UNHEARD MELODIES

NARRATIVE FILM MUSIC

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Functional Music

While film music functions differently from autonomous music, it is commonly held that well-conceived and well-written music for film will be better than "hack" scores, all other things being equal. This position, tenable as it might be, often leads scholars to dismiss serious consideration of the utilitarian functions of film music. After all, it is more acceptable to write about the work of such film composers as Sergei Prokofiev, George Antheil, Arthur Honegger, Hanns Eisler, and Bernard Herrmann than to tackle the question of the efficacy of sweet violins during a romantic scene or bass pizzicati mickey-mousing the footsteps of a thief through an abandoned warehouse.

For the moment, though, let us consider some purely functional aspects of music as it is set in the classical narrative film, by comparing film music to an extreme case, the most functional kind of music—background or "easy-listening" music. The age of mechanical/electronic reproduction, and of the commodification of music, has fundamentally changed the meaning of music, the ways in which we listen to it and hear it.[3] It is impossible to ignore that film music also participates in this transformation of listening.

Film music and easy-listening music have much in common. They are both utilitarian; both are received in a larger, nonmusical context; neither is designed to be closely attended to. (This latter feature does not obviate the possibility of their having "inherent" aesthetic worth. A Bach harpsichord sonata piped in through loudspeakers to a pastry and espresso shop is functioning as easy-listening music, as is rock or country music on the car radio as one drives along a city freeway.)

Easy-listening music is electronically regulated in its recording and in its consumption. It is commodified and quantifiable; more or less of it is consumed, depending on the contextual demand for it. It may nominally signify. By this I mean that the casual listener will recognize a studio orchestra's rendition of the Beatles' "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," and certainly the exceptionally attentive listener may follow an entire piece through, attending to the syntax of its musical discourse; but as often as not, musical signification is not essential to easy-listening. Nor is musical form. The piped-in music in a discount store may be interrupted at any moment to make way for a live voice that announces a special sale or the name of a child separated from its mother. One may turn the car radio on and off (and up and down in volume), not in function of the musical form, but of the duration of the drive or the rhythm of conversation with passengers. In its consumption, functional music subordinates its *form* and *volume* to the context in which it is deployed.

The calculated use of functional music for purposes of social control seems

to have gotten its start during World War II. Wartime publications by an optimistic U.S. government and by ASCAP (the composers' and music publishers' union) document and prescribe its use in industry to boost morale and productivity. An ASCAP pamphlet proffers this advice:

> In selecting music for industry, remember that it is something which is intended for background. Do not choose the pieces which assert a constant demand on attention by having tricky instrumental effects, prolonged vocals, or changes of key in the middle of a chorus. . . . It is a customary practice to start the morning off with about ten minutes of march music while the shift is coming on. Military marches are generally the rule, but some plants have discovered that the associative effects can cause a psychological breakdown, particularly if large numbers of women are employed. Therefore, it is wise to be cautious . . . try a college march. . . . For the sake of variation, you might also insert a fast fox trot or a polka. In any event, what you are striving for at this point is to wipe the gloom off the faces of the incoming employees and perhaps to instill a little esprit de corps into the whole group.[4]

What does this utilitarian music do? It relieves anxiety, irritability, tension.[5] Music is good in traffic and on long drives. In the waiting room it allays fears about the imminent drilling or pulling of teeth, or the airplane's departure. It loosens shoppers' purse strings. For such reasons, music has been inserted into every public place where it is economically advantageous to alleviate consumer anxiety. It fills silences (or covers other sounds) that would allow us to dwell on such anxiety, or the "pain of existence" itself.[6]

Easy-listening music at its most standardized is barely discernible as music, and does not call attention to itself with surprising harmonies or dynamics. Extremes of volume or instrumentation, any departure from the most conventional harmony and the most regular rhythm, detract from the "ease" of listening. Such music signifies little but a general *pleasantness*. It has as its purpose to lull the individual into being an *untroublesome social subject*.

As I have suggested, the parallels to be drawn between easy-listening and film music are numerous. Music in film is electronically regulated, and generally rendered subservient to the denotatively signifying elements of narrative discourse. Its effectiveness often depends upon its not being listened to. While certainly not always signifying "pleasantness," it is nonetheless programmed to match the mood or feelings of the narrative scene of which it is a part, to bathe it in affect. Unlike the dentist's office, though, the narrative cinema (and the concert, too, for that matter)[7] is an institution that channels psychic energies in patterns of tension and relaxation; *the way* to the satisfaction of narrative closure (or musical resolution) is paved with anticipation and conflict. Thus the expressive range of functional music is

broader in a film score. All the same, the overall purpose of film music is very much like easy-listening music: it functions to lull the spectator into being an *untroublesome* (less critical, less wary) *viewing subject*. Utilitarian music may be seen as an "intellectual or cerebral anesthetic." "Music will always have this influence," asserts Roger Tallon, "because it does not pass through the same control circuits, because it is almost directly plugged into the psyche."[8]

Easy-listening reduces the displeasure engendered by the economic tensions of shopping and the physical fear of dentists' drills. Film music also helps to ward off displeasure—a displeasure of two sorts connected with the film experience.

First—and we have mentioned this in other contexts—music serves to ward off the displeasure of uncertain signification. The particular kind of music used in dominant feature films has connotative values so strongly codified that it can bear a similar relation to the images as a caption to a news photograph. It *interprets* the image, pinpoints and channels the "correct" meaning of the narrative events depicted. It supplies information to complement the potentially ambiguous diegetic images and sounds. It cues the viewer in to narrational positions: for example, the menacing "shark" theme, heard even before the camera in *Jaws* reveals the deadly shark closing in on the unsuspecting swimmers, gives the viewer advance knowledge of the narrative threat. It creates on one hand an ironic distance between viewer and characters, and, on the other, a complicity with the film's narrative voice.

Further, standard film music efficiently establishes historical and geographical setting, and atmosphere, through the high degree of its cultural coding. The *signification* attained through the use of this music (freshness of springtime, the seventeenth century, menacing evil) wards off the displeasure of the image's potential ambiguity, which Barthes characterized "the terror of uncertain signs." This primarily semiotic functioning of music, then, is what Barthes called *ancrage* in connection with the photograph caption. Music, like the caption, anchors the image in meaning, throws a net around the floating visual signifier, assures the viewer of a safely channeled signified.

A second kind of displeasure that music helps to ward off is the spectator's potential recognition of the technological basis of filmic articulation.[9] Gaps, cuts, the frame itself, silences in the soundtrack—any reminders of cinema's materiality which jeopardize the formation of subjectivity—the process whereby the viewer identifies as subject of filmic discourse—are smoothed over, or "spirited away" (recall Eisler and Adorno's view of music as magical "antidote to the picture") by the carefully regulated operations of film music.

(In this light, it is possible to see that both "parallel" and "counterpoint" aesthetics of film music ultimately serve the same impulse, i.e., to have the spectator identify as subject with a certain production of meaning and expression.) The loss of identification which filmic discourse constantly threatens, via the very means that carry the narrative (cutting, the frame, etc.)—this loss of pleasure is countered in part by the particular ways in which the classical film takes advantage of music.

Needless to say, background music functions according to a larger sphere of reference than musical syntax itself. Like the supermarket music whose volume drops in deference to an announcement, film music is normally subordinated to more "directly" significant sounds on the soundtrack, and to the demands of "the narrative itself." Soundtrack music will drop in volume when characters speak, because the intelligibility of dialogue is more important in the narrational hierarchy. Likewise, musical form is normally subject to the temporal and dramatic conditions of narrative segmentation. The bath or gel of affect in which music immerses film narrative is like easy-listening music in that it rounds out the sharp edges, smooths roughnesses, masks contradictions, and masks spatial or temporal discontinuity with its own sonic and harmonic continuity. Film music lessens awareness of the frame, of discontinuity; it draws the spectator further into the diegetic illusion. The playwright Elmer Rice characterized this effect of movie music quite vividly—in fact he emphasized its oneiric power to the point of caricature—in his novel *Voyage to Purilia*, which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* during 1929. Here he describes the planet Purilia, a thinly disguised conceit of movieland:

> It is difficult to convey to the terrestrial reader, to whom music is an accidental and occasional phenomenon, the effect of living and moving in a world in which melody is as much a condition of life as are light and air. But let the reader try to fancy himself lapped every moment of his existence, waking or sleeping, in liquid, swooning sound, for ever rising and falling, falling and rising, and wrapping itself about him like a caressing garment. The effect is indescribable. It is like the semi-stupor of an habitual intoxication: an inebriety without intervals of either sobriety or complete unconsciousness. . . . the sensitive reader will catch echoes and overtones of that omnipresent harmony; now pathetic, now gay, now ominous, now martial, now tender, but always awakening familiar memories, always swellingly mellifluous, and always surcharged with a slight but unmistakable tremolo.[10]

Rice's satire may not be much of an exaggeration. Psychoanalytic critics, as we shall see, would agree with his view of music as a sort of sonic/psychic bridge between "sobriety" and "unconsciousness," being tied in with "familiar memories."