

‘THE AESTHETICS OF FILM MUSIC: FROM ROMANTICISM TO MODERNISM’

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Abstract

In the Hollywood of the 1940's there was already entrenched a particular form of writing music for film. This form can be summarized as the symphonic style of late nineteenth century European romanticism. Many of the film composers working in the Hollywood of this period were immigrants from a Europe in which was immersed in this style of composing. The style was rich, diatonic and tonal, yet initially a consideration for questions of aesthetics and form of musical structure remained undressed. However, the issues of music and narrative in coherent unity was already pertinent within this tradition of European romantic composition.

The vast dramatic opera of Richard Wagner had long considered the problems of uniting music with dramatic action. He argued that since the decline of the Greek tragedy the drama had been separated into its constituent parts, painting, music, rhetoric etc., and that they had previously been unified. (3) He proposed a reuniting of these elements, in the form of a fusion of dramatic art forms of music, words and action, what was termed the Gesamtkunstwerk. Film composers of this tradition in the 40's and '50's Hollywood would therefore suture the screen action with the scoring of appropriate musical animation. Not only this but the use of what Wagner called 'Leitmotif', which are musical themes used in association with a particular character and then harmonically or rhythmically developed to correspond to developments of that character in the narrative. This evokes the original exposition of the leitmotif in the listener's consciousness, a concept Wagner termed 'Remembrance'. He also utilises the concept of 'foreboding', in which many of the major leitmotifs are introduced before their assignment to a character or situation. This can be reflected in the credit sequences of many films in this period as the exposition of a unified group of what will later become leitmotifs, somewhat setting the scene musically, as was also done visually through the use of art-titles.

In an example taken from 'Rebel Without A Cause' (1955) directed by Nicholas Ray and scored by Leonard Rosenman, we can see the coherent functioning of music with dramatic action. Another tradition of European music is also referenced in this scene⁷ that of the serialist or atonal works of Webern and Schoenberg (composers rather crudely grouped together under the label of the 2nd Viennese school). The emphasis here is on the removal of a 'home key' and of accepted harmonic relationships such as major, minor or modal, between notes. This sense of dislocation provides the music with a somewhat 'sinister' uncertainty, ideal for the conveyance of a dramatic or ominous scene.

The scene to which I refer is the 'chicken run', in which James Dean's character is about to race against another young man towards a sea cliff. The first driver to bail out of the car being the loser. In the sequence before the race is started, a young girl gives earth to each driver with which to rub on his hands and as a blessing of luck. The music in this sequence progresses between this 'atonal' sense uncertainty and the recalling of a romantic 'motif' when the girl gives the earth to James Dean's character. The through composed music glides between these varying emotions, unifying them and their transformations within the scene. Importantly, the music reacts specifically to the image, just as Wagner's music marries with the dramatized actions of the characters in 'The Ring cycle'(Wagner's epic opera), creating a unified art-work or, Gesamtkunstwerk.

This use of music relies heavily upon the culturally accepted meanings held about music and the emotions. These already extant culturally codified meanings inherent in the forms of music chosen for the composition of this scene reference major, minor and their corresponding accepted emotional equivalents. Also referenced are atonal decentering in order to contrast with these previous forms and to create dramatic tension. The orchestration of such motifs is also crucial in their cultural reception. Scoring a motif for a violin or flute against an orchestral background will have a greatly significant cultural difference than the same music scored for an African ensemble or a modern electric pop group.

To state that music reinforces the image is to imply that film music, as well as attaining meaning from the narrative, signifies something by itself. But music forms part of a cultural system of meaning. "particular musical devices - melodic figures, harmonic progressions or rhythmic relationships become form u/as which indicate a culturally codified mood or sentiment For those who are familiar with them, such signs may be powerful in conditioning re.'ponses'¹ (Leonard B. Meyer) (4)

As an extension of this, the music and image unity also work in psychological ways, drawing the viewer into the world of the characters. This occurs both physically, positioning the audience sonorously in the 3D world of the action, and also utilising the subconscious suggestion of emotion in music to reinforce the viewers interpretation of meaning in the image. This opens up debates of music and the emotions, notions of the 'pathetic fallacy' and Freud's pre-verbal world of the infant and it's relation to auditory space. (5)

I now intend to highlight an area of political and practical rejection of these notions of composing for the cinema. The debates and criticisms of Theodor Adorno (Philosopher, sociologist and trained musician) focus on the industrialization of culture and the transformation of conditions of receiving and listening to music. He argues that because music can be experienced by everyone as a 'community', and because it lacks the 'definiteness' of material things. that our individual interpretations lead to " their deliberate misuse for ideological purposes" (6)

He also succinctly argues that the use of the Wagnerian leitmotif is very different in cinema, as it is in Wagner's opera. "It is not merely supposed to characterize persons, emotions or things... but to endow events with metaphysical significance and cannot be developed to its full musical significance in the motion picture, leading to extreme poverty of composition. " (7)

The process of industrialization and mass production, argues Adorno, fetishizes certain aspects of music at the expense of others. Much of Adorno's theory although useful, dismisses notions that music is received and used in a plethora of cultures and situations and can thus change rapidly in its meaning. I thus intend to examine a less ideologically unsound theory, in the directions of Brechtian theatre and music, extending these notions to their cinematic parallel of Jean Luc Godard.

Just as the Hollywood composers of the 30's and 40's were embracing the romantic tradition of Europe as a stylistic model, Bertold Brecht among others (Eisler, Eisenstein, Shostakovich) was rejecting the work of the Wagnerian aesthetic. Himself a Marxist, Brecht was against a drama that posited man as subject to an inescapable fate, instead he saw man as being able to change economic and social factors, rather than vice versa. Brecht saw the Aristotelian drama as seducing and luring its audience into a passive identification with its ideology. By revealing contradictions in society and rendering aspects of it strange and unfamiliar, its unstated assumptions, its ideologies were demystified. To operate this demystification, Brecht argued for an 'alienation effect', an attempt to induce critical inquiry in the audience.

"The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production...can simply be by-passed by radically separating the elements. So long as the expression 'Gesamtkunstwerk (or integrated work of art) means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be fused together, the various elements will all be degraded and each will act as mere feed to the rest"

It can be seen here Brecht's radical political rejection to such notions as Wagners 'Gesamtkunstwerk' and its merging of the arts into an ideological whole. instead he champions 'alienation' and distancing from the illusory world that is represented. Creating via estrangement, a notion of the politically aware spectator and a mood of critical inquiry. I wish to concentrate upon two of the films of Jean Luc Godard in relation to this theatrical politique. 'Une Femme et Une femme' (1961) and 'Weekend' (1968) as I consider musical elements within these films as an extension of Brecht's ideas.

The films of Godard are well known for alienation devices, Marxist intertitles asking the audience to 'analyze' and addressing aspects of the class-war.

In Weekend, music suddenly bursts into a scene of predominant dialogue, alternating between piano and forte in volume, this often drowns out the conversation in the latter case. The music then is 'cut out' as suddenly as it appeared. This music is atonal in style and reminiscent of Bartok's string quartets. The music here functions not hand in hand with the image, but in the Brechtian sense as an alienation device, to break the marriage of image and music, giving occasional prominence to the non-diegetic score.

This technique also features heavily in Godard's earlier film, 'Une femme et Une femme'. There is considerable control over the musical elements in this film. In a scene where Angela, Anna Karma's character, arrives in her apartment. a popular song is used as the non-diegetic music. A cut to her friend shouting up at the apartment in the street outside, and the music is cut completely. Angela exits onto the balcony to say 'Not now!', and as we cut back to the interior of the apartment, the music is resumed, suddenly and in perfect sync with the cut. This technique foregrounds the non-diegetic nature of the music as it is only used when the inside of the apartment is seen, and not carried out into the street scene as would be the case of a sound source within the diegesis. Music is also used in a cartoonish manner to punctuate and echo dialogue. This parodies the 'Mickey-Mousing' music of Max Steiner in which musical flourishes encapsulate the movement on the image track. Godard's use of soundtrack effects is also worthy of mention, as he audibly depicts pinball machines, the roar of the Metro and other such extraneous sounds. This 'democratizes' the soundscape using these effects as interrupting and overriding narrative dialogue. This is a form of Bazanian realism (9) in which the sound is 'democratised' in much the same way as deep focus photography allowed the eye to choose what to see, rather than be guided by scene dissection. It is into this democracy of the sound sources in Godard's films that the non-diegetic music fits. However, this does not particularly allow the listener to choose between levels of dialogue, music and extraneous sound, but brings them into pre-organized collisions. often overriding one another. the method does highlight the degree to which these factors are controlled in classical Hollywood sound.

notes

- (1) Cage, John 'Silence'
- (2) Altman, Rick 'The Material Heterogeneity of recorded sound', from 'Soundtheory/Sound Practice' (Ed) Rick Altman.
- (3) Wagner, Richard 'Art and Revolution' c.1849
- (4) Meyer, Leonard.B. ' Emotion and Meaning in Music'(5) Ibid.
- (6) Adorno, T & Eisler,H 'Composing for the films'. Chapters 1 & 2.
- (7) Ibid p.5-6.
- (8) Brecht, Bertold ' The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre' 1930. A note to the published text of *Aufstieg und fall der stadt mahagonny*.
- (9) Williams, Alan 'Godard's use of Sound' (Bazin) 'Ontology of the photographic image' p.340.

additional bibliography

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Chanan, Michael. *Musica Practica: The social practice of western music from Gregorian chant to Post-modernism'* . Verso 1994