

# CM533 Multimedia Time-based Assets: Scripts & Semiotics

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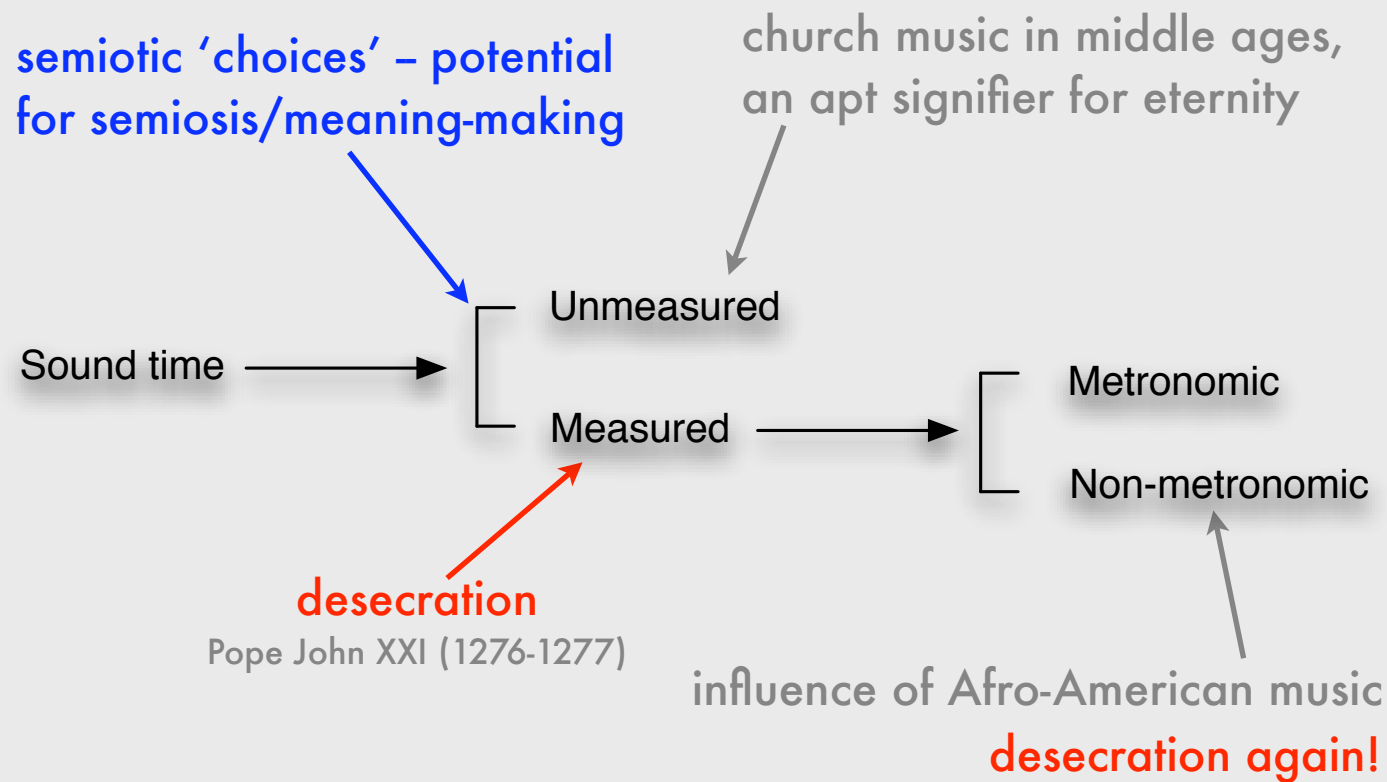
# sound semiotics

- ▶ Semiotics
  - ⊙ Study of signs & symbols
  - ⊙ Study of how meaning is constructed and understood
- ▶ Semiotics of sound: describing what you can say with sound and how to interpret the things other people say with sound (van Leeuwen, 1999, p.4)
- ▶ Traditional semiotics sees language as a set of rules, a code
  - ⊙ In bureaucracies and legal domains, fixed rules are necessary
  - ⊙ In creative domains, they become guidelines/frameworks

# sound design

- ▶ Sound-as-sound rather than sound-as-music or sound-as-language is a new area of practice
- ▶ No codified rules
- ▶ A semiotics of sound should not be a code book but an annotated catalogue of resources
  - ⦿ Offers array of semiotic choices & possible uses to which the resources may be put based on experience (van Leeuwen, 1999).

# sound time (van Leeuwen)



# perspective & soundscape

- ▶ Radio/film soundtracks have 3 zones:
  - ⦿ Immediate/foreground (to be listened to)
  - ⦿ Support/mid-ground (to be heard)
  - ⦿ Background (to be heard)
- ▶ In Schafer's soundscape terms:
  - ⦿ Figure - the sound 'signal'
  - ⦿ Ground - the setting/context
  - ⦿ Field - the place where the observation takes place
- ▶ Hi-fi & lo-fi soundscapes (Schafer)
  - ⦿ hifi - discrete sounds heard at great distance, low ambient noise
  - ⦿ lofi - individual sounds get blurred

# hifi, lofi, masking

- ▶ In lofi soundscapes perspective is lost.
- ▶ So common in urban environments that acoustic engineers deliberately create walls of noise because discrete noises are distracting:
- ▶ *“If a masking noise is uninterrupted and not too loud, and if it has no information content, it will become an acceptable background noise and will suppress other objectionable intruding noises, making them sound psychologically quieter” (Doelle, 1972)*

# figure, ground, field

- ▶ Any sound can be figure, ground, or field
  - ⦿ sounds designed to stand out (e.g. bells, alarms, sirens) can become Ground (e.g. in the city)
- ▶ It depends on the position of the listener
- ▶ *“In my workroom the tapping of the keys of my computer keyboard and the hum of my computer are Figure, a car starting up outside and the raucous voices of men drinking beer outside a pub across the road are Ground, while the ‘swash of traffic noise’ in the High Street, a little further away is Field. If a car alarm went off outside it would simply mix in with the Ground and not form a ‘signal’ for me” (van Leeuwen, 1999).*

# perspective

- ▶ What is Figure, Ground, Field depends
  - ⦿ on listener's relation to the world being represented
  - ⦿ or on the relation created for the listener in the sound mix
    - ★ Sounds of a horse-drawn carriage: placing rumble of wheels as Figure, gallop of horses as Ground, and rural sounds as Field, places the listener as the passenger of the carriage rather than an observer of it
- ▶ In movies music is usually background
  - ⦿ Except in **The Piano** when Sam Neill chops of Holly Hunter's finger
  - ⦿ Or in **Reservoir Dogs** in the chair torture scene
  - ⦿ Or in the Wagner scene in **Apocalypse Now**
- ▶ In Cage's 4'33" the Field becomes Figure

# rock 'n' roll

- ▶ Urban environments are lofi
  - ⊙ broadband noises (car engines, machines, ...) are rare in nature (only some insects produce it)
  - ⊙ absence of reverberation
  - ⊙ acoustic space is crowded and close
- ▶ Rock music is typically broadband: sound is crowded, a wall of sound. Solo instruments and vocalists must scream to be heard

# drum 'n' bass

- ▶ A reversal of western music
  - ◉ Melody moves to background (Ground or Field)
  - ◉ Accompaniment moved to Figure
  - ◉ The drums and the bass are played in the head rather than a real acoustic space
  - ◉ Ground usually a keyboard sound (sustained pad chords or repetitive piano riff)
  - ◉ Field is intermittent snippets, sound FX, techno hits, voice fragments etc

# semiotic summary

- ▶ semiotic system of aural perspective divides simultaneous sounds into groups placed at different distances from the listener to make the listener relate to them in different ways
- ▶ Sound positioned in three groups: Figure, Ground, Field or two groups: Figure & Ground or Figure & Field
- ▶ When there is no perspective there is only Figure

# figure

- ▶ The most important sound
  - ⦿ The sound the listener must identify with
  - ⦿ react to
  - ⦿ act upon

# ground

- ▶ Part of the listener's social world but in a less involved way
- ▶ Treated like the familiar faces and places we see every day
- ▶ A context we take for granted and only notice when it is taken away

# field

- ▶ In the listener's physical rather than social world
- ▶ Treated like people that crowd the street we are in, the trees in the forest, etc.

# semiotic summary cont.

- ▶ Figure, ground, field made specific by the context in which they occur
- ▶ Perspective can be manipulated (by moving sounds between f,g,f)
- ▶ Perspective is realised by the relative loudnesses of the various sounds

# social distance

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Distance	Voice	Message
very close (3" to 6")	soft whisper	top-secret
close (8" to 12")	whisper	very confidential - for 1 person
near (12" to 20")	soft indoors/full outdoors	confidential
close neutral (20" to 36")	low volume	personal subject matter
far neutral (4' to 5')	full voice	non-personal matters
public (5.5' to 8')	full, slightly overloud	public information
across the room (8' to 20')	loud	to a group
at the limits (over 20')	shouting	very public!

These are culturally specific

At 'far neutral' American voice < Arab, Spaniard, South Asian, Russian but > English upper class, South East Asian, Japanese

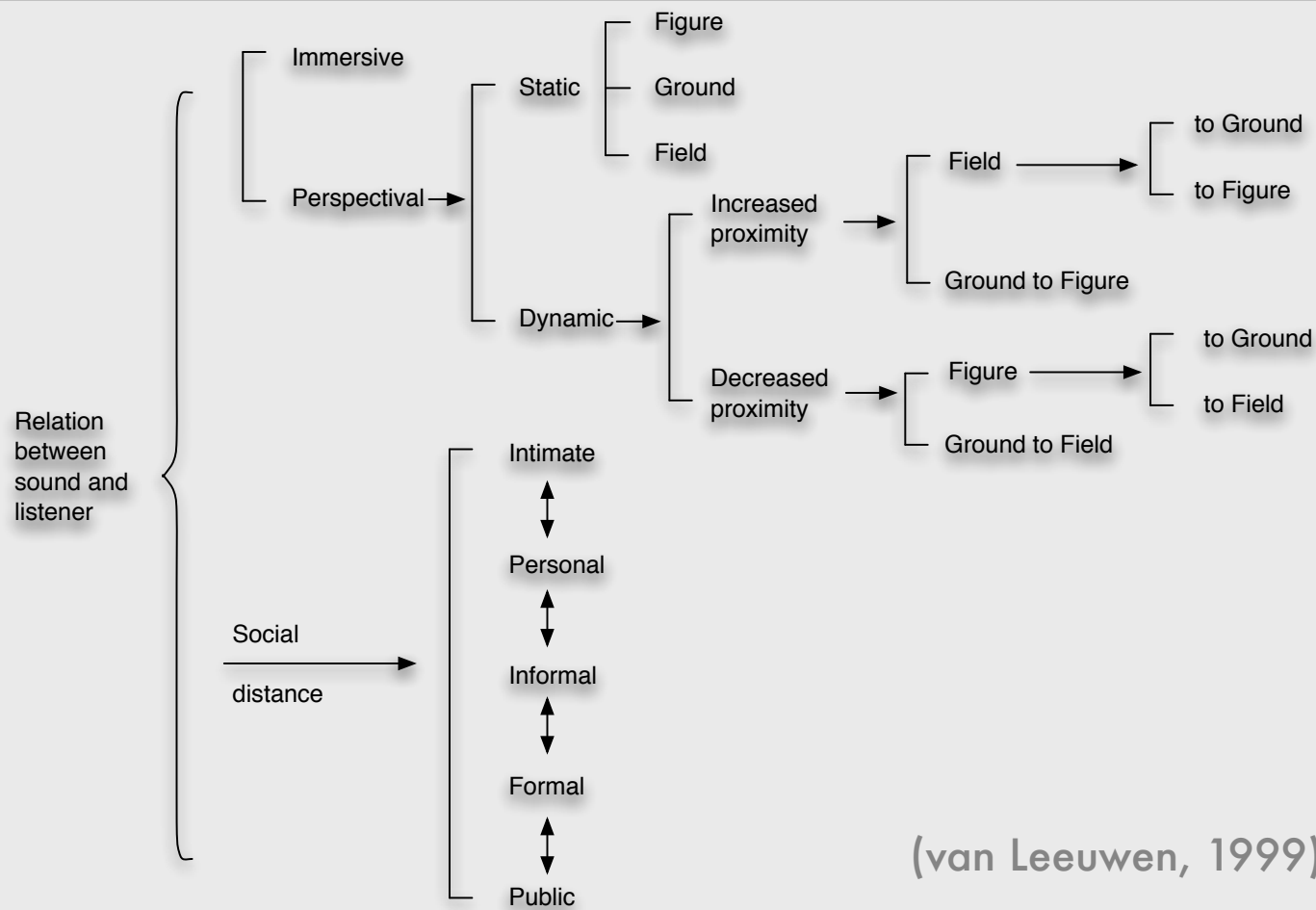
# perspective & social distance

- ▶ social distance applies to single sounds
- ▶ perspective applies to simultaneous sounds
- ▶ Recording technology has uncoupled the two giving semiotic freedom
  - ⊙ a breathy whisper can be mixed to stand out against loud drums
  - ⊙ social distance now uncoupled from real distance and now conveyed by voice quality
  - ⊙ close-miking enhances feelings of closeness whilst reverb can add distance

# distances

- ▶ Intimate distance
- ▶ Personal distance
- ▶ Informal distance
- ▶ Formal distance
- ▶ Public distance

# system network of aural perspective & social distance



(van Leeuwen, 1999)

# scripting it

- ▶ Sound script itemises every component of a soundtrack and gives each a unique number
- ▶ Similar to storyboarding
- ▶ *“First we hear the sound of a howling wind fade in. Then enter footsteps in crunching snow. Next we hear a snippet of dialogue. the wind continues during the whole of the segment, and the footsteps also continue during the dialogue. After the dialogue we hear only the footsteps and the wind, and then a newsreader’s voice. When the voice starts, wind and footsteps cut out.” (van Leeuwen, 1999, p.201)*

# the script

1. Fade in howling wind
2. Enter footsteps in snow (as wind continues)
3. John: *Are you alright?*  
Cathy: *I can't see very well*
4. Howling wind and footsteps continue
5. Newsreader: *A severe snowstorm tonight claimed several lives (... etc)*

# using perspective & distance

Sound script example: Extract from *Wild Honey*, an Australian Broadcasting Commission radio play, 1992

	Perspective	Social distance
<b>1. The sound of a DIDGERIDOO fades in</b>	Figure	Close
<b>2. The DIDGERIDOO fades down again as</b>	Figure to Ground	Close
<b>3. The voice of a YOUNG ABORIGINAL WOMAN enters:</b> <i>Many wet seasons ago, I went with my father to get sugarbag, wild honey. He used to climb on top of the trees and look for the bees going into or coming out of the cutting where the sugarbag is. He would make a cradle out of paperbark to get the honey syrup. We tasted the honey syrup which is like sugar. It is too strong and sour when you drink it straight. You have to drink it with water dew.</i>		
<b>4. The sound of the DIDGERIDOO now fades down as</b>	Ground to Field	Close
<b>the buzzing sound of BEES fades up</b>	to Figure	Close
<b>and the sound of VOICES SPEAKING AN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE also fades up</b>	to Ground	Far
<b>5. The buzzing of the BEES now fades down and the ABORIGINAL VOICES fade out as</b>	Figure to Field	Close
<b>A WHITE FEMALE VOICE enters</b> The ladies said 'Come hunting. Hunting for the wild honey. Tomorrow.'	Figure	Mid
<b>6. As the voice continues FOOTSTEPS fade up</b> 'Follow us', they called, 'Come hunting for sugarbag.'	to Ground	Close
<b>7. And the footsteps continue after the voice stops</b>	to Figure	Close