

Elements of Aesthetics

Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno

(1947)

TO establish¹ aesthetic principles of cinema music is as dubious an enterprise as to write its history. Up until now all attempts at an aesthetic analysis of motion pictures and radio, the two most important media of the cultural industry, have been more or less formalistic. The rule of big business has fettered the freedom of artistic creation, which is the prerequisite for a fruitful interaction between form and content; and a concrete aesthetics must necessarily refer to such an interaction. Because of the vulgar materialism of the content of motion pictures entirely alien to art, aesthetic considerations about them so far had to dodge the whole issue of content. That is why they have only been abstract. They have dealt predominantly with technicalities such as the laws of movement or color, the sequence, the cutting, or with vague categories such as “the inner rhythm.” Although the criteria derived from such analyses can to some extent circumscribe the framework of *métier* within a given production, they are completely insufficient to determine whether the product is good or bad. It is possible to imagine a motion picture—and this applies to its music as well—which conforms to all these criteria, upon which an enormous amount of conscientious labor and expert knowledge has been spent, and which is nevertheless utterly devoid of any real value, because the falseness and emptiness of the underlying conception have degraded the formal achievements into merely technical ingredients.

Quite apart from the detrimental influence of commercialism, aesthetic analyses of the motion picture easily become inadequate because it is rooted less in artistic wants than in the fact that in

the twentieth century optical and acoustic technic reached a definite stage, which is essentially unrelated, or related only very indirectly, to any possible aesthetic idea. An attempt to formulate the aesthetic laws of the Greek tragedy, for instance, might be based on concrete social and historical factors, such as the symbolic rites of the Greek religion, the sacrifice, the trial, the primitive family conflicts, and the dawning critical attitude toward mythology. To attempt anything of this kind with regard to the motion picture would be puerile. Its connection with the developmental tendencies of dramatic or novelistic art is defined only by the fact that it takes for granted and assimilates these traditional forms, that is to say, reproduces them with some modifications dictated by requirements of technic or social conformity. Its potentialities are far more closely connected with those of photography and electrical sound developments. These media, however, have evolved entirely outside the domain of aesthetics, and aesthetic principles in relation to them are so insubstantial that they need not even be challenged. The possible contribution of these fields to the aesthetics of the motion picture is about the same as that of the physical theory of contrasting colors to the art of painting, or that of overtones to music.

Hence caution is particularly advisable with regard to pseudo-aesthetic considerations in the functionalist style, such as were popular in Germany in the name of the principle of *Materialgerechtigkeit*, or adequacy to the given material. With regard to the most essential instrument in cinema music—the microphone—the experience of the radio showed long ago that the creation of compositions “ade-

¹Chapter 5, from *Composing for the Films*, Dennis Dobson Ltd., London: 1947

quate” to the microphone led in practice to an unjustifiable oversimplification of musical language.

So-called adjustment to such supposedly objective material conditions fetters musical imagination, generally for the sake of that kind of popularity which is the main concern of the motion-picture industry. The postulate of adequacy to the material would make sense only if it referred to the musical material in the proper meaning of the term, namely, to the tones and their relationships, not to extraneous and relatively accidental recording technics. A truly functional procedure would consist in adapting the microphone to the requirements of the music, not vice versa. Even in architecture, which is practiced with a tangible material, the term functional would not be applied to a structure that is adapted to the nature of the trucks and cranes that serve for transporting the building material, but rather to one that is adopted to the nature of the available building material and the end of the whole. The microphone is a means of communication, not of construction. Incidentally, the progress of recording technics has today made speculations on aesthetic limitations of that sort obsolete.

Even more dubious are speculations that seek to develop laws from the abstract nature of the media as such, for instance from the relation between optical and phonetical data in terms of the psychology of perception. At best this results in the ornamental applied-art duplicate of the ‘abstract’ picture. The antidote to commercialism in motion pictures is not the foundation of sects which dwell, let us say, on the affinity between certain colors and sounds and which mistake their obsessions for avant-garde ideas. Arbitrarily established rules for playing with the kaleidoscope are not criteria of art. If artistic beauty is derived exclusively from the material of the given art, it is degraded to the level of nature, but does not thereby acquire natural beauty. An art that aims at the geometrical purity, perfect proportions, and regularity of natural objects infects beautiful forms, if they are still beautiful at all, with the reflexive element that inevitably dissolves natural

beauty. For the latter, “both with regard to the abstract unity of form and the simplicity and purity of the sensuous material” is “lifeless in its abstraction and is not a truly real unity. For true unity presupposes spiritual subjectivity, and this element is totally absent from natural beauty.”²

Basic Relation between the Music and the Picture

Thus far, Sergei Eisenstein has been the only important cinema director to enter into aesthetic discussions. He, too, polemizes against formalistic speculations about the relation between music and motion pictures, let alone between music and color. “We conclude,” he writes³ “that the existence of ‘absolute’ sound-color equivalents—even if found in nature—cannot play a decisive role in creative work, except in an occasional ‘supplementary’ way.”

Such “absolute equivalents” are, for instance, those between certain keys or chords and colors, of which the mirage has haunted theorists since Berlioz. Some of them are obsessed by the idea of associating every shade of color in a picture with an “identical” sound. Even if such an identity existed—and it does not exist—and even if the method were not so atomistic that it flagrantly negates any continuity of artistic intent, the purpose of this identity would still be questionable. Why should one and the same thing be reproduced by two different media? The effect achieved by such repetition would be weaker rather than stronger.

Eisenstein also rejects the search for equivalents of “the purely representational elements in music,” that is to say, the effort to achieve unity between picture and music by the addition of pictorial equivalents to the expressive associations of single musical themes or whole pieces.

However, Eisenstein himself is not altogether free from the formalistic type of thinking he so properly attacks. He inveighs against the shallowness of pictures based on a narrow representational idea of music; thus, the Barcarolle from *Tales of Hoffmann* in-

²Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, W. W. 1. Band, 1. Abteilung, ed. Hotho, Berlin, 1842, p. 180.

³Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, New York, 1942, p. 157.

spired one film director to show a pair of lovers embracing against a background of Venetian scenery. “But take from Venetian ‘scenes,’” he writes, “only the approaching and receding movements of the water combined with the reflected scampering and retreating play of light over the surface of the canals, and you immediately remove yourself, by at least one degree, from the series of ‘illustration’ fragments, and you are closer to finding a response to the sensed inner movement of a Barcarolle.”⁴

Such a procedure does not transcend the faulty principle of relating picture and music either by pseudo-identity or by association; it merely transfers the principle to a more abstract level, on which its crudeness and redundant character are less obvious. To reduce the visible waves to the mere motion of water and the play of light upon it, which is supposed to coincide with the undular character of the music, is to move toward the same kind of “absolute equivalence” that Eisenstein rejects. It owes its absoluteness merely to the absence of any concrete limiting element.

The basic law formulated by Eisenstein reads: “We must know how to grasp the movement of a given piece of music, locating its path (its line or form) as our foundation for the plastic composition that is to correspond to the music.”⁵ The manner of thinking exemplified here is still formalistic, both too narrow and too vague. The basic con-

cept of movement is ambiguous in both media. In music movement primarily signifies the underlying constant time unit, as it is approximately indicated by the metronome, although it may suggest something different; for instance, the smallest groups of notes (such as the semiquavers⁶ in a piece of the *Bumble Bee* type, the basic unit of which is, however, the crotchet⁷). Or “Movement” is used in a higher sense, that of the so-called *Grossrhythmus*⁸, the proportion between the parts and their dynamic relationship, the progression or the stopping of the whole, the breath pattern, so to speak, of the total form.

The concept of movement as it is used in motion pictures is even more ambiguous. It can mean the tangible and measurable rhythm of symmetrical optical structures, such as animated cartoons or ballets. If, in the name of higher unity, picture and music were made to present this rhythm incessantly and simultaneously, the relations between the two media would be pedantically restricted, and the result would be unbearable monotony. Movement can also mean a higher aesthetic quality of the motion picture; and it is this quality that Eisenstein obviously has in mind. Kurt London, too, introduces it under the name of “rhythm,” declaring that it is “derived from the various elements in its dramatic composition, and on the rhythm again is based the articulation of the style as a whole.”⁹

⁴Ibid. p. 161. The example Eisenstein gives for the interpretation of the inner movement of the Barcarolle is not convincing. In the Silly Symphony *Birds of a Feather* (1921), Walt Disney related that piece to “a Peacock whose tail shimmers ‘musically’ and who looks into the pool to find there the identical contours of its opalescent tail feathers, shimmering upside down. All the approachings, recedings, ripples, reflections and opalescence that came to mind as a suitable essence to be drawn from the Venetian scenes, have been preserved by Disney in the same relation to the music’s movement: the spreading tail and its reflection approach each other and recede according to the nearness of the flourished tail to the pool—the tail feathers are themselves waving and shimmering—and so on.” However, Disney’s pretty idea does not imply the direct transformation of one medium into another. The transformation is indirect, literary in character, based on the generally accepted premise that this popular piece is associated with water, gondolas, and therefore with Venetian opalescent effects. The intention here is to show by the interpolation of a concept that the colors of a bird can symbolize Venice. The idea of the playful interchangeability of different elements of reality as well as subtle irony with regard to Venice, which is likened, in its picturesqueness, to a peacock, are ingredients inseparable from the effect of Disney’s interpretation. This effect is certainly legitimate, but the doctrine of inner movement does not even begin to account for it. It is a highly sophisticated effect and Eisenstein’s purely formal, literal interpretation misses the point.—This example shows the inadequacy of formal-aesthetic discussions of even highly stylized, nonrealistic pictures; with regard to more realistic films, this inadequacy is even more flagrant.

⁵Ibid. p. 168.

⁶*semiquaver*: sixteenth note

⁷*crotchet*: quarter-note.

⁸*Grossrhythmus*: “great” rhythm, i.e., largest structural rhythm.

⁹London, op. cit. p. 73.

Such a “rhythm” unquestionably does exist in the film, although a discussion of it can easily degenerate into empty phraseology. This rhythm results from the structure and proportions of the formal elements—as in musical compositions. To mention only two such “higher” principles of movement, there are in the motion picture drama-like forms, i.e., extensive dialogues that employ the dramatic technique, with relatively few camera changes; and epic-like forms, i.e., sequences of short scenes, “episodes” that are connected only through their content and meaning, frequently strongly contrasting with each other, without unity of space, time or main action. *The Little Foxes* is an instance of the dramatic form, and *Citizen Kane* of the epic form. But this rhythmical structure of the motion picture is neither necessarily complementary nor parallel to its musical structure. It might enter the process of composition, e.g., by the choice of short “episodic” or long and elaborate musical forms, but this relationship would of necessity be of a very indirect and vague nature. Even the idea of adjusting the total structure of the music to that of the picture remains problematic, if for no deeper reason, because the music does not accompany the whole picture, and therefore cannot follow its temporal totality. One may admit that an ultimate relation between visual and musical form can be established, the common denominator being the “sequence.” As long, however, as one remains on the level of generalities about movement or “rhythm,” and looks for an accord of the two structures, the actual result is likely to be an affinity of moods—in other words, something suspiciously trite that contradicts the very principle of adequacy to the motion picture in the name of which that “rhythm” or “higher movement” is invoked. It is hardly an exaggeration to state that the concept of mood is altogether unsuitable to the motion picture as well as to advanced music. It is no accident that pictures supposed to express mood usually resemble photographed landscapes or genre paintings, and strike one as spurious and stilted. And one cannot imagine Schönberg or Stravinsky stooping to compose genre music.

It is true that there must be some meaningful relation between the picture and the music. If silences,

blank moments, tense seconds, are filled out with indifferent or naively heterogeneous music, the result is a complete nuisance. Picture and music, however indirectly or even antithetically, must correspond to each other. It is a fundamental postulate that the specific nature of the picture sequence shall determine the specific nature of the accompanying music or that the specific music shall determine the specific sequence, although this latter case is today largely hypothetical. The actual inventive task of the composer is to compose music that “fits” precisely into the given picture; intrinsic unrelatedness is here the cardinal sin. Even in marginal cases—for instance, when the scene of a murder in a horror picture is accompanied by deliberately unconcerned music—the unrelatedness of the accompaniment must be justified by the meaning of the whole as a special kind of relationship. Structural unity must be preserved even when the music is used as a contrast; the articulation of the musical accompaniment will usually correspond to the articulation of the motion-picture sequence, even when musical and pictorial expressions are diametrically opposed.

However, the unity of the two media is achieved indirectly; it does not consist in the identity between any elements, be it that between tone and color or that of the “rhythms” as a whole. The meaning or function of the elements is intermediary; they never coincide *per se*. If the concept of montage, so emphatically advocated by Eisenstein, has any justification, it is to be found in the relation between the picture and the music. From the aesthetic point of view, this relation is not one of similarity, but, as a rule, one of question and answer, affirmation and negation, appearance and essence. This is dictated by the divergence of the media in question and the specific nature of each. Music, however well defined in terms of its own structure, is never sharply defined with regard to any object outside itself to which it is related by imitation or expression. Conversely, no picture, not even an abstract painting, is completely emancipated from the world of objects.

The fact that it is the eye, not the ear, that perceives the world of objects affects even the freest artistic process: on the one hand, even the purely geometric figures of abstract painting appear like

broken-off fragments of the visible reality; on the other hand, even the most crudely illustrative program music is at most related to this reality as a dream is to awakened consciousness. The facetiousness characteristic of all program music that does not naively attempt something that is impossible to it derives from that very circumstance: it manifests the contradiction between the reflected world of objects and the musical medium, and exploits this contradiction in order to enhance the effect of the music. Roughly speaking, all music, including the most “objective” and nonexpressive, belongs primarily to the sphere of subjective inwardness, whereas even the most spiritualized painting is heavily burdened with unresolved objectivity. Motion-picture music, being at the mercy of this relationship, should attempt to make it productive, rather than to negate it in confused identifications.

Montage

The application of the principle of montage to motion-picture music would help to make it more adequate to the present development phase, to begin with, simply because those media have been evolved independently of each other, and the modern technic by which they are brought together was not generated by them, but by the emergence of new facilities for reproduction. Montage makes the best of the aesthetically accidental form of the sound picture by transforming an entirely extraneous relation into a virtual element of expression.¹⁰

The direct merging of two media of such different historical origins would not make much more sense than the idiotic movie scripts in which a singer loses his voice and then regains it in order to sup-

ply a pretext for exhausting all the possibilities of photographed sound. Such a synthesis would limit motion pictures to those accidental cases in which both media somehow coincide, that is to say, to the domain of synaesthesia, the magic of moods, semi-darkness, and intoxication. In brief, the cinema would be confined to those expressive contents which, as Walter Benjamin showed, are basically incompatible with technical reproduction. The effects in which picture and music can be directly united are inevitably of the type that Benjamin calls “auratic,”¹¹—actually they are degenerated forms of the “aura,” in which the spell of the here and now is technically manipulated.

There can be no greater error than producing pictures of which the aesthetic ideas are incompatible with their technical premises, and which at the same time camouflage this incompatibility. In the words of Benjamin,

It is noteworthy that even today particularly reactionary writers pursue the same line of thought, and see as the chief significance of motion pictures their capacity for expressing, if not the ritual, at least the supernatural elements of life. Thus, in discussing Reinhardt’s production, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Werfel says that it is doubtless the sterile imitation of the external world with its streets, interiors, railway station restaurants, cars and beaches, that has so far stood in the way of the rise of the motion picture to the realm of art. “The motion picture,” to quote his words, “has not yet grasped its true significance, its real potentialities. . . . These consist in its unique capacity for expressing the realm of the fairy tale, the miraculous and the supernatural with natural means and incomparable convincing power.”¹²

Such magical pictures would be characterized by the tendency to fuse the music and the picture and to avoid montage as an instrument for the cognition of reality. It is hardly necessary to

¹⁰“Two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition.” (Eisenstein, op. cit. p. 4.) This applies not only to the clash of heterogeneous pictorial elements, but also to that of music and picture, particularly when they are not assimilated to each other.

¹¹“What is stunted in the age of technical reproducibility, is the aura of the work of art.” The aura is “the unrepeatable, single impression of something presented as remote, however close it may be. To follow with one’s eyes a mountain chain on a summer afternoon or a bough that casts its shadow on one resting under it—is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that bough.” The aura is “bound with the here and now, there can be no copy of it.” (Walter Benjamin, “L’oeuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, V., Paris, 1936-7, pp. 40 ff.)

¹²The quotation is from Franz Werfel, “Ein Sommernachtstraum, Ein Film Von Shakespeare und Reinhardt,” in *Neues Wiener Journal*, quoted in Lu, 15 Nov. 1935.

¹³Eisenstein is aware of the materialistic potentialities of the principle of montage: the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements

stress the artistic and social implication of. Werfel's program—pseudo-individualization achieved by industrial mass production¹³. It would also mark a retrogression from the achievements of modern music, which has freed itself from the *Musikdrama*, the programmatic school, and synaesthesia, and is working with might and main at the dialectical task of becoming unromantic while preserving its character of music. The sound picture without montage would amount to a “selling out” of Richard Wagner's idea—and his work falls to pieces even in its original form.

Aesthetic models of genuine motion-picture music are to be found in the incidental music written for dramas or the topical songs and production numbers in musical comedies. These may be of little musical merit, but they have never served to create the illusion of a unity of the two media or to camouflage the illusionary character of the whole, but functioned as stimulants because they were foreign elements, which interrupted the dramatic context, or tended to raise this context from the realm of literal immediacy into that of meaning. They have never helped the spectator to identify himself with the heroes of the drama, and have been an obstacle to any form of aesthetic empathy.

It has been pointed out above that today's cultural industry unwittingly carries out the verdict that is objectively pronounced by the development of the art forms and materials. Applying this law to the relation between pictures, words, and music in the films, we might say that the insurmountable heterogeneity of these media furthers from the outside the liquidation of romanticism which is an intrinsic historical tendency within each art. The alienation of the media from each other reflects a society alienated from itself, men whose functions are severed from each other even within each individ-

ual. Therefore the aesthetic divergence of the media is potentially a legitimate means of expression, not merely a regrettable deficiency that has to be concealed as well as possible. And this is perhaps the fundamental reason why many light-entertainment pictures that fall far below the pretentious standards of the usual movie seem to be more substantial than motion pictures that flirt with real art. Movie revues usually come closest to the ideal of montage, hence music fulfills its proper function most adequately in them. Their potentialities are wasted only because of their standardization, their spurious romanticism, and their stupidly super-imposed plots of successful careers. They may be remembered if the motion picture is ever emancipated from the present-day conventions.

However, the principle of montage is suggested not merely by the intrinsic relation between pictures and music and the historical situation-of the mechanically reproduced work of art. This principle is probably implied in the need that originally brought pictures and music together and that was of an antithetic character. Since their beginning, motion pictures have been accompanied by music. The pure cinema must have had a ghostly effect like that of the shadow play—shadows and ghosts have always been associated. The magic function of music that has been hinted at above probably consisted in appeasing the evil spirits unconsciously dreaded. Music was introduced as a kind of antidote against the picture. The need was felt to spare the spectator the unpleasantness involved in seeing effigies of living, acting, and even speaking persons, who were at the same time silent. The fact that they are living and nonliving at the same time is what constitutes their ghostly character, and music was introduced not to supply them with the life they lacked—this became its aim only in the era of total ideological

raises them to the level of consciousness and takes over the function of theory. This is probably the meaning of Eisenstein's formulation: “Montage has a realistic significance when the separate pieces produce, in juxtaposition, the generality, the synthesis of one's theme” (op. cit. p. 30). The real achievement of montage is always interpretation.

¹⁴Kurt London makes the following illuminating remark: “It [motion-picture music] began not as a result of any artistic urge, but from the dire need of something which would drown the noise made by the projector. For in those times there was as yet no sound-absorbent walls between the projection machine and the auditorium. This painful noise disturbed visual enjoyment to no small extent. Instinctively cinema proprietors had recourse to music, and it was the right way, using an agreeable sound to neutralize one less agreeable.” (London, op. cit. p. 28.) This sounds plausible enough. But there remains the question, why should the sound of the projector have been so unpleasant? Hardly because of its noisiness, but rather because it seemed to belong to that uncanny

planning—but to exorcise fear or help the spectator absorb the shock.¹⁴

Motion-picture music corresponds to the whistling or singing child in the dark. The real reason for the fear is not even that these people whose silent effigies are moving in front of one seem to be ghosts. The captions do their best to come to the aid of these images. But confronted with gesticulating masks, people experience themselves as creatures of the very same kind, as being threatened by muteness. The origin of motion-picture music is inseparably connected with the decay of spoken language, which has been demonstrated by Karl Kraus. It is hardly accidental that the early motion pictures did not resort to the seemingly most natural device of accompanying the pictures by dialogs of concealed actors, as is done in the Punch and Judy shows, but always resorted to music, although in the old horror or slapstick pictures it had hardly any relation to the plots.

The sound pictures have changed this original function of music less than might be imagined. *For the talking picture, too, is mute.* The characters in it are not speaking people but speaking effigies, endowed with all the features of the pictorial, the photographic two-dimensionality, the lack of spatial depth. Their bodiless mouths utter words in a way that must seem disquieting to anyone uninformed. Although the sound of these words is sufficiently different from the sound of natural words, they are far from providing “images of voices” in the same sense in which photography provides us with images of people.

This technical disparity between picture and word is further accented by something much more deeplying—the fact that all speech in motion pictures has an artificial, impersonal character. The fundamental principle of the motion picture, its basic invention, is the photographing of motions. This principle is

so all-pervading that everything that is not resolved into visual motion has a rigid and heterogeneous effect with regard to the inherent law of the motion-picture form. Every movie director is familiar with the dangers of filmed theater dialogs; and the technical inadequacy of psychological motion pictures partly derives from their inability to free themselves from the dominance of the dialog. By its material, the cinema is essentially related to the ballet and the pantomime; speech, which presupposes man as a self, rather than the primacy of the gesture, ultimately is only loosely superimposed upon the characters.

Speech in motion pictures is the legitimate heir to the captions; it is a roll retranslated into acoustics, and that is what it sounds like even if the formulation of the words is not bookish but rather feigns the “natural.” The fundamental divergencies between words and pictures are unconsciously registered by the spectator, and the obtrusive unity of the sound picture that is presented as a complete reduplication of the external world with all its elements is perceived as fraudulent and fragile. Speech in the motion picture is a stop-gap, not unlike wrongly employed music that aims at being identical with the events on the screen. A talking picture without music is not very different from a silent picture, and there is even reason to believe that the more closely pictures and words are co-ordinated, the more emphatically their intrinsic contradiction and the actual muteness of those who seem to be speaking are felt by the spectators. This may explain—although the requirements of the market supply a more obvious reason—why the sound pictures still need music, while they seem to have all the opportunities of the stage and much greater mobility at their disposal.

Eisenstein’s theory regarding movement can be appraised in the light of the foregoing discussion. The concrete factor of unity of music and pictures

sphere which anyone who remembers the magic-lantern performances can easily evoke. The grating, whirring sound actually had to be “neutralized,” “appeased,” not merely muted. If one reconstructed a cinema booth of the type used in 1900 and made the projector work in the audience room, more might be learned about the origin and meaning of motion-picture music than from extensive research. The experience in question is probably a collective one akin to panic, and it involves the flasblike awareness of being a helpless inarticulate mass given over to the power of a mechanism. Such an impulse is easily rationalized, for instance, as fear of fire. It is basically the feeling that something may befall a man even if he be “many.” This is precisely the consciousness of one’s own mechanization.

consists in the gestural element. This does not refer to the movement or “rhythm” of the motion picture as such, but to the photographed motions and their function in the picture as a whole. The function of music, however, is not to “express” this movement—there Eisenstein commits an error under the influence of Wagnerian ideas about the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the theory of aesthetic empathy—but to release, or more accurately, to justify movement. The photographed picture as such lacks motivation for movement; only indirectly do we realize that the pictures are in motion, that the frozen replica of external reality has suddenly been endowed with the spontaneity that it was deprived of by its fixation, and that something petrified is manifesting a kind of life of its own. At this point music intervenes, supplying momentum, muscular energy, a sense of corporeity, as it were. Its aesthetic effect is that of a stimulus of motion, not a reduplication of motion. In the same way, good ballet music, for instance Stravinsky’s, does not express the feelings of the dancers and does not aim at any identity with them, but only summons them to dance. Thus, the relation between music and pictures is antithetic at the very moment when the deepest unity is achieved.

The development of cinema music will be measured by the extent to which it is able to make this antithetic relation fruitful and to dispel the illusion of direct unity. The examples in the chapter on dramaturgy were discussed in reference to this idea. As a matter of principle, the relation between the two media should be made much more mobile than it has been. This means, on the one hand, that standard cues for interpolating music—as for background effect, or in scenes of suspense or high emotion—should be avoided as far as possible and that music should no longer intervene automatically at certain moments as though obeying a cue. On the other hand, methods that take into account the relation between the two media should be developed, just as methods have been developed that take into account the modifications of photographic exposures and camera installations. Thanks to them, it would be possible to make music perceptible on different levels, more or less distant, as a figure or a back-

ground, over-distinct or quite vague. Even musical complexes as such might be articulated into their different sound elements by means of an appropriate recording technique.

Furthermore it should be possible to introduce music at certain points without any pictures or words, and at other points, instead of gradually concluding the music or cautiously fading it out, to break it off abruptly, for instance at a change of scenery. The true muteness of the talking picture would thus be revealed and would have to become an element of expression. Or the picture might be treated as a musical theme, to which the actual music would serve as a mere accompaniment, consisting of musical base figures without any leading voice.

Conversely, music might be used to “outshout” the action on the screen, and thus achieve the very opposite of what is demanded by conventional lyricism. This latter possibility was effectively exploited in the orchestration scene of *Algiers*, where the noise of the mechanical instrument deafened the cries of mortal fear. However, even here the principle of montage was not fully applied, and the old prejudice that the music must be justified by the plot was respected.

The Problem of Style and Planning

The foregoing analyses have certain implications regarding the style of motion-picture music. The concept of style applies primarily to the unbroken unity of the organic work of art. Since the motion picture is not such a work of art and since music neither can nor should be part of such an organic unity, the attempt to impose a stylistic ideal on cinema music is absurd. We have sufficiently stressed the fact that the prevailing would-be romantic style is inadequate and spurious. If it were replaced by a radically “functional” style, as might be the temptation in view of the technical character of the motion picture, and exclusively mechanical music were employed in the neoclassical manner, the result would be hardly more desirable. The present shortcomings—pseudo-psychological aesthetic empathy and redundant reduplication—

would only give way to the defect of irrelevance. Nor can it be expected that a compromise, the middle course between the extremes, a style both expressive and constructivist, would remedy the evil. The piling up of antagonistic principles intended to safeguard the composition from all sides only defeats its purpose and in practice results in the achievement of old effects by new means. A hair-raising, “thrilling” accompaniment to a murder scene will be essentially the same even if the whole tone scale is replaced with sharp dissonances.

Mere will to style is of no avail. What is needed is musical planning, the free and conscious utilization of all musical resources on the basis of accurate insight into the dramatic function of music, which is different in each concrete case. Such conscious and technically adequate musical planning has been attempted only in a few very exceptional instances. But it must be stated at once that even if the routine business obstacles were overcome, this type of planning would still have to cope with great objective difficulties. The tendency toward planning was inherent in the evolution of music itself, and it led to the ever greater control of the autonomous composer over his material. But under the conditions of the commercial cinema industry this tendency has many unfavorable aspects. By planning, the autonomous composer has emancipated himself from the dilettantism of so-called inspiration. He rules as a sovereign over his own imagination; it was said long ago that in every domain the genuine artist must master his spontaneous ideas. This is possible if the whole conception of the work is rooted in his freedom, is truly his own, and is not imposed upon him by another agency. His arbitrary rule is legitimate only in so far as the conception of the work, which is the goal of his efforts, preserves a non-arbitrary, purely expressive element. In the moving picture, the situation is quite different. The work, the goal, is determined extrinsically to a much greater extent than even by the text of the traditional opera. As a result, the arbitrary element is deprived of that sap of non-arbitrariness in the productive process, which raises what has been made to the level of something more than just “having been made.” The achievements connected with

the mastery of the material easily degenerate into calculated tricks, and the spontaneous element—which is indispensable, even though its value as an isolated quality is dubious—threatens to shrink. The progress of subjective mastery over the musical material jeopardizes the subject expressing himself musically.

Moreover, conscious selection among possibilities instead of abiding by a “style” might lead to syncretism, the eclectic utilization of all conceivable materials, procedures, and forms. It may produce indiscriminately love songs composed in terms of romantic expressiveness, callously functional accompaniments of scenes that are intended to be disavowed by the music, and the mode of expressionism in scenes to which music is supposed to supply tempestuous outbreaks. Such dangers make themselves felt in today’s muddling-through practice. It is only a special instance of the general practice of rummaging through all our cultural inheritance for commercial purposes, which characterizes the cultural industry.

An effective way to meet that danger can be formulated on the basis of a closer scrutiny of the concept of style. When the question of an adequate style for motion-picture music is raised, one usually has in mind the musical resources of a specific historical phase. Thus impressionism is identified with the whole-tone scale, chords on the ninth and shifting harmonies; romanticism suggests the most conspicuous formulas of composers like Wagner and Tchaikovsky; functionalism is conceived as the sum total of “drained” harmonies, rudely stamping movements, preclassical head motifs, terrace-like forms, and certain patterns that can be found in Stravinsky and to some extent in Hindemith.

Such an idea of style is incompatible with motion-picture music, which can employ resources of the most varied character. What counts is the way these resources are handled. Of course, the two elements, the resources and their treatment, cannot be mechanically separated. Debussy’s procedure is the consequence of the inherent necessities of his musical material, and, vice versa, this material is derived from his method of composing. However, one may venture the thesis that today music has reached a

phase in which its resources and methods of composing are becoming increasingly independent of each other. As a result, the material tends to be in some aspects rather irrelevant to the method of composing.

In other words, composing has become so logical that it need no longer be the consequence of its material and can, figuratively speaking, dominate every type of material to which it is applied. It is not accidental that Schönberg, after evolving the twelve-tone technique and achieving complete and consistent command of his material in all its dimensions, tested his mastery on a piece consisting only of triads, such as the last choir of opus 36, or that he added the finale of the Second Chamber Symphony. This finale written forty years after the symphony had been conceived brings to the fore the constructive principles of the twelve-tone technique within musical material that represents the stage of development of about forty years ago. Of course, such a feat represents only a tendency, and is inseparable from Schönberg's incomparable productive power.

As a matter of principle, priority goes to the truly novel musical resources. However, motion-picture music can also summon other musical resources of the most varied nature, on condition that it reaches the most advanced contemporary modes of composing, which are characterized by thorough-going construction and the unequivocal determination of each detail by the whole, and which are thus in line with the principle of universal planning, so fundamental for motion-picture music. Thus the negation of the traditional concept of style, which is bound up with the idea of specific materials, may lead to the formation of a new style suitable to the movies.

It goes without saying that such a style is not yet achieved when a composer is only shrewd enough to accompany a sequence with some material that happens to fit. One would be justified in speaking of a new style only if the disposal of such arbitrarily selected material reflected the most highly developed experience of modern composing. If this experience is truly present, the composer may also use triads; when subjected to the principle of construction they will sound so strange in any event that they will have nothing common with the lyri-

cal ripple of the late-romantic convention and will strike the conventional ear as dissonance. In other words, obsolete musical material, if it is really put to use and not just commercialized by the motion picture, will undergo, by the application of the principle of construction, a refraction relating both to its expressive content and its purely musical essence. Occasionally, musical planning may provide for applying the principle of montage to the music itself, that is to say, it may employ contradictory stylistic elements without mediation, and exploit their very inconsistency as an artistic element.

In all this, one must not overlook the situation of the composer himself. It would be vain to decree "objectively" what is timely or not, while dodging the question whether the composer is capable of doing what the times seem to require. For he is not merely an executive organ of knowledge, a mirror of necessities outside himself; he represents the element of spontaneity, and cannot be divested of his subjectivity in any of his objective manifestations. Any musical planning that ignored this would degenerate into arbitrary mechanical rules.

This does not refer merely to the fact that many composers, and not necessarily the worst ones, lag behind the intellectual level of planning procedures in their method of composing; theory cannot condemn even them as unfit for writing motion-picture music. But the situation of any motion-picture composer, including the most modern one, is to some extent self-contradictory. His task is to aim at certain sharply defined musical profiles relating to plots and situations, and to transform them into musical structures; and he must do this much more drastically and with much more objective aloofness than was ever required in the older forms of musical drama. At the end of the era of expressive music, it is the principle of *musica ficta* that triumphs—the postulate that it must represent something to which it refers instead of merely being itself. This alone is paradoxical enough and involves the greatest difficulties. The composer is supposed to express something, be it even by way of negating expression, but not to express himself; and whether this can be done by a music that has emancipated itself from all traditional patterns of expression is impossible to decide

beforehand.

The composer is confronted with a veritable task of Sisyphus. He is supposed to abstract himself from his own expressive needs and to abide by the objective requirements of dramatic and musical planning. But he can achieve this only in so far as his own subjective possibilities and even his own subjective urges can assimilate those requirements and gratify them spontaneously—anything else would be mere drudgery. Thus the subjective prerequisite of the composer's work is the very element that the supposed objectivity of this work excludes; he must, so to speak, both be and not be the subject of his music. Whither this contradiction will lead we cannot predict at the present stage of development, when it has not even been visualized by normal production. But it can be observed that certain apparently sophisticated, aloof, and objective solutions that sacrifice the expressive urges to avoid the romanticist jargon, e.g., some French cinema composers in the orbit of the Circle of the Six, result in a tendency toward automatism and boring applied-art mannerisms.

Not only theoretical reflection but also technological experience raises the question of style. All motion-picture music has so far displayed a tendency to neutralization¹⁵—there is almost always an element of inconspicuousness, weakness, excessive adaptation, and familiarity in it. Frequently enough it does exactly what it is supposed to do according to the current prejudice, that is to say, it vanishes, and remains unnoticed by the spectator who is not especially interested in it¹⁶. The reasons for this are complex. First of all there is the system of cultural industry with its standardization, and countless conscious and unconscious mechanisms of censorship, which result in a general leveling process, so that every single incident becomes a mere specimen of the system, and its apprehension as something specific is practically impossible. This, however, affects both pictures and music, and explains the gen-

eral inattention in the perception of movies, correlated to the relaxation that they supposedly serve, rather than the fact that the music is not noticed. This latter circumstance is the result of the spectators' concentration on the visual plot and the dialog, which leaves him little energy for musical perception. The physiological effort necessarily connected with the act of following a motion picture plays a primary role in this context.

Apart from that, however, the existing recording procedures are themselves responsible for neutralization. Motion-picture music, like radio music, has the character of a running thread—it seems to be drawn along the screen before the spectator, it is more a picture of music than music itself. At the same time it undergoes far-reaching acoustic changes, its dynamic scale shrinks, its color intensity is reduced, and its spatial depth is lost. All these changes converge in their effects; if one is present at the recording of an advanced cinema score, then listens to the sound tracks, and finally attends the performance of the picture with its “printed” music, the progressive grades of neutralization can be observed. It is as though the music were gradually divested of its aggressiveness, and in the final performance the question whether the score is modern or old-fashioned has far less importance than one might expect from merely reading it or even from listening to the same music in the concert hall. Even conservative listeners in the cinema swallow without protest music that in a concert hall would arouse their most hostile reactions.

In other words, as a result of neutralization, musical style in the usual sense, that is to say, the resources employed in each case, becomes largely indifferent. For this reason, the aim of a genuine montage and an antithetic utilization of music will not be to introduce the largest possible number of dissonant sounds and novel colors into the machinery, which only spits them out again in a digested, blunted, and conventionalized form, but to break the

¹⁵Cf. T. W. Adorno: “The Radio Symphony,” in *Radio Research*, 1942, pp. 110 ff.

¹⁶This could be checked by empirical methods. If the audience of a motion picture were given a questionnaire after the performance and asked to state which scenes were accompanied by music and which were not, and to characterize this music in a general way, it is likely that hardly any of them would be able to answer these questions with approximate correctness, not even musicians, unless they came to see the picture for professional reasons.

mechanism of neutralization itself. And that is the very function of planned composition. Of course, there may always be situations that require inconspicuous music, as a mere background. But it makes all the difference in the world whether such situations are part of the plan and whether the inconspicuousness of the music is composed and constructed, or whether the expulsion of music into the acoustic and aesthetic background is the result of blind, automatic compulsion. Indeed, a genuine background effect can be obtained only by planning, not as a result of mechanical absence of articulation. The difference between the two kinds of effects can be likened to that between Debussy, who most perfectly and distinctly created a vague, indistinct, and dissolving impression, and some blunderer who extols his own involuntarily vague, amorphous, and confused structure, the product of an insufficient technique as the embodiment of an aesthetic principle.

Objective planning, montage, and breaking through the universal neutralization are all aspects of the emancipation of motion-picture music from its commercial oppression. The social need for a

non-predigested, uncensored, and critical function of music is in line with the inherent technological tendency to eliminate the neutralization factors. Objectively planned music, organically constructed in relation to the meaning of the picture, would, for the first time, make the potentialities of the new improved recording techniques productive.

Insight into the contradictions characteristic of the relations between motion pictures and music shows that there can be no question of setting up universal aesthetic criteria for this music. It is superfluous and harmful, says Hegel, "to bring one's yardsticks and apply one's personal intuitions and ideas to the inquiry; it is only by omitting these that we are enabled to examine the subject matter as it is in and for itself."¹⁷ The application of this principle does not surrender motion-picture music to arbitrariness; it means that the criteria of this music must be derived in each given case from the nature of the problems it raises. The task of aesthetic considerations is to throw light on the nature of these problems and their requirements, to make us aware of their own inherent development, not to provide recipes.

¹⁷*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Lasson, 2. Auflage, Leipzig, 1921, P. 60.