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Soundscapes and Silence in HBO's *The Pitt*

R. Scott Gemmli's 2025 series *The Pitt*, is a series that takes broad leaps forward in the medical drama genre. The series prioritizes realism, through painstakingly accurate medical language and procedures, and through its highly sequential format. Each episode takes place sequentially with an hour of a fifteen-hour shift (Echoing ABC's series *24*). Christos Dermentzopoulos and Eleftheris Kosmidou argue that "What we judge to be realistic is not just an assessment of how a film or scene relates to what we know of in the real world. Realism always involves an aesthetic judgement about how this vision of the real has been produced and how it relates to, or is in dialogue with other representations." (Dermentzopoulos & Kosmidou p. 7) These aesthetic judgements in an effort to achieve realism are often made in the realm of multimodality. *The Pitt's* greatest feat in its achievement of medical realism, I would posit, is its restraint with the non-verbal and oral mode of media.

In an interview with Pitchfork, Gemmli and composer John Wells go in depth with their decisions in *The Pitt's* sound design. It is important to note the series contains very minimal scoring, writer Jeremy Larson explains, "Instead of a score, we hear the whirring of an ECMO machine, gurneys wheeling around corners, joints being popped back into place, eye sockets being drained of blood EKG machines bleep-bloping, ankle monitor alarms going off, or the distant keening wails of a grieving mother. This is the real Score of *The Pitt*." (Larson para.7.)

Eloise Ross, in her 2025 article, calls this phenomenon “Not-Quite Sound”. This “Not-Quite-Sound” is the lifeblood of *The Pitt*’s realism. Ross explains “...if bodies are anchored by the continuous use of sound, then they are vulnerable to any ripples or disturbances of that continuity.” (Ross p. 946) These disturbances to continuity can be the ECMO machines referenced, the gurneys wheeling, or the silent shuffle of solemn patients.

One of the better utilizations use of this not-quite-sound in the series is in, Season 1 Episode 8 “2:00 P.M.”. When a patient who has gone brain-dead from a fentanyl overdose receives an honor walk towards organ donation. All that can be heard is the awkward shuffle of feet and the sound of the gurney wheeling along.



Centered in the shot, Dr. Robby (played by Noah Wyle) looks on at an intubated braindead patient covered in a “Pittsburgh Steelers” receiving an “honor walk”. Framing either side of the shot is the patient’s parents facing away from the camera. To the left of Dr. Robby is the Organ Donor consultant, still in the patient’s room. To the right of Dr. Robby staff of the hospital and patient’s friends look on.

I think what is also vital is as the patient is wheeled along, you hear the coughs and snuffles of those witnessing the walk. This lack of music places the viewer much more in the

scene, rather than utilizing score it gives the viewer a much more ethereal and realistic picture. Then, as the patient is loaded into the ambulance, a slight drone is heard, this is non-diegetic but yet is still incredibly restrained. Rather than a full score the drone almost registers as that same silence. Normally in multimodal fiction, this scene would receive a swelling score or another form of non-diegetic music, such as the use of Freya Ridings' "Lost Without You," in a similar honor walk scene in season 15 episode 19 of Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy*.



A patient is being pushed on a hospital bed through a long hallway in the center of the shot. She is surrounded by doctors and onlookers either pushing the bed or watching along the hallways.

While both of these scenes elicit the same emotional response, *The Pitt*, is able to derive a more natural response from the viewer not aided by music, which is a much more intense form of the non-verbal or oral mode.

Silence is also an inherently separate choice from Not-Quite-Sound. It is a further extension of the non-verbal, it is also an inherent and intentional choice. In film, “Silence – that is, absolute silence, a sound vacuum – is not a regular phenomenon in the cinema, and neither is it regular in everyday life.” (Ross 946) The most poignant use of silence is in episode 13 of season 1 “7:00 P.M.”. Throughout the season there had been mention of a music festival running concurrently with the shift of the doctors called, “PittFest”. In the midst of the E.R becoming essentially a M.A.S.H unit, with colored slap bands being utilized to denote triage, and level of care necessary, a silent moment is used to show the human cost. The social workers at the hospital are in the makeshift morgue in the pediatric wing of the E.R, silently they peel back the blanket of a deceased gunshot victim. They take pictures of the victims face and any other identifying marks in order to publish to a portal for families to identify the bodies. There is complete silence in this scene. This leaves the viewer with nothing but their own thoughts notably this scene is preceded by banter between attending “Dr. Abbott,” and resident “Dr. Mohan,” In which Mohan asks Abbott “what else do you have in your go bag?” to which he replies, “just wait and see”. The silence in the scene with the social worker helps show the contrast between the action of the doctors in the E.R and the reality and intensity of the situation.

Through the non-verbal and oral mode, *The Pitt* is able to tell an emotional and impactful story. One can argue that the emotional beats I described would not carry the same weight if it were layered with non-diegetic orchestral music or needle-drop style lyrical music. This is all effectively described through Ross’ description and concept of “not-quiete-sound”, and the intentional choice of silence in order to create a unique, emotional, and realistic portrayal of medical drama and procedures. Importantly, it is these choices that drive the realism in the series and create an effective narrative.

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