

REUBEN MORRIS-DYER PRESENTS...

"THE SONIC BODY!"

A SPINE-TINGLING EXPLORATION OF SOUND AND THE BODY IN HORROR CINEMA

INTRODUCTION...

Sounds play a crucial role in how we experience films, often communicating information to us so subtly that we don't even notice. Despite this, academic research has often neglected to analyse sound design in films, instead focusing on cinema's visual aspects.

In my Laidlaw Project, I aimed to correct this imbalance, and so examined the impact of film sound, focusing in particular on the relationship between sound and the human body.

This led me to explore how sounds in the films we watch can affect...

- Our perception of the bodies on-screen.
- The body of the viewer (a physical response).
- The politicisation of cinematic spaces through dominant voices.

BACKGROUND...

Since the introduction of sound film at the end of the 1920s, it has been used to excite and terrify audiences. The first full-length "talkie" was "The Jazz Singer" (1927), a musical which had synchronised speech, singing, and music! Unfortunately, early sound technology often went wrong, meaning that the sound and picture would be out of time.

WARNING!

if you hear his whispers...
IT'S ALREADY TOO LATE!!!

UNCANNY BODIES...

Professor Robert Spadoni engages with the idea of "the Uncanny Body", a term he coins which refers to the effect produced by unsynchronised sound and voice. Spadoni argues that when we watch a film in which the movements of characters' mouths are not aligned with the voices, they seem eerie and less like a living being. This links this to Freud's definition of "the uncanny", in which he applies this term to things which seem at once familiar and unfamiliar. Interestingly, Spadoni points out that in "Dracula" (1931), this mismatch of body and voice is deliberately used to make the character Renfield seem more threatening. I used this as the starting point for an essay, "Altered, Unsynchronised and Dubbed: Spadoni's 'Uncanny Bodies' and Vocality in Horror Cinema" in which I explored instances of "the uncanny body" in modern horror films such as "The Exorcist" (1973) and "Get Out" (2017).

POLITICAL VOICES...

In "The Sonic Colour Line", Jennifer Lynn Stoeber discusses how voices can play an important role in creating politicised spaces, creating spaces which are racially segregated - 'in the allegedly colour-blind post-Civil Rights Movement United States there are "invisible flashing white-only signs everywhere" (Breanna Edwards - 'The Root' 20th Jan 2016) and we hear them loud and clear.' In response to this, I considered how racialised spaces are vocally represented in films, prompting me to consider how "white-only" spaces are created through dialogue in "Get Out" (2017) and how problematic and stereotypical black spaces are created in "Candyman" (1992). I was also prompted by this to consider how gendered spaces can be created through voice, which can also be seen in "Candyman".

METHOD...

As I only had 10 weeks to complete my research, I decided to focus on a genre which I knew would engage with the theme of the body

- HORROR!!!

I therefore used a combination of primary sources (films, virtual reality games, and an experiment I conducted) and secondary sources (books and journal articles) to conduct my research and collaborated with my supervisors to approach the topic of 'The Sonic Body'.

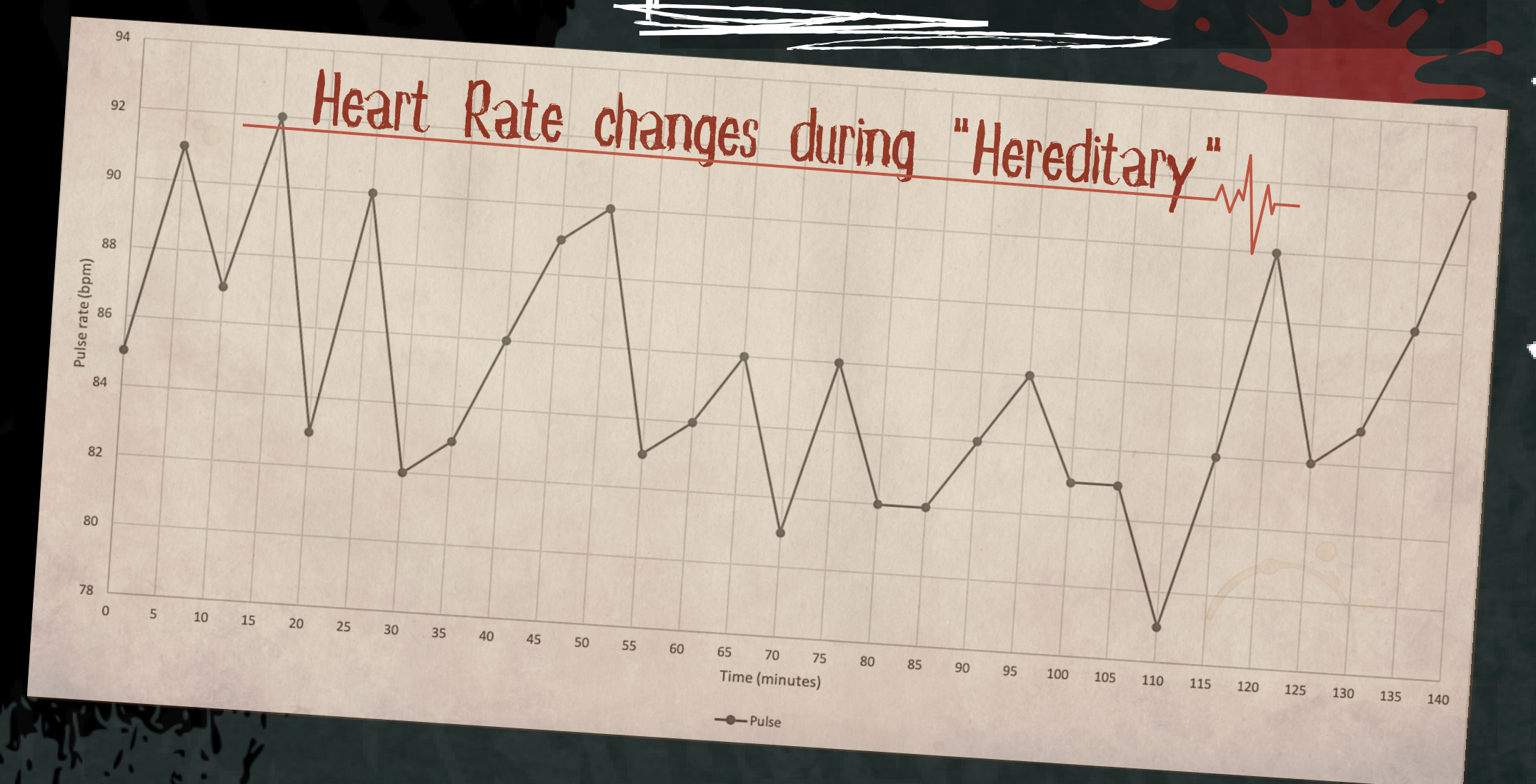
HEARTBEATS...

One discovery which I made was Ben Winters' "Heartbeat Hypothesis", which proposes that heartbeat rhythms (either in a film's soundtrack or its musical score) can help the viewer to simulate in their own body the anxiety or fear which the character on-screen is experiencing. Consequently, even if we are not conscious of the heartbeat sound effect, our own heart rate may increase, mirroring the distress of our on-screen avatar.

THE EXPERIMENT...

In order to test this theory, I conducted an experiment alongside the St Andrews School of Medicine. Whilst watching a horror film - "Hereditary" (2018), my heart rate and blood pressure were monitored. Using these results, I was able to map my pulse rate and blood pressure against the film's run-time and identify which scenes had the greatest impact upon me (see below).

I then examined each of the scenes that had caused me the greatest distress and considered how the sound effects and music may have contributed to my elevated heartbeat.



TO CONCLUDE...

My research has shown that the relationship between sound and the body in films is extremely complex and multifaceted (especially in horror films), and has evolved alongside the cinematic art form. Not only is sound able to articulate information to the viewer about the bodies which we see onscreen, it is also capable of directly affecting the body of the person watching in order to establish a physical level of empathy. This capacity to affect the viewer extends to the capacity for film sound to disquiet: I found that unsynchronised or dubbed voices can seem uncanny and unsettling, hinting at a supernatural presence or revealing a character's true identity. Finally, I have explored the idea of political spaces in films and how they can be created through the voices which are heard on-screen, prompting me to reflect on how vocality can manifest an oppressive racist or misogynistic environment.

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