

“Puss in Boots: The Last Wish” — A Movie for Children, A Soundtrack for Adults

Dreamworks Animation has long been praised for their mature storytelling and modernization of children narrative features. The “*Shrek*” franchise most prominently has connected with young and old audiences alike thanks to its adult themes, reinvention of the genre, and positive messaging. *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* is no exception to this franchise, reminding viewers that Dreamworks still has the capability to create impactful media that both entertains and tackles questions of substance. Largely responsible for this latest installment’s success on this front is the film’s comprehensive sound design. Employing empathetic sound, distinct musical motifs, and incredible attention to thematic detail, Dreamworks pulls off yet another children’s movie that resonates with parents all the same.

In order for any animated film to win over audiences, sound designers and the art department alike are responsible for creating non-realistic characters that are believable and relatable. In this particular picture, the viewer is able to connect and relate to the protagonist namely because of the empathetic sound design. Audiences hear and experience the story world through Puss’ ears. Whether the music is diegetic or not, the soundtrack mirrors Puss’ emotions so viewers may feel what he feels. When the feline in footwear is succeeding in battle, viewers will hear a triumphant Spanish guitar. When he is bested by his “bounty hunter” foe, this music is cut off abruptly and replaced with low, dark strings reverberating, only to pick back up to Puss’ overconfident guitar licks when he goes in for another attack [14:20]. When Puss panics, audiences hear his racing heartbeat, experiencing his anxiety alongside him [56:25]. When Puss unsheathes his non-existent blade, audiences hear the sound effect of a sword being drawn, experiencing his egotistical delusions alongside him [28:30]. Instances such as these serve to make the protagonist one both adults and children can root for, as sound designers elected to use nuanced effects in conveying his emotions.

This film runs rampant with both musical and sound effect motifs, and many of these motifs are ones that would likely deter children rather than win them over. Perhaps the most effective audio motif is used when the Big Bad Wolf, or “Death”, is on the screen. Audiences actually hear Death before seeing him, his distinct bone-chilling whistle introducing him as a character meant to be feared [13:01]. Every time this whistle is played, the film’s antagonist enters the scene. It can be inferred that, if adults find this scary, children under the age of ten are likely to be traumatized by this

whistle. While this motif is more suited for a horror movie, other sound motifs remind the viewer that this is a fantasy family movie. For example, whenever the map to the Wishing Star appears, sounds of wind chimes and glimmering bells invade the audio profile. Other soundtrack motifs include different emotional variations of the diegetic opening song “Fearless Hero” when Puss is feeling confident or over-zealous again [1:10:09], or hopeless [18:17]. This motif is indicative of Puss in Boots the legend, not the person (or cat). The motif serves to show how Puss changes throughout the film, shedding his fearlessness and ego for honest humanity and an acceptance of his anxieties.

With plot points revolving around anxiety, death, and self-obsession, there is no doubt that this film’s screenplay deals with very mature ideas. These themes are ever-present in the sound design of the film in a very sophisticated and poetic manner. This is most prominently seen in the opening 10 minute sequence, where Puss battles the sleeping Giant of Del Mar using a church bell. During this inciting incident, Puss carelessly loses his eighth life. Being a cat, he survives with only one life remaining, thus launching his quest to wish for more lives. Beneath the surface of the battle’s stunning animation, there is a deeper significance in the sound design. Playing with the idea of the death knell, or the tolling of a bell used to announce a person’s passing, the sound designers utilized the bell sound effect in a very specific and limited manner. The bell rings exactly 8 times in this scene. That’s 1 time for each of Puss’ deaths thus far [7:05]. Other instances of poetic sound design can be seen in the explicit “mickey-mousing” of the ethical bug character, who offers advanced moral advice whilst parodying Disney’s *Pinnocchio* character. With every blink or muscle movement, a cartoonish sound effect makes this conscientious character less credible, poking fun at how corrupt or coldhearted a person (or studio) can be [1:03:42]. It’s important to note that, with rare exception, all the other characters in this film have a sound profile that is very realistic and non-cartoonish despite being animated. These choices exhibit such intentionality and self-awareness that further cements this movie as one that is crafted for mature audiences.

All in all, *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* has a comprehensive sound design that leaves fans of the Shrek franchise hopeful for things to come. With *Shrek 5* on the way, the kids who grew up with the ogre in the 2000s can rest assured that the newest adaptations are crafted to entertain their adult selves.