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# The sound of the unsound: The role of film sound design in depicting schizophrenia and schizophrenic hallucination in *The Soloist*

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# The sound of the unsound: The role of film sound design in depicting schizophrenia and schizophrenic hallucination in *The Soloist*


## Abstract

This article considers the crucial role that film sound design and music play in the representation of schizophrenia, with a particular focus on the construction of schizophrenic hallucination, in the Joe Wright directed film *The Soloist* (2009). In undertaking close textual analysis of the film's blending of various sound effects, music, dialogue, and language, as well as considering important production insights from the director's commentary on the film's DVD, this work explores the creative approach taken to portray the film's biographical subject, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr, and his schizophrenic hallucinations in the film primarily through the use of sound design and sound editing. Important areas considered include the context of the Hollywood biopic and its current fascination with the issue of mental health; the role of music and sound as a means of creating a compelling and nuanced psychological portrait in the film; and a consideration of the impact that hearing voices has for Ayers as a vulnerable and homeless black schizophrenic man, whose auditory hallucinations frequently manifest in ways that implicate racist discourses and racial anxiety in the onset and exacerbation of his mental illness.



## Keywords:

Film sound, music, schizophrenia, hallucination, mental disorder, The Soloist, biopic


## Introduction: Genre, Representation, and Mental Disorder

The opening sequence of Joe Wright's *The Soloist* (2009) begins with the sound effect of a tape recorder rewinding a cassette. Once the cassette is rewound the recorder clicks into playback and the first images of the film emerge. The device's owner, journalist Steve Lopez (Robert Downey Jr) starts his voice-over narration of the story of the schizophrenic and

homeless cellist Nathan Anthony Ayers Jr (Jamie Foxx). In the film's DVD commentary, director Joe Wright exclaims that "I don't know why, but poetically that sound of the rewinding tape machine kind of means something about the brain to me". Throughout the film, Lopez uses this device as a means of capturing, preserving and organising his thoughts and ideas for his weekly column. By contrast, the depiction of Ayers and the articulation of his schizophrenia explores the relationship between music, sound effects, voice, dialogue and language that is far more chaotic and disruptive, constructing a soundscape of mental disorder through sound designer Craig Berkey's complex mixing and interplay. This article explores and analyses the sound techniques employed in creating this auditory psychological portrait, considering the role of film genre, wider debates about mental illness representation, and the sonic properties of the film's impression of schizophrenic hallucination. The final section of this article then considers the linguistic content of Ayers's auditory hallucinations to explore some of the systemic issues that inflect the depiction of his condition, intertwining discourses of pathology, difference, and black cultural identity.

Whilst the representation of mental illness in a great number of films, including the example considered here, use creative and at times experimental visual techniques to construct representations of mental health disorders, the focus and importance placed on sound here is derived from the notion that so much of the experience and symptoms for those with mental disorders are internal, and are therefore unfamiliar to, and *unseen* by, others (see, David Mitchell and Sharon Synder 2000, 21-22). In thinking of hallucinations experienced by some schizophrenics, which, according to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) may be visual for some patients but are far more commonly auditory in nature (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 87), the use of sound to articulate these symptoms and experiences can be argued to be a fitting creative technique to make these symptoms tangible to an audience rather than perhaps rendering them in primarily visual ways.

However, this claim that sound is perhaps more effective as a representational device for phenomena like mental disorder is not to be taken in such a way as to suggest that this article is wedded to over-simplistic notions that particular disorders can be more "accurately" depicted in one way or another by a rigid adherence to symptomology. That is; there is no assumption here that because most symptoms of mental disorders are unseen they are therefore more "authentically" represented by sound than visuals by default. Michel Chion (1994, 107) outlines a pertinent point in this regard, stating:

> Sound that rings true for the spectator and sound that *is* true are two very different things. In order to assess the truth of a sound, we refer much more to codes established by cinema itself […] than to our hypothetical lived experience. Besides, quite often we have no personal memory we might refer to regarding a scene we see. If we are watching a war film or a storm at sea, what idea did most of us actually have of sounds of war or the high seas before hearing the sounds in films?

From this one can glean that, for the most part, those viewing a film representing schizophrenic hallucinations and other symptoms (or any particular mental disorder and symptoms) who have first-hand experience of such phenomena is likely to be very low. Secondly, there is no immediate given that those who may have a lived experience of schizophrenic hallucinations have had the same experience as another person with the condition, such is the subjective and socio-culturally-influenced nature of many mental disorders. Therefore, this work identifies and explores how sound design can be used to articulate the representation of mental disorder not because sound inherently makes these representations more accurate, but because sound may provide more creative license to make tangible phenomena that are by nature largely unseeable. To this end, this article considers

not only medical criteria and symptomology but more so the underlying cultural and systemic discourses that inflect the representation of Ayers's schizophrenia.

This is not to say that the visual aspects of film form cannot be impactful or creative in the way they depict mental health issues and symptoms. Take, for instance, *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard 2001). The film portrays John Nash's (Russell Crowe) schizophrenic hallucinations in a primarily visual sense, presenting Nash's hallucinations as a selection of characters that, as is revealed towards the end of the second act, only he can see. For much of the film these characters are presented in a way that suggests they are real participants in the diegesis and only upon Nash's institutionalisation and diagnosis with schizophrenia does the realisation that they are symptoms of his mental disorder become apparent to him and the audience. In the film's making-of documentary producer Brian Grazer explains one the central complications of the film's pre-production, "how do we make thought visceral and real? If we could deal with the multiple realities and give it a thriller context it would make the movie a visceral experience, so an audience could relate to it." Grazer's comments reflect one of the more broadly philosophical questions when it comes to representing mental illness in film. How can one visually depict something that is, by nature, unseeable? In an interview for Al Jazeera TV (Khan 2009), the real John Nash explains that the hallucinated characters in the film were visions that he never saw, and that indeed he has never had visual hallucinations but rather his main symptom is hearing voices. Therefore, with Grazer's comments about providing a "thriller context" in mind, it seems the decision to represent those voices as visual characters within the film was more concerned with genre aesthetics than with attempting to accurately depict Nash's real experiences. The film noir-influenced tropes and the thriller narrative conventions of the film's second act would be significantly more difficult, if not impossible, to construct without rendering Nash's real-life audible hallucinations as visible characters that participate in the film, and certainly this would have

prevented the possibility of the film's narrative twist in shifting from a noir-style drama to a film focussing on mental health and treatment.

This therefore raises questions about the significant role that genre plays in the decision-making process for representing mental disorder. Both *The Soloist* and *A Beautiful Mind* here are significant examples of a much broader Hollywood genre trend noticeable in recent decades. Not only do both films depict prominent narratives about mental health issues but both also do so with an explicit emphasis on the protagonist's tale as a "real-life story". The Hollywood biopic has, perhaps more than any other film genre, recently shown great fascination with narratives and themes of mental disorder, with a consistent stream of major productions released each year since the turn of the millennium. Biopics such as *Girl Interrupted* (Mangold 1999), *Pollock* (Harris 2000), *Prozac Nation* (Skoldbjærg 2001), *The Hours* (Daldry 2002), *The Aviator* (Scorsese 2004), *Ray* (Hackford 2004), *Walk the Line* (Mangold 2005), *Factory Girl* (Hickenlooper 2006), *The Fighter* (Russell 2010), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese 2013), *Pawn Sacrifice* (Zwick 2014) and *Love & Mercy* (Pohlad 2014) all exemplify the genre's recent fascination with all manner of mental health issues ranging from depression, addiction, bipolar, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and beyond.

All of the aforementioned biopics of course have varied production circumstances, focus on a host of different types of historical figure and are tasked with representing a wide range of incredibly different mental health disorders. Therefore, there is an inevitable lack of aesthetic or thematic continuity writ large across the genre in the way that these representational modes are enacted. In her discussion of the genre, Bronwyn Polaschek (2013, 47) states:

> If we consider the genre as a medium for representing the significance of the lives of historical figures, and as an intervention into specific discourses, we might ask: what

kind of individuals are currently celebrated by the biopic genre? How are their lives represented?

In considering Polaschek's questions, I have already outlined that one of the most popular types of historical figure in the Hollywood biopic of the last two decades appears to be those who have experienced mental illness. In addressing how these lives are represented, one can see a great degree of range in the philosophies towards depicting mental health in film. This breadth and variation in the way that the genre depicts mental health issues is influenced by key factors such as the particular disorder the protagonist has, the historical period that is being recreated in the film, and the particular conventions associated with certain subgenres of the biopic. As already mentioned above, the construction of schizophrenia is drastically different between *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Soloist* precisely because the historical periods and locations are different but also primarily because they are constructed with different subgenre tropes and themes in mind. As a popular music biopic, discussed in further detail by Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard (2012, 346-361), *The Soloist*, like others within the subgenre that focus on musicians with mental health issues, such as *Amadeus* (Forman 1984), *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Love & Mercy*, understandably make significant use of sound (voice, dialogue, music, and sound effects) as a substantial means of portraying that disorder, to reflect the creative field of the performers whose lives they narrate. In undertaking a close analysis of *The Soloist*'s approach to creating a mental illness soundscape and its experimentation with the characteristics of conventional sound design, this article makes for an original contribution to the field of film sound studies, illuminating how the various aspects of sound design come together here to create the impression of auditory hallucinations and shed light on the crucial role of sound in communicating mental illness on film and connecting these representations to wider cultural and systemic discourses.

**Sound, Music, and the Mind**

The use of diegetic music and sound in *The Soloist* as a means of representing schizophrenic hallucination are both inflected and complicated by their relationship to non-diegetic sound, interior diegetic sound and moments where distinctions between diegetic and non-diegetic are intentionally disregarded as a means of creating a psychologically complex portrait of Ayers and his condition. In the film, Ayers first comes to public attention after Steve Lopez has a chance meeting with him by a statue of Beethoven in Los Angeles. Lopez, struggling to find an original story for his *L.A. Times* column, decides to write a series of articles about how this talented Juilliard-trained musician came to be homeless. Soon after, Lopez watches and listens to Ayers play the cello in a tunnel of a busy L.A. road. The use of sound editing here becomes important in reinforcing Ayers's affinity, as a homeless man, with the streets. As he plays, the resonance and timbre of the notes are embellished by the ambient traffic noises in the tunnel and the distant sounds of police car sirens. The camera begins with close-ups of Ayers's hands, emphasising his talent and mastery of the instrument, but then rises above Lopez and Ayers, floating above the streets as Ayers's music, accompanied by non-diegetic orchestral accompaniment, continues to play. The piece that Ayers plays is an arrangement for the film, composed by Dario Marianelli, titled *A City Symphony*. The music's title alone illustrates how the piece purposely blurs diegetic and non-diegetic sound to emphasise Ayers's association with the urban milieu of Los Angeles on account of his homelessness, which is accompanied by visuals that first focus on Ayers and his performance but ultimately culminates in a series of bird's-eye-view aerial shots of the Los Angeles topography, which Ayers describes as "the perfect music environment."

The presence and role of Beethoven here has significant narrative value in terms of disability, music, and pathology. Firstly, that Lopez meets Ayers by the composer's statue symbolises Ayers's adoration for Beethoven, who is frequently referenced throughout the film to be Ayers's largest musical inspiration. However, more significant in investigating the

role of sound and music and their connections to disability and mental health is that Marianelli's *City Symphony* arrangement is an adaption of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 Op. 132. The movement's title, *Heiliger dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart* (translating to 'a holy song of thanksgiving to the Deity from a convalescent in the Lydian mode') is considered by many to be an autobiographical piece. Composed in 1825, close to Beethoven's death after sustained periods of ill health and experience with hearing loss, which were believed by some to be linked (see, for example, Wallace 2018, 14-15), the composer has often been portrayed as having become psychologically unstable and erratic (Deaville, 2015, 648). As such, common discourses surrounding the notion of what Joseph N. Straus (2011, 27) calls "divine affliction" inform the critical reception and framing of Beethoven, suggesting that his disability was in some way an obstacle to be triumphantly overcome in order to keep producing exceptional music (ibid, 17). Whilst Straus takes issue with this common but overly simplistic trope of representing disabled composers (a trope that has also been prevalent in Hollywood biopic narratives of characters with mental health issues as well), there is nevertheless an interesting biographical and narrative connection made between Ayers and Beethoven here, substantiated by the historical context of the autobiographical music ruminating on Beethoven's experiences of illness and disability. Both figures have been framed in various ways as a version of the archetypal "mad genius", Beethoven as an increasingly reclusive tortured genius contending with deafness and Ayers as a disadvantaged homeless schizophrenic with a supreme musical exceptionality.

When Lopez first meets Ayers by the Beethoven statue, he is actually playing a dishevelled violin, complete with some missing strings, because it is easier to keep when living on the streets than a cello. In this initial meeting, Ayers persistently plays the same short melodic fragment over and over again. Chion (1994, 8) describes this musical technique as a common trope for connoting madness in opera, in which "the famous operatic convention of madness [features] dumb little music that a character repeats while rocking

back and forth". As such, this initial motif is symbolic of Ayers's disordered mental state. However, once he is given the opportunity to play the cello again and we hear his performance alongside the full non-diegetic *City Symphony* accompaniment, it emerges that the violin motif that Ayers played initially is actually part of the wider symphony. Only now, as Ayers has his specialist instrument back (and all of his strings!), is the motif resolved and returned to its position within the wider arrangement in its full splendour. Therefore, it becomes ever clearer how important the role of music is in narrating the life-story of this musical figure and for portraying the vicissitudes of his mental health.

The combination of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in this sequence serves to comment upon Ayers's mental faculties. Until this point viewers have only seen Ayers behaving incoherently and in an unusual manner, but the use of sound and musical performance here illustrates not just his affinity with the streets but also the way in which music anchors, stabilises and directs his concentration. In his discussion of sound and the disabled body in horror films, Stefan Sunandan Honisch (2016, 119) contends that "if noise is defined by sonic disorder, then music, its opposite, produces sonic order". This is also true of *The Soloist*'s use of sound and music to suggest mental order and disorder through the contrast of consonance and dissonance, a technique of sonic representation of disability frequently explored in disability studies in music (ibid, 121). The use of distorted and cacophonous sound and noise to connote Ayers's more turbulent experiences with hallucination, discussed in further detail in the following section, and the use of music in these earlier scenes to provide a sonic counterpoint to this instability illustrates the manner in which the film juxtaposes elements of sound design and score to provide complexity to the depiction of Ayers's schizophrenic vicissitudes.

The use of a select few shot-reverse-shot close ups of Lopez and Ayers during his performance in the tunnel also uses a juxtaposition technique in the editing to add emphasis to Ayers's exceptional relationship with music. Every shot showing Lopez as he listens and

appreciates Ayers's playing using only diegetic sound of the traffic and the cello's notes, whereas all close-ups on Ayers's face mix these diegetic sounds with the non-diegetic orchestral accompaniment. This sound editing strategy allows one to see, and more importantly *hear*, the way in which Ayers's extraordinary musical aptitude enables him to understand and locate his instrument's position within the larger orchestral arrangement entirely in his mind.

If the non-diegetic sound that one hears during shots of Ayers's face suggest that this extra accompaniment is present in Ayers's mind, this would suggest that this is in fact not non-diegetic at all and is instead what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson refer to as "internal diegetic sound". Bordwell and Thompson (2001, 307) note that using sound to enter a character's mind is a common narrative trope, to the point where we must distinguish between when diegetic sound is internal (occurring within the diegesis but exclusively within the character's mind) and external (sound that we can connect with a physical source in the scene). Thus, my interpretation of this scene, whereby Ayers hears the orchestra in his head as he plays, suggests that the sound is not, as I referred to it earlier, non-diegetic at all, but in fact is internal diegetic sound. However, in the shots where neither character is shown but instead we see the urban landscape of L.A. the orchestra remains, and Ayers's playing simply becomes another component of this soundscape. It is for this reason that I also refer to this as non-diegetic sound, as the blurred distinction between the two characteristics of Berkey's sound design is an integral aspect of how this scene emphasises Ayers's affinity with and movement within the streets.

Where Bordwell and Thompson (ibid, 308) rightly note that blurred distinctions between diegetic and non-diegetic sound are often used to challenge viewer's expectations of typical sound design or to reject the conventionality of traditional sound design in mainstream cinema, this scene offers another insight into the potential motivations for obfuscating distinctions between these elements of film sound. In this instance, the unclear

relationship between the different types of film sound is in fact utilised to enhance our insight into Ayers's schizophrenic mind. Therefore, when scholars such as Bordwell and Thompson (ibid) and Chion (1992, 110) refer to Jean-Luc Godard as a notable exponent of this technique, the key distinction here is that in *The Soloist* this blurring between the different aspects of soundtrack is not part of a meta-textual practice designed to draw viewers out of suspended disbelief or directly challenge their viewing expectations but rather forms part of a cogent tapestry of Ayers's mind.

There is one particular moment in the film where Joe Wright's direction and Craig Berkey's sound mixing makes explicit the impact that music has upon Ayers's mental state. Lopez takes Ayers to listen to a rehearsal of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and as the introductory bars of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 ring out, a close-up shot of Ayers's upper body and face shows him flinch as the staccato notes in the opening punctuate the silence of the scene. The camera then centres solely on Ayers's chest as the sound effect of his heartbeat is introduced in time to the music, as if keeping rhythm. This immediately establishes both a physical and emotional connection between Ayers and the music of his idol. This technique exemplifies the manner in which, in Sunandan Honisch's (2016, 118) words, "music serves…as an expressive medium through which to narrate the disabled body." However, this approach goes beyond narrating only the disabled body but also elucidates further the film's crucial interplay between music and Ayers's psychological balance. This method of representation typifies the concept of the *bodymind*, as discussed by scholars such as Margaret Price (2014) and Sami Schalk (2018), whose intersectional work on feminist theory, racial identity, and disability studies explores the complex imbrication of mind and body and the intractable connection between the physical and mental, complicating common Cartesian notions of the mind/body divide (ibid, 5).

An extreme-close-up on Ayers's eyes as he watches the orchestra then begins to track-out quickly, with all backing light having dropped to black, leaving only Ayers visible

in the frame as he closes his eyes. Upon doing so, the footage switches to an abstract sequence of lights, in various colours and shapes, flashing and moving in time with the music. This visual accompaniment, achieved through filming disco lights through the bottom of a whiskey glass, remains uninterrupted as the coloured strands accelerate and decelerate alongside the tempo of the music. In the director's commentary on the film's DVD, Wright says of the scene: "I really wanted the audience to just listen to a piece of Beethoven […] and not have to worry about images, which was when I came up with the idea of an extended 2-minute abstract light show sequence."

Wright's contention here is that this unusual aesthetic practice is aimed at removing, or at least downplaying, the spectacle of the image and focussing viewers' attention to the modality of film sound. Wright goes on to say that that light sequence "also refers to […] synaesthesia, which is a condition that some people have when musical notes are represented in their mind by colours. In other words, when they hear a musical note they see a colour. Often schizophrenics also have synaesthesia. Although, [Ayers] doesn't." This scene then demonstrates another approach to the question posed by Grazer about the most effective way to make mental illness tangible in film. Where *A Beautiful Mind* translates John Nash's auditory hallucinations into the visual modality for the sake of fitting the thriller aesthetic of the film, then, *The Soloist*'s focus on Ayers as a character profoundly motivated and moved by the music of Beethoven employs a technical approach that adds visual embellishment to the primary use of sound in this instance. As a popular music biopic focussing on the life-story of a musician and his mental disorder the use of sound here to communicate the experience of the condition is befitting of the genre's codes and conventions. Although Wright points out that the real-life Ayers does not experience synaesthesia as part of his schizophrenia, what this scene creates is a greater sense of Ayers's psychological connection to music in the film; exhibiting its capability to soothe and stabilise his mental state. Just as with Nash and his experience of schizophrenia in *A Beautiful Mind*, which takes many

narrative and aesthetic liberties with the details of his life and illness, the inclusion of the synaesthesia reference here re-emphasises the biopic's loose relationship to the actual lives of those they focus upon, reminding us once more that the critical questions asked of the genre, as with fictional texts depicting mental health issues in any genre, must go beyond notions of accuracy or fidelity to the "real" person or the "real" condition.

Elsewhere in his commentary on the film, Wright explains that "the voices in a schizophrenic's mind are believed to be caused by a […] connection of synapses between the hearing part of the brain and the thinking part of the brain, so that they literally believe the brain reads thoughts as sound". Regardless of whether this claim is substantiated medically or not this comment provides an insight into the aspects of the mental condition that have informed the creative choices taken by Wright, Berkey, and the film's production team in exploring the aural possibilities of representing it. We might therefore interpret the aforementioned abstract light sequence as a visual metaphor for the electrical nerve signals sparked by synapse activity in Ayers's brain upon hearing the rendition of Beethoven as well as a less intrusive accompaniment to the music's prominence in the film's final edit.

Wright's understanding that schizophrenic hallucinations are the result of overlapping synapse connections between the hearing and cognitive areas of the brain also illustrates the manner in which the voices that Ayers hears in his aural hallucinations become manifest in the film. Ayers's hallucinations are primarily presented and explored through the use of flashbacks, using internal diegetic sound to portray these voices. This internal diegetic sound is often purposefully unclear and incoherent as a means of emphasising the disorientating and traumatising effect they have on him. The sound design is fundamental in the approach to creating a compelling and convincing soundscape of mental illness here, typified by the way that Joe Wright and Jamie Foxx approached the preparation for the performance of schizophrenia given by Foxx in these flashbacks. Wright explains that, during the recording of one specific flashback in which Ayers is particularly unnerved and distressed by the

voices, the scene was shot using audio technology as a means of confusing and disorientating Foxx during filming: “I put earpieces in Jamie [Foxx’s] ears that fed to a mixing desk, and from the mixing desk I played music forwards, music backwards, voices, and I spoke to him through a microphone; stuff that I can’t repeat on a PG-13 DVD”.

Although the variety of discordant sonic elements brought together and narrowcasted into Foxx’s ears as a means of enhancing his performance of mental illness are not those that ultimately were included in the scene’s postproduction (a detailed discussion of the hallucinations’ audio content is included in the following section), this strategy does replicate the sonic confusion created via the use of the cacophony technique that remains present in the final cut. Gianluca Sergi (2004, 150-151) explains that incoherent cacophonous sound is rarely the objective of sound design and mixing in postproduction as “in conceptual terms, too many sound layers will produce a kind of conceptual cacophony: they will end up sounding like a mass of sound whose individual components are not distinguishable.” However, Sergi goes on to highlight that, actually, the concept of clarity in sound design doesn’t necessarily always mean being able to identify each sound element and layer precisely, but in fact “[a] lack of clarity in a sequence could work to the film’s advantage” (ibid, 152). Therefore, whilst the use of blended and cacophonous sounds directed into Foxx’s earpieces doesn’t feature in the final cut of the film, but is rather replaced by a different cacophony of recorded voices to simulate the phenomenon of hallucinations, the manner in which these postproduction voices are blended and mixed in such a way as to obfuscate the sonic clarity of the hallucination actually provides conceptual focus to Ayers’s mental state. For Sergi (ibid), “thinking about focus is […] very important because it helps highlight the need for filmmakers to achieve some kind of ‘order’ in what potentially could otherwise be irreversibly chaotic [sound]”. Thus, the clashing and discordant sounds of the various voices all speaking at once, in various registers and volumes, that we hear in Ayers’s head means that the sound design of the hallucination simultaneously obfuscates the viewer’s

perceptual focus, that is, the ability to distinguish individual aspects of the sound design with precision, whilst elucidating the conceptual focus of Ayers's unsettled mind with a degree of verisimilitude. Thus, paradoxically, this sound design technique creates the "order" that Sergi alludes to through the intentional sonic disruption of clarity.

## The Voice and Racial Discourse

As discussed, the use of flashbacks is an instrumental technique in thinking through Ayers's trauma and anxieties. The key sonic characteristics of these flashbacks are incoherence and cacophony as a means of depicting the disorientation of schizophrenic hallucination. However, another important aspect to consider is the key linguistic content of the hallucinations. Having considered the sonic properties of the voices that Ayers hears this section turns attention to what the voices actually say when they can be heard with any clarity and what this means for the representation of mental illness in the film.

The running theme present in the flashbacks to Ayers's teenage years is that much of Ayers's anxiety and paranoia stems from a fear of racial persecution, leading to the onset of his schizophrenia. There are numerous discursive links between racial discrimination and mental illness in the film, with sound design at the forefront of this. In the first flashback that touches upon Ayers's nascent schizophrenia, the young Ayers is shown in a concert hall at the Juilliard School. He is the only black character in shot; indeed, it is suggested through a variety of wide angle panning shots that Ayers is the only black pupil attending the school. A wide shot shows Ayers in the middle of the group of white students, the ambient sound of the groups' muttering and talking is silenced and punctuated by the sudden non-diegetic sound of a tuning fork being struck; at the same moment the camera cuts to a close-up of Ayers's face, internalising the sound of the fork within his mind. When the camera cuts back out to wide shot Ayers now appears sitting in the auditorium alone, and thus the intentional discontinuity edit from the previous wide shot alerts the viewer that all is not well in Ayers's mind. This

sequence emphasises Ayers's isolation from his peers as the only black member of the group. As the tuning fork sound effect fades out, nondescript male and female voices can be heard repeatedly calling out Ayers's name. As Ayers is now shown alone, we come to understand these as auditory hallucinations, and thus the tuning fork comes to symbolise the precipitous moment that Ayers's disorder begins to manifest.

Shortly after, in another flashback to Juilliard, Ayers becomes distressed by the growing presence of the voices that he hears and attempts to find a place to hide from them in the school. As he does so, the voices can be heard making racially provocative comments, such as, "they hate you with all their white heartless anger". When Ayers finds a closet to hide in the voices tell him that he will never be able to hide well enough. The sound mix then adjusts, beginning to clash and overlap the sounds of the different voices indecipherably and with increasing frequency, demonstrating the use of cacophony as a synchronising motif to create an audible sense of the disorientation and paranoia that Ayers experiences. Eventually, as the camera tracks in on Ayers's anguished face, the only word that can be picked out of the chaotic mélange of sound is "whiteness", which is repeated several times at increasing volume until the end of the scene. Though the film never shows Ayers being racially abused by other characters, the fact that his hallucinations manifest in such a way as to racially persecute Ayers illustrates his concerns and anxieties about being the only African American in his class, ultimately causing him to drop out of the school. Thus, his social isolation on account of his minority status is implicated as being significant in the onset of his mental disorder, ultimately leading to his homelessness.

Morgan Woolsey (2015, 176-177) contends that "[there is a] usual hierarchy of cinematic sounds that dictates that all sonic elements assure the intelligibility of the dialogue." However, a different effect is noticeable here in *The Soloist*, using both diegetic sound and music to defy convention and emphasise Ayers's psychologically complex character. The intentional blurring and lack of clarity in the audio of Ayers's hallucinations in

these flashbacks marks a distinct separation from the conventional approach to sound design that Woolsey alludes to, in which coherent and clear dialogue is prioritised above all other aspects of sound design. This technique resembles more what Carolyn Birdsall and Senta Siewert (2013, 34-39) refer to as distortion, which they identify as a key trope in post-WWII European avant-garde radio that has more recently migrated into film production. The use of distortion in avant-garde radio was primarily an experimental voicework technique whereby disturbing the clarity of recorded voices became one of the means of "investigating themes of disembodiment, interiority, multiple voices and split subjectivities […] allowing the voice to become an abstract sound (or even sound effect)" (ibid, 34). Birdsall and Siewert go on to note that the rise in digital film sound in the 1990s enabled similar creative possibilities, in which "techniques of distortion and immersive soundscapes [construct] the disturbed interior world of protagonists" (ibid, 39). In this case, Ayers's hallucinations begin rather perceptible, but ultimately are mixed into cacophonous distortion, allowing only the word "whiteness" to be discernible amongst the noise, ensuring that the impression given is that Ayers's disturbed interior world is one permeated by racism and racial anxiety, exacerbating and elucidating his mental disorder.

Chion (1994, 5-6), in keeping with Woolsey, refers to cinema as being primarily "vococentric" in nature, meaning that "[film] almost always privileges the voice […] it is the voice that is isolated in the sound mix like a solo instrument – for which other sounds (music and noise) are merely accompaniment". In *The Soloist* what one notices instead is that, whilst the use of voices to create hallucination is essential, and therefore may be described as vococentric in its application, the fluctuating nature of the hallucinations' clarity and intelligibility challenges this notion. Ayers may be a soloist, but he is most often accompanied by an ensemble of cacophonous voices that are privileged over his own voice at various points in the film. This is particularly true when we hear the many racially charged comments that Ayers's hallucinations make. However, that there are times when the

hallucinatory voices are themselves indecipherable from one another suggests that this sonic technique does not neatly nor consistently conform to this vococentric approach.

It is important to note, however, that whilst the use of such techniques in *The Soloist* add complexity to Ayers's psychological characterisation, the crucial detail is that Ayers's interiority does not become resolved or restored at any point. Rather, there is a problematic sense throughout the film that Ayers and his condition are significant because they allow Steve Lopez to grow and develop as a person, changing the way he relates to vulnerable people around him and becoming re-engaged with important loved ones, his ex-wife in particular. David Mitchell and Sharon Synder (2000, 9-15) discuss this prevalent form of narrative prosthesis, in which they refer to the relationship of disability and characterisation as a prosthetic contrivance. In this instance, there are moments in the film in which Ayers's disability becomes a contrived narrative device for evolving Lopez's character and storyline, thus downplaying Ayers's own agency and autonomy.

Woolsey (2015, 177-178) explains that, in early American sound cinema, there were concerns that the nascent ability to record voices would detract from the visual action of films by focussing too heavily on dialogue. The way that this fear was assuaged was to frequently use and record African American performers as their voices were perceived to have less intrusive sound properties. However, alongside this practice there is also evidence of another, contradictory, approach. Michael A. Chaney (2004), Mary Bucholtz (2011), and Qiuana Lopez (2017) all discuss the role of the disembodied black voice in media, considering early 20th Century film's use of white performers imitating black dialect, or "blackvoice", through minstrelsy (Bucholtz, ibid, 256); the re-appropriation of these historical sonic stereotypes in the Hollywood "wigger" comedy film (ibid) and animated television shows (Chaney, 2004); to the later emergence of metaparodic depictions of incompetent minstrel performers in Hollywood film (Lopez, 2017). Perversely, then, the use of disembodied black voices for their perceived un-intrusiveness as noted by Woolsey clashes discordantly with other

instances in which historical representations of black identities, as performed by white actors over-exaggerating sonic and linguistic stereotypes of blackvoice, stands in stark contrast to this technique. There is therefore an untidy tension and interplay between those black voices interpreted as un-intrusive and those imitated black voices, which, as Bucholtz notes, "often highlighted rather than erased dissonant indexicalities of race." Therefore, the use of sound and voice to depict black identities and culture in historical film presents numerous incongruities and unresolved clashes.

Woolsey (ibid, 178) likens this interplay to a form of synaesthesia, claiming "the idea of the 'black voice', then, is made possible by 'synaesthesia', the conflation of the audible and visible." The broader point Woolsey makes here is that black representation becomes identifiable through a series of conventional expectations produced via sound, which in turn directs focus to the visual signifiers of race. Whilst synaesthesia has already been discussed in this article in the way that Wright privileges music and sound through the use of an abstract light sequence to downplay the spectacle of images, Woolsey's point refers to a form of broader cultural synaesthesia constructed via film conventions, which rings true in the audio-linguistic content of Ayers's hallucinations. Where black voices in some cases may have commonly been used in film sound recording due to notions of being less intrusive, the use of voicework here is deployed precisely for its intrusiveness and disturbing presence, though still in a manner that draws attention to Ayers's racial identity and its assault by the intrusive voices.

Throughout the series of flashbacks showing the onset and growing severity of Ayers's condition, the soundscape of the hallucinations is frequently partnered with shots of Ayers in confined and/or underground areas. Spaces such as the closet where he hides, the tunnel where he first performs on the cello, and his mother's basement all function as interior spatial metaphors for Ayers's subconscious, which harbours an anxiousness and instability that is articulated primarily through sound editing. In each flashback the hallucinations are

consistently difficult to hear amidst their many clashes. However, in each instance there are perceptible moments that gesture to Ayers's clear racial insecurity and anxiety. For instance, particular phrases such as "they'll turn you white", "you're my boy", and the macabre claim that "they'll string you up Nathaniel", which enmeshes Ayers's musicality and his anxiousness through an explicitly racist discourse, all serve to continually implicate Ayers's awareness of his disadvantaged social position as a young poor black man and its incongruity with his musical skill in the construction of his mental disorder. The more panicked and insecure Ayers becomes, the voices often tell him that he "isn't really there", ultimately denying him his identity and place in the world by questioning his very sense of being. Ultimately then, Ayers's psychic interiority is and remains fractured and unsettled, it is never restored or resolved. Instead, Ayers is plagued by a discriminatory racial discourse that has resonances with historical racial tensions prevalent in American history since the era of slavery, which may problematically be suggestive that Ayers himself is at fault for his condition as it overrides any sense in the film that physiological factors may contribute to or be responsible for his illness. Instead, this racial identity focus seems to exclusively implicate the systemic impact of racism as a root cause that elides the possibility of medical and physiological causes.

As previously noted, that we see Ayers confined in claustrophobic environments as a visual means of accompanying his mental distress acts as spatial metaphor for his deteriorating condition. However, we may also link this technique back to the notion of the *bodymind*. As Schalk (2018, 5-6) writes, '*bodymind* is particularly useful in discussing the toll racism takes on people of colour. As more research reveals the ways experiences and histories of oppression impact us mentally [and] physically…the term *bodymind* can help highlight the relationship of nonphysical experiences of oppression – psychic stress – and overall wellbeing.' (Italics in original). In the case of Ayers, whilst his experiences of racist oppression may be almost exclusively internalised and derived from schizophrenic

symptoms, and this may have problematic repercussions in terms of suggesting Ayers is responsible for his own illness, these voices manifest deploying a rhetoric that implicates the historical legacies of racism and systemic inequalities in America as significantly detrimental to his wellbeing, combining the use of sound to depict the mental events in his mind with images of his physical presence in uncomfortable and claustrophobic spaces, articulated in a manner that encapsulates the concept of bodymind.

Ultimately, the use of hallucinatory voices as a device to connect Ayers's mental illness to a sense of anxiety derived from his overwhelmingly white surroundings speaks to Birdsall and Siewert's claim, developed from Chion's work on *acousmatic* sound (that is, film sound that has no visible source), that disembodied voices in film showcases the possibility for film sound to "experiment with [the] relationship of the voice to body and subjecthood" due to their connection to concepts of the uncanny and mental disturbance (2013, 30). One may argue that as the internal diegetic voices are present in Ayers's mind that they do have a visible on-screen source, complicating the notion of whether this hallucinatory sound is indeed acousmatic, but what is clear is that the use of the disembodied hallucinatory voices in *The Soloist* touches on this form of psychoanalytic uncanny sound, whereby the construction of his mental disorder and its symptoms implicates racist discourses as the voices directly challenge and assault his psychic subjecthood and mental wellbeing.

## Conclusion

That the popular music biopic has an intrinsic and important relationship to music and sound design is likely unsurprising. However, this article has, through the exploration and analysis of *The Soloist* as an exemplar text, revealed the creative possibilities for sound design to achieve an articulation of schizophrenic experience and symptoms in cinematic representation. As part of the popular music biopic subgenre, the film can be located within a wider cyclical moment in modern film production owing to the Hollywood biopic's current

and sustained fascination with the issue of mental disorder. In narrating a large segment of Ayers's life the film foregrounds sonic techniques as an essential component in constructing his auditory hallucinations. Through shrewd and precise combinations of music, sound effects, dialogue and voice(s), director Joe Wright, sound designer Craig Berkey, and the many other staff responsible for the film's sound have developed a soundscape that blends these various elements to create a sonic portrait of Ayers's psychic mental state. The interplay between various diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, as well as moments where the relationship between both is disrupted and unclear, showcases the important role that music plays in Ayers's wellbeing, placing its soothing and structuring role at odds with the racially provocative and chaotic cacophony of the voices that he hears. Throughout the film there are other (predominantly white) characters who are shown to "opt-in" to the technologised hearing of voices, Lopez frequently uses his tape recorder as well as the headset of his mobile phone and in several establishing shots groups of tourists are shown taking audio tours of L.A. The technological hearing of voices here provides clarity and structure to the thoughts and experiences of these characters whereas for Ayers, who has no control or capability to manipulate the voices, the aggressive and disorientating nature of his hallucinations serve only to disrupt his musicality and place him outside the social status quo as both a black homeless man conscious of his largely white surroundings and as a vulnerable schizophrenic character impacted by systemic racist discourse and internalised experiences.

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