

Investigating *Morse*: detecting innovations in sound and image

Introduction

In the climax to the 1990 *Inspector Morse* (ITV, 1987-2000) episode ‘Masonic Mysteries’, the titular detective (John Thaw) is held at gunpoint by arch-nemesis Hugo De Vries (Ian McDiarmid). It seems Morse’s days are numbered as the overture from *The Magic Flute*, which is playing in the background, rises to a closing crescendo.¹ De Vries disappears from the frame as he moves centre-screen, obscured by Thaw’s anxious face, which is foregrounded in close-up. There is a cut to a shot of an audiocassette clicking to a halt, and Mozart’s thunderous music is replaced by silence. As the unseen De Vries bids Morse a sardonic ‘Goodbye,’ two close-ups are shown of an unaware Morse in surveillance photographs taken by De Vries earlier in the episode, before cutting back to Thaw in close-up. A gunshot is heard. As Thaw winces, the screen immediately cuts to black.

Coming as it does in the final episode of series four, this moment, which is clearly marked out by its powerful use of sound and image, might well have proven to be Morse’s last. In fact, the sound of loyal sidekick Sergeant Lewis (Kevin Whateley) banging at the door is swiftly followed by the revelation that the eponymous detective is unharmed, and the doom-laden atmosphere turns to one of black humour: the detectives watch the smirking De Vries make his getaway in the car Lewis has foolishly left unlocked on the driveway outside. In this confrontation between De Vries and Morse, music, silence, dialogue and sound effects complement and supplement each other to provide added direction and momentum to a pivotal scene.

Existing academic work on *Inspector Morse* has lauded the series for its ‘quality’ and ‘heritage’ signifiers, Ben Lamb highlighting its ‘glossiness’ (2019: 121) as a distinguishing

factor, yet the programme was notable for far more than high production values. While in some ways a traditional detective procedural, its distinctive approach to sound and image, as demonstrated in the scene above, helped set the programme apart from contemporaries, its often self-conscious use of cinematography, music and editing leaving audiences and critics by turns captivated, unsettled and entranced. Nearly two decades after the series concluded, its impact on the television landscape can still be felt in the form of its popular prequel, *Endeavour* (ITV, 2012-).

This chapter will examine examples from a range of episodes to demonstrate how *Inspector Morse*'s pioneering approach to sound and image created a truly distinctive overall look and feel. Following a brief overview of academic work conducted on the series, it will investigate the extent to which the programme can be said to have established a 'house style' in terms of its employment of sound and image, before unpacking the ways in which it occasionally subverted this in a selection of sequences designed to undercut audience expectations. The case will thus be made that *Inspector Morse* was more than a 'glossy' crime drama; rather, its idiosyncratic approach to sound and image allowed for a degree of audio-visual experimentation hitherto unseen within the genre.

Morse as 'quality' TV

Launched in 1987, *Inspector Morse* focused on the Oxford-based investigations of the titular Thames Valley CID officer and his sidekick, Sergeant Lewis. Initially adapted from a series of novels by Colin Dexter, the programme ran for seven series and five 'specials', and became one of the most acclaimed crime dramas of the 1990s; at the height of its popularity, it achieved viewing figures of 18.8 million (Sanderson, 1995: 121). Despite its success, academic work on the programme is comparatively limited, and has focused primarily on its status as 'quality' television. Setting the tone for much of what would follow, Richard

Sparks' 1993 essay highlights the programme's sense of style, wit and artfulness: 'it draws attention to its own cleverness. In so doing it extends (even subverts) the earlier boundaries of the "cop" format and invites a literate response from a knowledgeable audience' (99). However, Sparks' excellent analysis does not focus specifically on the question of sound and image, aside from briefly hailing 'the brilliant pastiche operatic and baroque incidental music by Barrington Pheloung' and 'languid panning shots of Oxford' that set *Inspector Morse* apart from more quotidian detective fare (90). Elsewhere, Mike Wayne (1994) lists the programme's other textual markers of quality, including its utilisation of location shooting, two-hour episode length, a cultured leading character and neat 'stylistic touches' (59), though these are not unpacked in detail. Lyn Thomas's 'In Love with Inspector Morse' (1995) employs qualitative research to examine whether the series' nostalgic representations of Englishness represent a convergence between quality and conservatism, but treatment of sound and image is not among the subjects discussed by her focus group participants. Lastly, Charlotte Brunson's 'Structure of Anxiety' (1998) positions the programme as a modern example of 'heritage television.' While Brunson acknowledges that *Inspector Morse*'s moments of 'visual splendour' and operatic soundtrack represent '[a denial] that it is television' (231), analysis is necessarily brief. The programme's Oxford 'heritage locations' are also later cited by Helen Piper, along with *Morse*'s 'golden deep-focus cinematography', when contrasting it with the grittier realism of *A Touch of Frost* (ITV, 1992-2010) (2015: 45).

These analyses have, to varying extents, outlined the stylistic conventions that helped mark *Inspector Morse* out as a 'quality' production, but only a non-academic publication, Mark Sanderson's *The Making of Inspector Morse* (1995), has paid particular attention to the programme's often unusual, dissonant or de-familiarising use of sound and image. Sanderson's chapter 'Three of the Best' (97-111) examines, among other elements, the audio-

visual components of key episodes ‘Service of All the Dead’, ‘Promised Land’ and ‘Masonic Mysteries’, identifying use of sound and image as central to their success, and also includes a brief examination of the scene that opens this chapter. This particular moment, while representative of the distinctive aural and visual approach often employed on *Inspector Morse*, also shows the programme taking a playful approach to its own conventions, teasing the audience with the possibility of Morse’s death, and therefore the conclusion of the series as a whole.

The works cited above make it clear that *Inspector Morse* is perceived to have distinguished itself by establishing a number of conventions designed to signify ‘quality’. However, Sanderson’s work indicates that the programme was also unafraid to subvert these norms on occasion. This chapter will now unpack the primary audio-visual characteristics of *Inspector Morse*, before providing examples of key moments in which it disrupted or overturned them.

The opening shot

Several motifs are so strongly established in the initial episodes of *Inspector Morse* that they go on to become part of the programme’s grammar. Richard Sparks has highlighted the repeated use of a slow pan across the rooftops of Oxford colleges, frequently taking in the dome of the Radcliffe Camera, which now seems almost synonymous with the series, establishing a sense of tranquil calm that will all too soon be disturbed by the discovery of wrongdoing.² The college skyline features as early as the third episode, ‘Service of All the Dead’, and although it only appears at the commencement of six of *Inspector Morse*’s thirty three-episodes,³ it is this iconic image, usually accompanied by the diegetic sound either of a bell ringing (‘Service of All the Dead’, ‘The Wolvercote Tongue’, ‘Deadly Slumber’, ‘The Daughters of Cain’) or classical music being listened to by Morse (on his record player in ‘Last Seen Wearing’, at a live recital in ‘Twilight of the Gods’), that resonates for Sparks,

since it works so effectively to establish the rarefied environment into which the viewer is about to be plunged.

Figure 1: The Oxford skyline in 'Deadly Slumber'

However, several episodes of *Inspector Morse* begin instead with an abstract or misleading image. In 'Masonic Mysteries', director Danny Boyle eschews reliance on the Oxford skyline to open with a (faintly absurd) shot of the actor playing Papageno⁴ in rehearsals for a production of *The Magic Flute*, resplendent in his bird costume head, seen through the window of the theatre. Similarly, 'Absolute Conviction' begins by presenting what appears to be a long shot of a Caribbean island - then revealed to be a close-up of a postcard in a prison cell. Faces and body parts are also abstracted in 'The Secret of Bay 5B', which begins with an extreme close-up of Rosemary Henderson's (Mel Martin) hand caressing her exposed belly, while 'The Sins of the Fathers' opens with the reflection of the back of Trevor Radford's (Andy Bradford) head in his office mirror, seconds before it is smashed in and his body dumped in a beer vat. Even when taken in isolation, these opening moments set the tone for what is to follow, letting the audience know that the crime drama territory they are about to enter will be far from mundane.

The title sequence

One of the key stylistic touches in *Inspector Morse*, highlighted by Mike Wayne, is the way each new episode opens 'straight into the first scene, which is then intercut with the titles' (1994: 59). The credits commence with a title card for John Thaw as Chief Inspector Morse, followed by the episode title, main cast⁵ and individual credits for the episode writer,⁶ producer and director, typeset in white letters set against a plain black background. These introductory scene and title sequences either juxtapose sound and image – as in debut episode

‘The Dead of Jericho’, in which Vivaldi’s ‘Gloria in Excelsis Dio’ and Hubert Parry’s ‘My Soul There is a Country’ are contrasted with a police raid – or allow sound an unusual degree of dominance, as when Brian Johnston’s cricket commentary, a radio call-in show and the strains of Saint-Saens’ ‘Concerto for Cello’ compete for the viewer’s (and Morse’s) attention in series three’s ‘Deceived by Flight’. In many episodes, diegetic noise and/or non-diegetic music continue to play over the title cards as they appear; in others, such as ‘The Wolvercote Tongue’, they are accompanied by silence, momentarily disrupting the flow and suspending the narrative.

These diverse approaches represent varying responses to the need to provide a stylish, captivating series of sounds and images that still function within the set title credits format. Selecting a single representative example is therefore problematic. However, the series four episode ‘Driven to Distraction’, by which time the series’ distinctive approach was well established, provides one of the more subversive entries, both in terms of its treatment of the genre and approach to its own conventions. The narrative centres round the investigation of a serial killer stalking their potential victims by car while listening to a jazz recording of the Cole Porter track ‘Why Can’t You Behave?’. In generic terms, therefore, ‘Driven to Distraction’ arguably represents *Inspector Morse* at its most mainstream. Manhunts for serial killers, of the type that provides the central focus here, rarely feature elsewhere in the series. In addition to this established crime drama trope, the episode also includes an uncharacteristic focus on police procedure (leading to atypical friction between the intuitive Morse and by-the-book Lewis), complete with an incident room packed with hard-bitten male officers. In addition, one of the main supporting characters is, again atypically, a visiting female detective, DS Siobhan Maitland (Mary Jo Randle), who is initially treated with disdain by the traditionalist Morse due to her ‘modern’ focus on criminal profiling before the pair bond over

their appreciation of classical music. It is interesting to compare this episode with its near contemporary, crime drama serial *Prime Suspect* (ITV 1991). Both focus on the hunt for a serial killer, which in *Prime Suspect* is led by a female detective, Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren), who is simultaneously dealing with resentment from a male colleague. However, while *Prime Suspect* provides a realist treatment of the politics of policing, this is not the primary concern of *Inspector Morse*, to which *Prime Suspect* was conceived as an ‘antidote’ (Lamb, 2019: 91). While covering similar generic territory, the treatment of sound and image in ‘Driven to Distraction’, both in the opening segment and throughout the episode, means that it presents its narrative in a far from prosaic manner.

The opening sequence is neatly divided into two stylistic halves to provide a ‘before and after’ of the murder of Jackie Thorn (Julia Lane), a young woman who is introduced to the audience while stuck in a traffic jam, shortly before being dispatched off-screen. The scenes leading up to the killing are notable for dwelling on sights of the mundane – traffic lights, shopping, car stereos and mechanics – and as a result the *mise-en-scene* is largely unremarkable. The sole stylistic touches come with the soundtrack, via the employment of both ‘You Do Something to Me’, the easy listening track Jackie plays in her car, and another song from the same genre, ‘Why Can’t You Behave?’,⁷ which becomes a sinister aural calling card for the as-yet unseen murderer. This motif will be employed repeatedly throughout the episode, as the killer first selects and then pursues their next victim. However, this approach, which favours innovative use of sound rather than image, is reversed for the scenes following Jackie’s death, when the visual style becomes notably more stylised. Here the viewer is forced to share the point of view of a scurrying, ground level camera, an overall sense of anticipation and anxiety building to a climax before Jackie’s lifeless body is ultimately revealed.

While 'Driven to Distraction' opens with a long shot of Oxford, it is an overhead view of the crowded high street in the city centre, rather than the expected college panorama. Instead of classical music, a jazzy blues track can be heard, though it is not immediately clear whether this is diegetic. There follows a series of short shots: a woman pressing the button for a pedestrian crossing; a university building; and – as traffic noises begin to be heard over the music, now revealed as 'You Do Something to Me' – individual shots of a tour bus slowly pulling round a corner, the traffic lights turning to red, and three separate shots of vehicles slowing to a halt. Rather than the usual lackadaisical sequence of dreaming spires, the audience is being presented with a vision of Oxford as a tourist trap: gridlocked, sluggish and stressful. In this way, the opening moments of 'Driven to Distraction' subvert *Inspector Morse*'s perceived 'heritage' style, toying with audience expectations.

Jackie is now shown in the driver's seat of her car, viewed from outside her window. The music (which clearly emanates from her car stereo) stops, and she reaches for the cassette player. This introduces the viewer both to the first murder victim of the episode, and to the style of music that will come to be associated with the murderer. After Jackie reinserts the cassette, there is a swift track backwards to reveal Morse sitting in the passenger seat of Lewis's car, stationary behind Jackie's. As Morse, who is in a hurry to collect his car from the garage, suggests turning on the siren, there is a point of view shot of Jackie's car in front of them, bearing the legend 'Boynton's' on the rear window. While the significance of this name is for the moment lost on detectives and audience alike, car salesman Geoffrey Boynton (Patrick Malahide) will later become the main suspect in the investigation of Jackie's murder, as he is revealed to have been conducting an illicit affair with her. Like the killer, Boynton will also be closely associated with a liking for easy listening. Lewis protests that using the siren is anti-social, and Morse grumpily points out that he will be unable to collect his car for

the weekend if they are delayed. The shot then cuts to a medium close-up of Jackie, this time from the front, as the music becomes distorted, and she looks down at the cassette player. Morse's glowering face is visible, though out of focus, in the background. It is clear at this moment that the audience is being positioned closer to Jackie than to Morse, both physically and emotionally, encouraged to empathise with her discomfiture rather than the (comparatively minor) inconvenience being experienced by the detective. There follows a series of shots designed to strengthen this bond with the soon-to-be victim, showing Jackie first fumbling with the cassette, and then stalling her vehicle as Morse angrily sounds Lewis's car horn. The audience shares Jackie's sense almost of being bullied by Morse - with whom, as series protagonist, they might more usually be expected to sympathise. However, following a close-up of the flowers on Jackie's passenger seat (later revealed to be a gift from Boynton) falling over, it is Jackie's frustration that the audience shares, not Morse's. This is followed by a cut to Lewis and Morse's point of view of Jackie angrily turning to glare at Lewis, whom she believes to be responsible for the aural rebuke. The audience then shares Jackie's point of view for the first time as they see Lewis making a placatory hand gesture, while Morse looks away through the car window. This provides a moment of both tension (the ill will generated by the claustrophobic line of cars stuck in traffic) and humour (Morse forcing Lewis to take the blame for his ill-mannered behaviour). The segment ends with a return to the side view of Lewis looking across at Morse reproachfully, before their car also pulls away and the first title caption appears.

This brief segment presents both the episode's main victim and the detectives that will solve her murder, and also introduces the motif of cars as tools of aggression – an aggression that is directed by their drivers specifically against women. However, Morse's impatient use of Lewis's car horn to intimidate what he regards as an inattentive female driver is not on the

same scale as the murderous act that will shortly take place, and the audience's positioning alongside Jackie is no sooner established than it is severed in the following sequence of shots.

The first title card serves as a temporal ellipsis, and Jackie's car is next seen pulling into her driveway, the only sounds being birdsong and light traffic noise. This then cuts to another angle which makes it clear that the viewer is observing Jackie from outside her home, her car half-seen through the trees that border the property. As Jackie exits, 'Why Can't you Behave?' is heard for the first time, and the camera pans down to show a black-gloved hand at the wheel of a second car, pulling into shot from the left. The audience has now been repositioned; they are watching Jackie from a distance, forced into the role of voyeurs rather than sharing her experiences close-up. In addition, they are being made complicit in the killer's murderous intention, forced to share his listening experience rather than hers. This fact is reinforced with a shot of Jackie taking the mangled cassette out of the car, now from the new arrival's point of view. The audience then moves closer still to the killer as there is a close-up of their hand opening the glove compartment, which is shown to contain a roll of brown masking tape – foreshadowing the attack that is about to take place. Still, 'Why Can't You Behave?' is heard playing from the car stereo. While this provides an ironic comment on the killer's lack of self-control, it also offers a link to his intended victim, who has already been shown listening to a similar style of music.

While Jeremy Boynton, whom Morse later (wrongly) assumes to be the killer, has yet to be seen, this scene is littered with clues that later seem to indicate his guilt – to such an extent that the audience ultimately becomes complicit in the detective's false deduction. Subsequent shots show that Boynton, like the killer and Jackie, enjoys playing easy listening standards on his car stereo (though not 'Why Don't You Behave?') and, like the killer, wears black driving gloves – though close analysis reveals that the murderer's are of a slightly different material

and cut. While the camera being employed to mislead the audience in this way is not uncommon in television crime drama, it is unusual for the soundtrack to prove so unreliable in its suggestiveness.

Thus far, the opening sequence has utilised a somewhat conventional sequence of shots, including near point of view angles, to establish audience identification with the victim, before they are then obliged to share the killer's perspective. The main innovation has been through the use of diegetic music: two similar yet distinct easy listening tracks that offer points of identification with both hunter and prey. However, this is disrupted when the second title card is accompanied by a sudden switch to silence. There is then a mundane yet mildly humorous scene of Morse and Lewis arriving at the garage, and Morse forcing the reluctant owner to open up and return his car. This segment is notable for its brevity and simplicity, featuring just two shots before the third title card arrives, and provides a bridge between the two key sequences: pre- and post-murder.

In the next section visuals are prioritised over sound, as a series of low level shots inside Jackie's flat gradually reveals the aftermath of the killing, culminating in the discovery of her corpse. Here, the chief use of sound is via a straightforward piece of non-diegetic 'suspense' music, which is used to accentuate a growing sense of foreboding.

First, the killer's feet are shown, becoming entangled with the reel of tape that has unspooled from Jackie's damaged cassette as he exits her flat. The snail's eye camera then tracks along the path of the tangled tape, creating a growing sense of unease as it reveals signs of a disturbance – a broken egg yoke, through which the tape has been dragged – at the gap between the door to the Jackie's flat and the floor. The camera then pauses, as though to give the viewer time to take in the scene, before the fourth and fifth title cards appear. Throughout these, the incidental music continues to play; it is not interrupted, as was the case with

diegetic sound, with the result that the sense of building suspense is maintained. However, this is then disrupted by a cut back to Morse and Lewis at the garage, Morse still arguing with the owner while Lewis looks on amused, and providing a marked counterpoint to the sinister reveal taking place elsewhere. After the sixth and seventh title cards silently provide the writing credits, the viewer is returned to Jackie's flat. The low level camera is now briefly replaced by a more conventional series of shots as Jackie's neighbour Angie (Tessa Wojtczak) is shown noticing the mess under her door as she passes on the stair, and pausing to call Jackie's name. Not receiving a reply, Angie leaves. A continuing sense of unease is provided by the music, which continues as David Lascelles' producer credit flashes up, leaving the viewer to ponder, like Angie, what lies beyond Jackie's door. This mystery is solved as the camera, now positioned inside the flat and at floor level once more, swiftly pulls away from the smashed egg and tape to take in various signs of a struggle, including Jackie's overturned shopping bag. The camera then passes an empty wine bottle (possibly signifying that a romantic assignation has taken place) and the remains of Boynton's floral gift, scattered along the corridor, before entering the bedroom, where Jackie's body is at last revealed, sprawled on the floor. To reinforce the shock of this discovery, there is a cut to a static overhead shot of Jackie's lifeless corpse, shown in full. The stillness of this moment provides a marked contrast with the constant camera movement that has thus far tracked the clues leading to Jackie's body.

Rather than cut to another title card, a sound bridge is now provided as Angie's electronically distorted voice comes through the entry phone in the hall, calling to be let in. As Angie explains that she has left her keys indoors, urging the unheeding Jackie to 'Tell that Tim to get off you', the camera pans up to what is revealed to be a video entry system, ending with the image of Angie's face on the screen. As Angie exasperatedly calls out 'I can see you!' –

attempting to taunt Jackie into ending what she clearly assumes to be a romantic tryst with her boyfriend – there is a cut to a close-up of Jackie’s face, her eyes now staring sightlessly, providing an ironic counterpoint to Angie’s words. The final shot is a close-up of Angie’s disgruntled face on the entry screen – another pair of eyes, staring impatiently into the camera – before the final title card heralds Sandy Johnson as the director.

Figure 2: ‘I can see you!’

Throughout this section the soundtrack has relied largely on non-diegetic music of the type that might feature in any number of episodes, yet the scurrying use of the camera to reveal Jackie’s grisly fate has built a sinister sense of suspense, and the final juxtaposition of Angie’s teasing line ‘I can see you’ with the unsettling image of Jackie’s unseeing eyes provides a neat twist with regard to the combination of image and words.

Opening sequences such as this are able to experiment with sound and image in various ways to establish the ‘feel’ of a particular episode. Yet while ‘Driven to Distraction’ maintains its stylish approach throughout, this is not always the case. Edward Bennett’s ‘Last Seen Wearing’ and Jim Goddard’s ‘The Secret of Bay 5B’ become somewhat pedestrian once their opening title sequences have concluded, particularly when compared to more adventurous instalments such as Peter Hammond’s ‘Service of All the Dead’, which makes extensive use of mirror images and religious iconography to create a disturbing backdrop to a story in which nothing and no-one is quite who they seem. Elsewhere, John Madden’s ‘Promised Land’ exploits the vast, empty plains and commercial folk sounds of its Australian setting to provide a marked contrast with the show’s usual Oxford *mise-en-scene* and classical music, emphasising that Morse is, for once, entirely outside his normal *milieu*. Hammond and Madden each worked on several episodes, while Bennett and Goddard, who enjoyed successful careers in crime drama and soap,⁸ only featured once, suggesting that directors

whose work demonstrated a flair for the visually and/or aurally audacious were more likely to return to the series.

Morse at home

Another recurring motif in *Inspector Morse*, established as early as opening episode ‘The Dead of Jericho’, is that of Morse listening to classical music at home, stretched out on his sofa with a book or crossword, and indulging in a glass of whisky. This reverie is then interrupted by a telephone call, obliging the reluctant Morse to switch off or at least turn down his music. The caller is usually Lewis with news of a murder, or of a development in their latest case. While in the series two opening episode ‘Last Seen Wearing’ this ‘Morse in repose’ scene is included purely to re-establish the central character, other episodes employ similar sequences to show Morse at work on the case, drawing inspiration from his listening or reading material. In the absence of a conventional opening title sequence, this example of redundancy reminds viewers of Morse’s primary character traits as both a cultured intellectual and a heavy drinker, and highlights his agency as central to the detective narrative. In her *Spaces of Television* blog, ‘Costume and Space: Inspector Morse in His Pyjamas’, Lucy Fife Donaldson has highlighted how such moments work to define the character, while ‘[seeming] unusual for a programme where some of the generic tensions between work and relationships are not present’ (2014). Significantly, Lewis is seldom shown in his home environment – and when he is, the scene is a domestic one. Often, Morse’s recreational activity is related to the investigation, either directly – when he works through the libretto of *The Magic Flute* in ‘Masonic Mysteries’ – or indirectly, when in ‘Second Time Around’ he repeatedly plays ‘Senza Mamma’ (‘Without Your Mother’) from Puccini’s *Suor Angelica* while pondering who murdered the orphaned Mary Lapsley. These sequences persuade the audience that they are gaining insight into Morse’s working through of his case,

while at the same time providing a reassuring sense of familiarity. However, this is undercut in two episodes that see Morse exposed to hostile forces seeking to undermine his agency while he attempts to relax at home. The first of these is ‘Masonic Mysteries’, in which Hugo De Vries’ campaign of persecution against Morse includes framing him for the murder of potential romantic interest Beryl Newsome, scratching Masonic symbols onto his beloved Jaguar, and planting the body of Morse’s murdered former boss Desmond McNutt in his home – which is then set on fire. The treatment Morse later receives from the tabloid press in series six’s ‘Happy Families’, which sees his predilection for crossword puzzles and alcohol held up to public censure, seems tame by comparison. Both stories employ the conventional use of freeze frames overlaid with the click of a camera shutter when an unheeding Morse is captured on film (by De Vries in ‘Masonic Mysteries’, and by press photographer Chas (Jamie Foreman) in ‘Happy Families’), and each features a disruption of the ‘Morse at home’ motif. However, in this respect ‘Masonic Mysteries’ is more notable for its juxtaposition of sound and image.

The disruption in ‘Happy Families’ comprises a brief scene in which Chas and journalist Billy (Rupert Graves) sneak up to Morse’s window to snap him enjoying a glass of wine in his drawing room while listening to *Così fan Tutti*. The uncharacteristic choice of wine rather than whisky or ale accommodates the fact that the journalists are seeking to portray Morse as an elitist, and in so doing to question his fitness to investigate the various murders taking place among the wealthy Balcombe family. However, the scene is shot in a conventional manner, and use of sound and image are in no way stylised. While it is significant for disrupting the usual calm of Morse’s home environs, this scene in itself does not provide the episode’s central focus. In contrast, ‘Masonic Mysteries’ features an extended sequence in which Morse is nearly killed as a result of De Vries planting an incendiary device in his

house. At this point in the narrative Morse has just been released from police custody, after a false story that he physically abused a former girlfriend has been disproven by the dogged Lewis. The extent to which these tribulations are affecting Morse has already been demonstrated by the unusual employment of an interior monologue while he sits in his cell, pondering his fate.

For Morse's return to the familiarity of home, director Danny Boyle produces a highly distinctive set piece that cleverly manipulates sound and image. Whereas usually the audience is shown Morse at home *in media res*, mid-way through a recording, book and/or drink, here he is depicted entering and carefully locking and double-locking his front door, the camera lingering on his hand in close-up as it performs each of these actions. In this way, the viewer shares Morse's uncharacteristic sense of caution – even trepidation – at entering his usually reassuring home environs. There is then an overhead shot of Morse, adding to the sense that he is under surveillance; a theme that permeates the entire episode. As he switches on the hall light, white noise can be heard very low in the sound mix, adding to the pervading sense of unease, and signifying that Morse no longer feels secure in his own home (with good reason, as soon transpires). Morse then walks out of shot, the camera remaining still as he enters the kitchen, and there is the clink of a drink being poured. He walks back into shot, carrying a glass and a bottle of whisky, and past the camera as he enters the living room. This is followed by an exterior shot of the male uniform officer who has been assigned to protect Morse, standing outside the front door with a torch. This seems to establish a visual routine for the following sequence: parallel editing between interior shots of Morse in his living room, and exteriors of the police officer patrolling the house. However, the soundtrack does not follow the same straightforward pattern, and it soon becomes unclear whether what the

audience is hearing is diegetic sound, non-diegetic sound, or Morse's subjective perception of the sounds around him – adding to the general sense of unease and confusion.

A medium shot of Morse's newspaper crossword lying on his abdomen makes it clear that some time has passed, and the sound of his heavy breathing, on the verge of snoring, is heard on the soundtrack – though no other diegetic sounds from the room, such as the ticking of a clock, are present. The beginning of 'Wir wandelten durch Feuersgluten' ('We wandered through the fire's glow' – adding an ironic touch) is then heard, though it is not immediately clear whether this emanates from Morse's record player. The camera pans up to Morse's face to reveal that he is either asleep, or half-asleep. A close-up of his empty glass and near-empty bottle of Samuel Smiths whisky reveals the cause of his slumber, before another exterior shot of the police officer, as the music continues to play, seems to indicate that all is well. However, the fact that no sound is heard when the officer switches on his torch provides the first indication that the music on the soundtrack is perhaps not purely diegetic. When the camera cuts back to Morse's face the sound of snoring is heard in addition to the music, indicating that the audience is in fact sharing Morse's semi-conscious state. There is then a pan to an alcove on the other side of the room containing shelves full of cassettes, one of which begins to emit smoke before bursting into flames. The only sounds remain the music and Morse's snoring, making it clear that Morse, still slumbering, has not noticed that a fire has started. Soon the entire shelf of cassettes is on fire, and flames also begin to rise from the floor. Still, the only sounds to be heard are Morse's snoring and the music playing, inducing anxiety in an audience by now concerned that the oblivious Morse is about to be burned alive. This sense of tension is heightened when the next exterior shot reveals that the police officer is now absent. Further shots of the supine Morse show him failing to react when the top shelf of cassettes crashes to the floor – and still no noise is heard on the soundtrack. This

atmosphere of suspense is maintained by further cuts back and forth between Morse and the seemingly unaware police officer returning from his patrol, with no sound to be heard of the conflagration within. Morse is then shown falling off the sofa, and finally coughing himself awake, accompanied by the sound of his spluttering, as the music continues to play – indicating that he is not yet fully conscious. Still there is no diegetic sound of the inferno that threatens to engulf Morse as he tries to get up before slumping again, raising the audience’s fears to fever pitch. However, salvation is finally at hand as a close-up of the policeman’s shocked face becomes a pan to him shouldering the door, and at last diegetic sound breaks through as he smashes the window. Only now does the audience hear the roaring sound of the blaze, an interior shot of fire and smoke showing Morse slumped unconscious on the floor. The policeman’s cries can be heard over crackling flames and blaring music – making it clear that this indeed derives from Morse’s sound system, and until this point the audience has been sharing his dimly subjective perception of it. Reality has now collided with this semi-conscious soundscape, barely in time to save Morse’s life. The new, purely diegetic sound continues as Morse is dragged from the room, though the combined noise of flames and music possibly becomes subjective again as there is an ellipsis to Morse being given oxygen on the line ‘Is he all right?’, followed by Morse’s laboured breathing. There is then a shot of the flames still consuming the living room, but when we cut back to Morse pushing away the oxygen mask the music has stopped, indicating that, following the ellipsis, it was playing only in his mind. This return to subjectivity is reinforced when, on Morse’s line ‘Trial by fire and water’, there is a flashback of him being dragged out of the room, now from a different angle.

Director Danny Boyle’s highly unusual utilisation of sound – or to be more accurate, just two sounds: John Thaw’s post-production snoring as Morse, and Mozart’s music – transform

what might otherwise be a straightforward case of parallel editing into a *tour de force* sequence that initially confuses and unsettles the audience before dramatically raising their sense of suspense. Only with the explosive burst of true diegetic sound provided by the police officer's rescue does a release of tension arrive, but this is undercut by the viewer being forced into Morse's uncomfortable consciousness, assailed by a confusion of sounds and images that reinforce the fact he is no longer in control of the situation. The combined efforts on 'Masonic Mysteries' of Boyle and writer Julian Mitchell result in some of the most memorable and distinctive moments in *Inspector Morse*, demonstrating that it is far more than a handsomely mounted and occasionally stylish crime drama.

Sound in *Morse*

The above sequence is particularly notable for its disconcerting use of sound; a trend that was established as early as the second episode, 'The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn'. Throughout this instalment's opening sequence the audience is forced to share the subjective experience of the hearing-impaired and soon-to-be-murdered title character as he makes his way round a crowded room, continually adjusting his hearing aid while attempting to focus on the various conversations taking place. The ensuing whistling obscures much of what is said, and the viewer is unaware that one of the dialogues with which they are being (partially) presented will provide the clue to Quinn's killer. Mis-hearing, and not being able to hear clearly or accurately, become recurring themes in this episode, which presents a panoply of sounds from which Quinn and other characters are alienated – not least the fire alarm that breaks up the meeting. It is Quinn's failure to hear the bell that provides his killer with the means to execute their crime, yet the use of subjective sound continues as the alarm is presented to the audience at varying volumes, depending on the room in which the ensuing action takes place. Later in the episode Morse is unable to hear Lewis over his blaring

classical music when his sergeant calls him at home (establishing another recurring motif), and both the detectives and the audience are presented with conversations that are difficult to make out. First, Lewis and Morse observe lovers Donald Martin (Roger Lloyd Pack) and Monica Height (Barbara Flynn) quarrelling outside the university, and Morse's later questioning of Martin in his garden is seen – but not heard – by Martin's suspicious wife (Julie Neubert). A later conversation between suspects Dr Bartlett (Clive Swift) and Roope (Anthony Smee) at the Botanic Gardens is similarly inaudible to the watching Lewis, and cements Morse's suspicions regarding the former. However, due to an essential misunderstanding by Quinn as to what was being said in the opening sequence, Morse initially jumps – like the victim – to the wrong conclusion.

Music in *Morse*

While *Inspector Morse* is notable for its use (and non-use) of sound as a key element of narrative, the series also merits attention for its intelligent employment of music. In an era when the combination of opening title sequence and infectious theme tune is less ubiquitous than was once the case, it should be borne in mind that *Inspector Morse* was one of the first mainstream dramas in the UK to withhold its theme, in which Barrington Pheloung famously spells out the eponymous detective's surname in Morse code, until the close of each instalment. Although occasionally featured during narratives in an abstracted form, this full orchestration is never heard until the resolution of the week's episodic enigma. Interestingly, early episodes 'The Dead of Jericho' and 'The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn' come closest to employing the title music as Morse's personal 'theme' during the episodes, but this is swiftly abandoned, and the pan pipe version used in the latter now seems particularly jarring. The majority of subsequent episodes only employ an abstraction of the morse notes, usually played on strings, to indicate a key moment in the investigation, though the series five

episode 'Fat Chance' presents a notable exception when, sensing a mutual attraction with deaconess Emma Pickford (Zoe Wanamaker), Morse for once enters the police station in an upbeat mood, and the theme is heard for the first time in a major key, C sharp (Sanderson 1995: 40). However, *Inspector Morse* generally avoids the device common in mainstream dramas of utilising musical themes for particular characters. Although Barrington Pheloung's original compositions for the programme and its successors, *Lewis* (ITV, 2006-2015) and *Endeavour*, filled several CDs prior to his death in 2019, these were interspersed with the classical tracks that Pheloung re-recorded for episode soundtracks, and it is the latter that are more likely to provide the 'theme' for individual episodes or characters. As seen earlier, 'Senza Mamma' offers a recurring musical backdrop in 'Second Time Around', and *The Magic Flute*, with its series of trials and tests, is integral to the narrative of 'Masonic Mysteries'. In 'The Infernal Serpent', Mozart's 'Piano Sonata No. 11 in A Major, K331: 1 Tema Andante Grazioso' provides Morse with a subtle indication to the abuse suffered by both Sylvie Maxton (Cheryl Campbell) and Mandy Hopkirk at the hands of Master Matthew Copley-Barnes (Geoffrey Palmer), and this is not the first time a formerly admired piece of music or performance shines a light on the uglier side of human nature. In 'Twilight of the Gods' Gwladys Probert (Sheila Gish), the mezzo-soprano whose singing Morse rapturously enjoys in the opening sequence, is ultimately revealed to be an ill-tempered *prima donna* and sexual predator, leading the detective to wistfully question his devotion to the arts in what, at the time, was billed as the final episode of the series.

Conclusion

Over its original run *Inspector Morse* featured contributions from twenty-one directors,⁹ fifteen writers¹⁰ and four producers¹¹. While several episodes were adapted from Dexter's original novels,¹² series four to seven featured stories conceived and written specifically for

television. Clearly, a number of authorial voices were in play, and this chapter has highlighted the fact that certain stories were perhaps more formally audacious than others. However, this is not to say that *Inspector Morse* was, in essence, a standard crime drama that provided occasional flashes of stylistic flair. Rather, the combination of approaches employed by the various creatives involved in its production resulted in a house style that both raised it above quotidian crime drama norms and provided each fresh contributor with the opportunity to take the series in dramatic new directions, both visually and aurally. The fact that its narratives continue to prove hugely popular with viewers, having inspired a successful sequel and prequel, is a testament to the success of the innovative approaches employed on the original series – not least with regard to sound and image.

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List of figures

Figure 1: The Oxford skyline in *Inspector Morse: Deadly Slumber*

Figure 2: Julia Lane as Jackie Thorn in *Inspector Morse: Driven to Distraction*

¹ In fact, the piece De Vries begins playing on the cassette deck earlier in the scene commences with the ‘magic bells’ of ‘Schnelle Füße, rascher Mut’ (‘Swift feet and ready courage’), also from *The Magic Flute*, which then fades out during his conversation with Morse. When the music fades back in, it has ‘magically’ become the Overture.

² This shot is, however, misremembered by some, Ben Lamb instead describing ‘helicopter shots of village greens and church spires’ (2019: 91).

³ These are: ‘Service of All the Dead’; ‘The Wolvercote Tongue’; ‘Last Seen Wearing’; ‘Deadly Slumber’; ‘Twilight of the Gods’; and ‘The Daughters of Cain’.

⁴ In reality, this is series composer Barrington Pheloung, (Sanderson 1995: 41).

⁵ From ‘The Wolvercote Tongue’ onwards, Kevin Whateley was given a separate title card. From ‘The Way Through the Woods’ onwards, the ‘John Thaw as Chief Inspector Morse’ opening card was preceded by one bearing the *Inspector Morse* series title.

⁶ The writer’s credit would typically be followed by one for Colin Dexter either as author of the original novel or, for non-adaptations, ‘characters created by’.

⁷ This is an arrangement by series composer Barrington Pheloung, who was responsible for recording all the music heard on the programme, in addition to his own compositions (Sanderson 1995: 36).

⁸ In terms of crime drama, Bennett has also directed episodes of *Bergerac* (BBC, 1981-1991), *Poirot* (ITV, 1989-2013), *Silent Witness* (BBC, 1996-), *Death in Paradise* (BBC, 2011-)

and *Grantchester* (ITV, 2015-), while work on continuing dramas includes *Casualty* (BBC, 1986-) and *Holby City* (1999-). Jim Goddard worked on *Callan* (ITV, 1967-1972), *Public Eye* (ITV, 1965-1975), *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1975-1978) and *Van der Valk* (ITV, 1991-1992), and also directed episodes of *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985-) and *Holby City*.

⁹ John Madden directed four episodes, Peter Hammond, Herbert Wise and Adrian Shergold directed three apiece, Alastair Reed, Danny Boyle and Colin Gregg each directed two, and there were individual contributions from, in chronological order, Brian Parker, Edward Bennett, Peter Duffell, Jim Goddard, James Scott, Anthony Simmons, Sandy Johnson, Roy Battersby, Antonia Bird, Stuart Orme, Stephen Whittaker, Charles Beeson, Robert Knights and Jack Gold.

¹⁰ Julian Mitchell wrote ten episodes, Daniel Boyle (not to be confused with the director) wrote five, Alma Cullen four, Anthony Minghella three, and there were individual contributions from, in chronological order, Michael Wilcox, Charles Wood, Thomas Ellice, Peter Buckman, Jeremy Burnham, Geoffrey Case, Peter Nichols, John Brown, Russell Lewis, Malcolm Bradbury and Stephen Churchett.

¹¹ Kenny McBain for series one and two, Chris Burt for series three and seven and the subsequent ‘specials’, David Lascelles for series four and five, and Deirdre Keir for series six.

¹² ‘The Dead of Jericho’, ‘The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn’, ‘Service of all the Dead’, ‘Last Seen Wearing’, ‘Last Bus to Woodstock’, ‘The Way Through the Woods’, ‘The Daughters of Cain’, ‘Death is Now My Neighbour’, ‘The Wench is Dead’ and ‘The Remorseful Day’ are all adapted from Dexter’s novels of the same name (published in, respectively, 1981, 1977, 1979, 1976, 1975, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1989 and 1999), while ‘The

Last Enemy' is based on *The Riddle of the Third Mile* (1983), and 'The Secret of Bay 5B' (more loosely) on *The Secret of Annexe 3* (1986). 'The Wolvercote Tongue' and 'Deceived by Flight' are credited on screen as being based on ideas by Dexter, and the former later provided the basis for *The Jewel That Was Ours* (1991).