

## Functions of Film Sound: A Man Escaped

Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (*Un Condamné à mort c'est échappé*) illustrates how a variety of sound techniques can function throughout an entire film. The story takes place in France in 1943. Fontaine, a Resistance fighter arrested by the Germans, has been put in prison and condemned to die. But while awaiting his execution, he works at an escape plan, loosening the boards of his cell door and making ropes. Just as he is ready to put his plan in action, a boy named Jost is put into his cell. Deciding to trust that Jost is not a spy, Fontaine reveals his plan to him, and they are both able to escape.

Throughout the film, sound has many important functions. As in all of his films, Bresson emphasizes the sound track, rightly believing that sound may be just as cinematic as images. At certain points in *A Man Escaped*, Bresson even lets his sound technique dominate the image; throughout the film, we are compelled to *listen*. Indeed, Bresson is one of a handful of directors who create a complete interplay between sound and image.

### Fontaine's Commentary

A key factor in guiding our perception of the action is the commentary spoken over by Fontaine himself. The voice-over is nonsimultaneous, since it occurs at a time later than the images. But it could be either internal or external sound, since we never learn whether Fontaine is thinking back over these events or recounting them to someone.

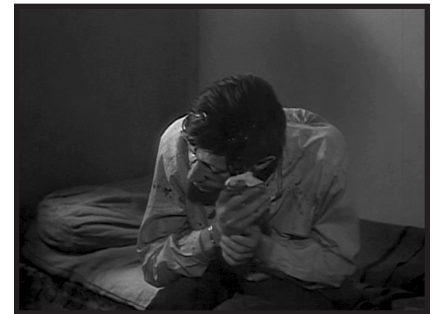
Fontaine's narration has several functions. The commentary helps clarify the action, since certain temporal cues suggest how long Fontaine spends in prison. As we see him working at his escape plan, his voice-over tells us, "One month of patient work and my door opened." At other points, he gives us additional indications of time. His commentary is particularly important during the final escape scene, where hours of action occupy only 15 minutes of viewing time and the narration is narrowly limited to what Fontaine could know. Fontaine's voice calmly tells us of his and Jost's patient, cautious progress toward freedom.

We receive other vital information through the commentary. Sometimes the narration simply states facts: that the pin Fontaine obtains came from the women's wing of the prison, or that certain prison officials' quarters were at various places in the building. More strikingly, Fontaine often tells what his thoughts had been. After being beaten and put in his first cell, he wipes the blood from his face and lies down. On the track, we hear his voice say, "I'd have preferred a quick death." Often the actor does not register such thoughts visually.

At some points, the voice-over commentary even corrects an impression given by the image. After Fontaine has been sentenced to death, he is led back to his cell and flings himself down on the bed. We might take him to be crying, but the commentary says, "I laughed hysterically. It helped." Thus the commentary adds a degree of depth to the film's narration by allowing us glimpses into Fontaine's mental states.

Yet at first much of the commentary may seem unnecessary, since it often tells us something that we can also see in the image. In one scene, Fontaine wipes the blood from his face (7.53), and his voice tells us, "I tried to clean up." Again and again in the film, Fontaine describes his actions as we see him perform them or just before or after them. But this use of sound is not redundantly supporting the visuals. One major function of the past-tense commentary and even the apparently redundant remarks is to emphasize the prison event as having *already* happened. Instead of simply showing a series of events in the present, the commentary places the events in the past.

Indeed, certain phrases emphasize the fact that the commentary is a remembering of events. As we see Fontaine lie down in his cell after having been beaten,



**7.53** One of the earliest instances of repetitive commentary in *A Man Escaped*, as Fontaine tells us, "I tried to clean up."

his commentary says, “I believe that I gave up and wept,” as if the passage of time has made him uncertain. After meeting another prisoner, Fontaine narrates, “Terry was an exception; he was allowed to see his daughter. I learned this later.” Again we are aware that the meeting we see on the screen occurred at a point in the past.

Because of this difference in time between image and commentary, the narration indicates to us that Fontaine will eventually escape rather than be executed. (The title also indicates this.) This final *result* of the narrative cause–effect chain is known. As a result, our suspense is centered on the *causes*—not *whether* Fontaine will escape, but *how* he will escape. The film guides our expectations toward the minute details of Fontaine’s work to break out of prison. The commentary and the sound effects draw our attention to tiny gestures and ordinary objects that become crucial to the escape.

Furthermore, the narrative stresses that work alone is not enough, that Fontaine and the other prisoners can survive, both mentally and physically, only through their efforts to help one another. Fontaine receives aid and comfort from his fellow prisoners. His neighbor Blanchet gives him a blanket to make his ropes; another prisoner who tries to escape, Orsini, provides him with vital information on how to get over the walls. Finally, Fontaine himself must extend trust to his new cellmate, Jost, by taking him along in spite of suspicions that he may be a spy planted by the Germans.



**7.54** As Fontaine patiently sharpens his spoon handle into a chisel, the simple framing and quiet background track allow the scraping noise to become prominent.



**7.55** At the start of the film, Bresson renders Fontaine’s first escape by keeping the camera in the car, as if waiting for him to return. Through the back window we glimpse him being led back to his captors.

“The eye solicited alone makes the ear impatient, the ear solicited alone makes the eye impatient. Use these impatiences.”

— Robert Bresson, director

## Sound Effects and Narration

The interplay between the sounds and images in *A Man Escaped* doesn’t pertain solely to the commentary. Bresson’s effort to focus our attention on details works with sound effects as well, where each object gains a specific timbre. In the long middle stretch of the film, in which Fontaine works on breaking through his door and making the implements of escape, detail becomes particularly prominent. A close-up shows Fontaine’s hands sharpening a spoon handle into a chisel; the loud scraping evokes the very feel of the metal (7.54). We hear distinctly the rubbing of the spoon against the boards of the door, the ripping of blankets with a razor to make ropes, even the swish of straw against the floor as Fontaine sweeps up slivers of wood. We’re intensely aware that such sounds could alert the guards to Fontaine’s activities.

The concentration on details follows a general pattern in the narration of *A Man Escaped*. The narration is remarkably restricted. We learn nothing that Fontaine doesn’t know. As Fontaine looks around his cell for the first time, his voice-over names the items it contains—a slop bucket, a shelf, a window. *After* he mentions each, the camera moves to give us a glimpse of it. At another point, Fontaine hears a strange sound outside his cell. He moves to the door, and we get a point-of-view shot through the peephole in his door; a guard is winding the crank of a skylight in the hall. For the first time, Fontaine becomes aware of the skylight, which eventually becomes his escape route.

At times, we know even less than Fontaine does. When he attempts to escape from the car in the opening scene, the camera holds on his empty seat and the other prisoner rather than moving to follow him and show his recapture (7.55). Later, in prison, Fontaine’s neighbor Blanchet falls down during their daily walk to empty their slop buckets. We first hear the sound of his fall as the camera remains on a medium shot of Fontaine reacting in surprise. Then there is a cut to Blanchet as Fontaine moves to help him up. While the image restricts our knowledge, the sound anticipates and guides our expectations.

At times, sound in *A Man Escaped* goes beyond controlling the image; sometimes it partially *replaces* it. Several of the film’s scenes are so dark that sound must play a large part in conveying information about the action. After Fontaine falls asleep in prison for the first time, there is a fade-out. While the screen is still dark,

we hear his voice-over saying, “I slept so soundly, my guards had to awaken me.” This is followed by the loud rasp of a bolt and hinge. The light let in by the door allows us to see a faint image of a guard’s hand shaking Fontaine, and we hear a voice tell him to get up. In general, the film contains many fade-outs in which the sound of the next scene begins before the image does. By putting sound over a black screen or dark image, Bresson allows the sound track an unusually prominent place in his film.

The reliance on sound culminates in the final escape scene. During much of the last sequence, the action takes place outdoors at night. There are no establishing shots to give us a sense of the space of the roofs and walls that Fontaine and Jost must scale. We get glimpses of gestures and settings, but often sound is our main guide to what is happening. This has the effect of intensifying our attention greatly. We must strain to understand the action from what we can glimpse and hear. We judge the pair’s progress from the church bells heard tolling the hour. The train outside the walls helps cover the noise the fugitives make. Each strange noise suggests an unseen threat.

In one remarkable shot, Fontaine stands in darkness by a wall, listening to the footsteps of a guard walking up and down offscreen. Fontaine knows that he must kill this man if his escape is to succeed. We hear his voice-over explaining where the guard is moving and mentioning how hard his own heart is beating. There is little movement. All we see is Fontaine’s dim outline and a tiny reflection of light in his eye (7.56). Again, throughout this scene, the sound concentrates our attention on the characters’ most minute reactions and gestures.

## Sound Motifs

We’ve discussed how a filmmaker controls not only what we hear but also the qualities of that sound. In *A Man Escaped*, every object is assigned a distinct pitch. The volume of sounds ranges from very loud to almost inaudible, as the opening scene illustrates. The first few shots of Fontaine riding to prison in a car are accompanied only by the soft hum of the motor. But as a streetcar blocks the road, Fontaine seeks to use the streetcar’s uproar to conceal his dash from the car. The moment Fontaine leaps from the car, Bresson eliminates the streetcar noise, and we hear running feet and gunshots offscreen. Later, in the final escape, the film alternates sounds offscreen (trains, bells, bicycle, and so on) with stretches of silence. The film’s sparse sound mix effectively isolates specific sounds for our attention.

Certain sounds not only are very loud but also have an echo effect added to give them a distinctive timbre. The voices of the German guards as they give Fontaine orders are reverberant and harsh compared to the voices of the French prisoners. Similarly, the noises of the handcuffs and the cell door’s bolts are magnified for the same echo effect. These manipulations suggest Fontaine’s own perceptual subjectivity. Thus our reactions to Fontaine’s imprisonment are intensified through the manipulation of timbre.

These devices all help focus our attention on the details of Fontaine’s prison life. But there are other devices that help unify the film and sustain its narrative and thematic development. These are the sound *motifs*, which come back at significant moments of the action.

One set of auditory motifs emphasizes the space outside Fontaine’s cell. We see a streetcar in the opening scene, and the bell and motor of a streetcar are heard offscreen every time Fontaine speaks to someone through his cell window (7.57). The noise remind us of his goal of reaching the streets beyond the walls. During the second half of the film, the sounds of trains also become important. When Fontaine is first able to leave his cell and walk in the hall unobserved, we hear a train whistle. It returns at other moments when he leaves his cell clandestinely, until the train provides the noise to cover the sounds Fontaine and Jost make during their escape.



**7.56** Waiting to kill the guard, Fontaine remains frozen and silent. The shot is so close and dim that only the soundtrack tells us of the guard’s approach.



**7.57** When Fontaine appears at his window, we hear the streetcar that evokes life outside the prison.



**7.58** Bresson avoids long shots of the prisoners in the washroom, letting the sound of water fill in the ambience.



**7.59** As the prisoners empty their slop buckets, we hear the Mozart Mass in C Minor.

Since the prisoners depend on one another, certain sound motifs call attention to Fontaine's interactions with the other men. For example, the daily gathering of the men to wash in a common sink becomes associated with running water. At first, the faucet is seen onscreen, but later Bresson presents the scrubbing of the prisoners in closer shots, with the sound of the water offscreen (7.58).

Some motifs become associated with defiance of the prison rules. Fontaine uses his handcuffs to tap on the wall to signal his neighbors. He coughs to cover the sound of scraping, and coughs among the prisoners become signals. Fontaine ignores the guards' orders and continues to talk to the other men. There are other sound motifs in the film (bells, guns, whistles, children's voices) that share certain functions already noted: dynamizing Fontaine's escape, calling our attention to details, and guiding what we notice.

## Music

Yet another auditory motif involves the only nondiegetic sound in the film—passages from a Mozart mass. The music is motivated clearly enough, since the film's plot action refers continually to religious faith. Fontaine tells another prisoner that he prays but doesn't expect God to help him if he doesn't work for his own liberty.

At first, we may be unable to form any consistent expectations about the music, and its recurrences are likely to take us by surprise. After it is heard over the credits, the music does not return for some time. Its first use over the action occurs during the initial walk Fontaine takes with the men to empty their slop buckets. As the music plays, Fontaine's commentary explains the routine: "Empty your buckets and wash, back to your cell for the day." Hearing ceremonial church music while prisoners empty slop buckets is a little startling, but the contrast isn't ironic (7.59). Not only are these moments of movement important to Fontaine's life in the prison, but they also provide his main means of direct contact with other prisoners.

The music, which comes back seven more times, emphasizes the narrative development. Fontaine meets the other men, wins their support, and finally plans to share his escape. The music reappears whenever Fontaine makes contact with another prisoner (Blanchet, Orsini) who will affect his escape. Later washing scenes have no music; these are scenes in which Fontaine's contact is cut off because Orsini decides not to go along. The music returns as Orsini attempts his own escape plan. He fails but is able to give Fontaine vital information he will need in his own attempt. The music reappears when Blanchet, once opposed to Fontaine's plan, contributes his blanket to the rope making.





Eventually, the music becomes associated with the boy, Jost. It plays again as Fontaine realizes that he must either kill Jost or take him along. The final use of music comes over the very end of the film, as the two escape from the prison and disappear into the night. The nondiegetic music has traced Fontaine's developing trust in the other men on whom his endeavor depends.

The recurring musical passages suggest a general implicit meaning beyond what Fontaine tells us explicitly. If we follow the pattern of the music's recurrences, we might interpret the motif as suggesting the importance of trust and interdependence among the people of the prison. Here we don't have the conventional mood music that accompanies the action of many films. The very incongruity of a Mozart mass as an accompaniment to mundane actions should cue us to seek an implicit meaning of this type.

## A Sample Sequence

A brief scene from *A Man Escaped* shows how our experience of the film's story can be shaped by silence and shift between sounds that are internal and external, simultaneous and nonsimultaneous. The eleven shots (7.60–7.70) in Table 7.3 constitute the scene in which the boy Jost is put into Fontaine's cell.

**TABLE 7.3** Sound and silence in *A Man Escaped*

Shot	Voice	Effects	Action/Camera
<p>(1) 27 sec</p>  <p><b>7.60</b></p>	<p>F. (over): But then once again . . .</p>	<p>Lock rattles off</p> <p>Rattle continues off</p>	<p>F. turns</p>
 <p><b>7.61</b></p>	<p>. . . I thought I was lost.</p>	<p>Footsteps off</p>	<p>F. turns head left</p> <p>Watches off left, turning head</p> <p>Moves left and slightly forward; camera pans with his actions</p>
 <p><b>7.62</b></p>	<p>(Over): In French and German uniform, he looked repulsively filthy.</p>	<p>Lock closing off</p> <p>One retreating footstep off</p>	<p>Catches door as it closes</p>
 <p><b>7.63</b></p>	<p>(Over): He seemed barely sixteen.</p>	<p>Echoing of locks and doors, off</p> <p>Two footsteps, off</p>	

**TABLE 7.3** Sound and silence in *A Man Escaped* (continued)

Shot	Voice	Effects	Action/Camera
	F. (aloud): Are you German?		
7.64			
(2) 10 sec			
	French? What is your name?		
7.65			Jost lifts head, looks off right
	Jost: Jost, François Jost.  F. (over): Had they planted a spy?		
7.66			
(3) 10 sec			
	F. (over): Did they think I was ready to talk?		F. lowers eyes
7.67			

**TABLE 7.3** Sound and silence in *A Man Escaped* (continued)

Shot	Voice	Effects	Action/Camera
 <p><b>7.68</b></p>		<p>Sound of one footstep (F.'s) on cell floor</p>	<p>F. moves left and forward, camera pans to follow</p>
 <p><b>7.69</b></p>	<p>F. (aloud): Give me your hand, Jost.</p>		<p>F. stretches right arms out</p>
<p>(4) 7 sec</p>  <p><b>7.70</b> Dissolve</p>	<p>F. (aloud): There isn't much room.</p>	<p>Sound of Jost rising</p> <p>Shoes against floor</p>	<p>Jost stands, they shake hands</p> <p>F. looks right</p> <p>They both look around</p>

Moments of silence and oscillation between Fontaine’s internal and external speech dominate the scene. We haven’t seen Jost before and don’t know what is happening as the scene begins. Fontaine’s internal commentary tells us that a new threat has appeared. Offscreen footsteps and Fontaine’s gaze indicate that someone has entered his room, but the camera lingers on Fontaine. Bresson delays the cut to the newcomer for a surprisingly long time. (This first shot is as long as the other three shots combined.) The delay creates special effects. It restricts the narration considerably, since we do not know what Fontaine is reacting to. Our access to his mental state through the commentary only hints at the threat: the “he” referred to could be either a guard or another prisoner. This is one of the many small moments of suspense the narration creates.

The fact that we wait to see Jost also functions to emphasize the importance of his appearance. It directs our expectations to Fontaine's reaction (conveyed largely through his nonsimultaneous diegetic commentary) rather than to the new character. By the time we actually see Jost, we know that Fontaine feels threatened by him and disturbed by his part-German uniform. The first words Fontaine speaks in the scene emphasize his doubt. Rather than stating a decisive attitude, he simply seeks information. Again his commentary returns as he makes clear the dilemma he is in: Jost may be a spy planted by the prison officials. Yet his words to Jost contrast with this inner doubt as he shakes hands and converses in a friendly fashion. Thus the interplay of simultaneous dialogue and nonsimultaneous narration allows the filmmaker to present contrasting psychological aspects of the action.

The sound effects mark significant actions and develop the narrative progression. Fontaine's footstep is heard as he moves toward Jost after his initial reserve, and Jost's rising accompanies their first gesture of trust, the handshake. Finally, their shoes scrape against the floor as they relax and begin to speak of their situation.

This scene is very brief, but the combination of different types of sound within a few shots indicates the complexity of the film's sound track. The track, though, cannot be considered apart from its place in the entire film, functioning in interaction with other techniques and with narrative form. Through Bresson's control of what sounds we hear, what qualities these sounds have, and what relationships exist among those sounds and between sound and image, he has made this technique a central factor in shaping our experience of the whole film.

## Summary

As usual, both extensive viewing and intensive scrutiny will sharpen your capacity to notice the workings of film sound. You can get comfortable with the analytical tools we have suggested by asking several questions about a film's sound:

1. What sounds are present—music, speech, noise? How are loudness, pitch, and timbre used? Is the mixture sparse or dense? Modulated or abruptly changing?
2. Is the sound related rhythmically to the image? If so, how?
3. Is the sound faithful or unfaithful to its perceived source?
4. *Where* is the sound coming from? In the story's space or outside it? Onscreen or offscreen? If offscreen, how is it shaping your response to what you're seeing?
5. *When* is the sound occurring? Simultaneously with the story action? Before? After?
6. How are the various sorts of sounds organized across a sequence or the entire film? What patterns are formed, and how do they reinforce aspects of the film's overall form?
7. For each of questions 1–6, what *purposes* are fulfilled and what *effects* are achieved by the sonic manipulations?

Practice at trying to answer such questions will familiarize you with the basic uses of film sound.

As always, it isn't enough to name and classify. These categories and terms are most useful when we take the next step and examine how the types of sound we identify *function* in the total film.