Ben Foster) abruptly awakening from hibernation.<sup>10</sup>

The cuts in these scenes generate significant discrepancy in the shots' sound levels and qualities. It could be argued that this form of aural jump cut does not create what have been designated as preliminary shock points in the same way as do the in-shot shock points described above. The argument would be that aural shock points occur when something unexpected happens and that a cut between two shots cannot, generally speaking, be designated as an unexpected occurrence since movies are based on various styles of montage and therefore normally consist of numerous cuts.

I agree that there is a formal distinction between these two forms of preliminary shock points but maintain the assertion that on-the-cut sound jumps have the potential to function as preliminary shock points as well. The distinction, in my view, is that while the structural build up of in-shot preliminary shock points condition the spectator by closely anticipating and mirroring the sophisticated structural build up of the upcoming crucial shock points, on-the-cut sound jumps are a simple, stylis-

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8. (TC 00:20:34 – 00:21:50).

9. *Pandorum* tells the story of two crew members who awake from hibernation on an apparently deserted spaceship without knowing where they are or what they are doing there. DVD edition 2009, Constantin Film Production GMBH.

10. (TC 00:02:55– 00:03:13).

tically effective, and less time consuming (production wise) means of achieving the same effect. The latter type of sonic sound jump is a more obvious example of the conventional means of generically priming the audience for the shocks to come. Actually, we more or less consciously expect instances of sudden bursts of sound in an otherwise low-level mixed sound milieu prior to confrontation with or attack from the monster, i.e. we more or less consciously expect preliminary shock points because they are important to the spectatorial pleasure of watching sci-fi horror since this is a generic play on the central narrative of disclosure/confrontation. A classic example of this is when characters that are in a frantic state knock things over, with the peculiar tendency in each instance of making a chillingly loud noise that potentially discloses their whereabouts to the monster.

The former type are instances of shock points that work in a similar manner to condition audiences for later shock points, though working on a predominantly subconscious level while at the same time functioning to subtly foreground central thematic dichotomies within the genre. One example of this is the aforementioned scene from *Alien*, in which the low-level sound environment of the 'safe' spaceship is contrasted with the high-level shrieking sound of the hostile environment on the surface of the planet. Here, the hostile and aggressive quality of the sound of the planet's environment is similar to the sound that will later be linked to the alien, thereby establishing the associative bond between high volume and high-pitched sounds that signal the theme of deadly danger for and potential defeat and annihilation of the human protagonists.

In the last two sections of this article, I will touch more upon the narrative and thematic importance of the preliminary shock points. First, by making a few observations on the basis of another classic example from the genre.

### *The diminished pleasure of horror*

Considering John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) might shed some additional light on the stylistic effectiveness of shock points within the sci-fi horror genre. While, unquestionably adhering to the sci-fi horror genre on multiple levels, *The Thing*<sup>11</sup> fails to meet the expectations and pleasures of the sci-fi horror genre in one crucial respect. It is safe to say that the human characters' encounter with an infectious alien species at a remote Antarctic outpost is intended to engulf the spectator in the spectacle of horrific pleasure as the alien causes the men to turn against one another in deadly fear. However, when watching the central scenes of horrific confrontation with the alien being in *The Thing*, it is evident that the film does not apply a stylistic approach to the sound design that facilitates shock points. This is because the creators of *The Thing* conceive of the encounter with the monster first and foremost as a visual spectacle and therefore downplay the systematic use of auditory shock points

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11. DVD Edition 1998, Universal Home Video.

as an otherwise-effective stylistic tool to enhance the impact of the pivotal instances of disclosure/confrontation so central to the genre. Instead, the repeated appearances of the alien are built around elaborate visual effects depicting the monster's transmogrifying incarnations. These central encounters foreground the attention on the visual spectacle while subordinating the auditory effect in the scenes to the spectacular imagery. The stylistic choice of foregrounding the visual aspects of the encounters leads to a failure to make creative use of sound contrasts relative to the central horror events in the movie, thereby minimising preliminary shock points.

The few instances of shock points in the film only condition the spectator very loosely, such as when Bennings (Peter Maloney) is startled during a game of cards because he has been disturbed by the dog/alien.<sup>12</sup> This scene leads up to the scene in which the alien is discovered in a state of transformation for the first time. The preliminary shock point is, however, never connected to or followed by shock points in the following revelation of the alien, thereby eroding the narrative force and purpose of the shock point in the overall context of the movie. The preliminary shock point in this case becomes an instance that never fulfils a designated narrative purpose with regards to the spectacle and thrill of horror.

*The Thing* undoubtedly inscribes itself in the long list of sci-fi horror movies, yet it is nevertheless a film that is attractive primarily on account of its imagery. This seems to be a suitable strategy given the presumably immense effort that was put into the visual effect artist's creation of the film's alien monster. However, when comparing *The Thing* with former specimens of the genre (*Alien*, 1979) and later examples (*Event Horizon*, 1997; *Pandorum*, 2009) on the level of generic sound-image relationships, one is left with the haunting suspicion that the filmmakers could have achieved an even better articulated experience of horror had they orchestrated the image-sound relationship to place more emphasis on sound design as a means of attaining the thrill of horror relative to the central narrative scenario of disclosure/confrontation.

This is not to say that implementing the structure of shock points is the only means of facilitating the dramatic effect of horror. The creation of the spectacle of horror is, of course, dependent on the efficient orchestration of a range of stylistic components: framing, mise-en-scène, acting, lighting, cutting, sound, etc. However, as the analysis of the concept of shock points in the foregoing has attempted to show, this strategy, if not quintessential *per se* to the genre of cinematic horror, at least seems to offer a very powerful and effective means of affecting the audience and accomplishing a central aim of the genre: the instigation of thrills of horror. Moreover, as the distinction between preliminary and crucial shock points within the storyline is designed to show, the application of this strategy becomes important to the narrative drive, playing with the audience expectation of the central theme of horror, that is, the encounter with the unknown.

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12. (TC 00:25: 53 – 00:26:22).

### *The narrative importance of shock points in sci-fi horror*

In the aforementioned cabinet example from *Event Horizon*, the preliminary shock points may function first and foremost as gimmicks that prime the audience's anticipation of the later and more crucial shock points. However, the preliminary shock points may also possess a more concrete narrative function, punctuating the beginning of a new narrative drive and disclosing new narrative information.

An example of the preliminary shock point's ability to drive the narrative can be seen in the sequence from the beginning of *Alien* described above. The preliminary shock created by the initialisation of MOTHER is the punctual sound event that signals the awakening of the spaceship and drives the plot forward as the crew awakens, only to discover that the cause of their awakening is a mysterious signal they are obliged to investigate. Similarly, the example from *Pandorum* and the shutters example from *Event Horizon* also function as punctual initiations of the following scene and thus important story content. In the first example from *Event Horizon*, the punctual sound initiates a spectacular 360° rotational zoom-out shot, which reveals Dr Weir's orbital location, while the loud noise of Bower's dehibernation in *Pandorum* aurally contrasts with the preceding established soundscape.

The preliminary shocks do not function solely as isolated instances but, on account of their relationship with the later crucial shock points, also function as narrative drivers, propelling the plot. The priming function central to the connection between preliminary shock points and crucial shock points in sci-fi horror works on a narrative level as an associative indicator of the later revelation of the monster. The manner in which the preliminary shock is constructed thus plays with the spectator's anticipation of the later disclosure, creating narrative tension and suspense concerning the central event surrounding the actual encounter with the monster.

## CONCLUSION

It might appear banal to observe that sci-fi movies make use of shifts in sound level. However, this article has sought to describe and explicate what I assume to be a vital component of the spectacle of horror within sci-fi horror cinema: the creation of shock points and their relationships with the pivotal event of the genre, namely the disclosure of/confrontation with the alien monster. Through an analysis of the specific use of sounds in sci-fi horror movies, I have explored the idea that sound contrast, involving the interplay of low and high sound levels within and between shots, plays a pivotal role in priming the audience and its narrative expectations. The preliminary shock points are effective both as instances of generic gimmicks and as means of driving the narrative of sci-fi horror. In this sense, the use of silence and sound contrasts in sci-fi horror represents an important – if not defining – aural trait of the genre, one that furnishes the central pleasure of experiencing horror in sci-fi movies.

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*Alien* (1979), *The Thing* (1982), *Event Horizon* (1997), *Pandorum* (2009).

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