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The Influence of Film Music on Emotion

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Music and Performing Arts

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of music as a narrative device to influence an audience's emotions and response in the context of film and visual media as well as its use as a tool to impart psychological transportation and assist the visual narrative. By identifying the contributions of music as a whole, I evaluate and describe its functions, roles and relationship with the audience through the medium of film. Using information collected from published reports, articles and books, I provide a thorough analysis of the varying methods and approaches used and the roles music plays in affecting the emotional response of an audience who views film accompanied with music.

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MPA 475

Professor Sammons

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Introduction

When we experience a great film or television show, we immerse ourselves in the world that it has created. Regardless of whether it is a comedy, thriller, or action-adventure, there are many aspects of a film that make it an enthralling experience for the audience. Such aspects can include the breathtaking cinematography, dynamic plot development, realistic special effects, and the dialogue. These aspects are vital to the narrative process, but there is one incredibly important creative tool that has the tendency to go relatively unnoticed: music. Music has long been used in film as a tool to impart theme as well as a way to provide texture to the overall narrative. The ability for music to impart meaning and impact emotions not only just by itself, but also in the context of film makes it an incredibly integral device to influence the emotional response of an audience while also assisting in psychological transportation.

Throughout this paper, I will examine the relationship between music and emotion separately from and in the context of film. By first identifying the history and varying cultural perspectives surrounding music and emotions, I evaluate and describe the evolution of technology influencing the change of music and sound practices within the film industry and the method by which music is used to heighten film. Lastly, I will finish with a brief insight on

film music's impact on narrative persuasion, transportation, functions, roles and relationship with the audience through the application of film.

Music in Everyday Life: The Role of Emotions

Emotion in History and Culture

To truly understand the integral role that music plays in affecting the emotions of an audience, we must first take a look into the historical and cultural factors surrounding the concept of emotion in music. Music and emotion have long been tied together since the days of the ancient Greeks. They are responsible for coining the terms *mimesis* (the representation or imitation of the real world in art and literature) and *catharsis* (the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotion), which they often related back to music. Mimesis "values music for its representational function, in this sense embracing it within the theory of knowledge." In contrast, catharsis "locates music's value in the effect it makes upon the experiencing subject" (Cook and Dibben 47). With this information, we can then infer that the idea of *catharsis* serves as an intersection between music and emotion. We, as humans, find solace and meaning within various aspects of our daily lives; so why would music be any different?

Throughout history, the general disposition and attitude of any group of people has been largely reliant on societal, environmental, and physical influences impacting the world around them. Much like musical periods, such as the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic, we can categorize a time period by its overall mood. For example, the 1960s were initially a time of free love and innocence, but soon turned into a time of protest and unrest among the younger

generation due to the Vietnam War and various political assassinations. Tensions were running high during this time period and it is very much reflected in the films released at the time. *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Rosemary's Baby* are all prime examples of films with overtly intensive subject matter and accompanying scores; they deeply reflect the violence and discourse that was occurring throughout the decade.

The general emotional disposition of societies throughout history has been in a constant state of movement and will continue to be as time progresses. It can be difficult to understand the correlation between any given culture's perceptions of emotion and how it relates directly to their experience of music. Realizing that there can be differences in perception and experience for certain groups of people broadens our ability to conceive of the complex nature of both music and emotion.

Emotion: Does It Happen Differently From Culture to Culture?

The majority of the research on the connection between music and emotion has been concentrated on the experiences of Western audiences and has consistently neglected the experiences of non-Western audiences. This discrepancy means we are not able to see the full extent to which the perception and experience differ among non-Western cultures (Thompson and Balkwill 755). Music has always played a role in cultures throughout the world; however, its functionality and level of significance varies wildly from culture to culture. Music can be used in social contexts, for entertainment, in rituals, etc., and its connection to the emotional status of the people it affects is incredibly important to our understanding of their relationship:

To a large extent, cross-cultural music cognition has focused on music as sound, but there is increasing awareness that music is a multimodal phenomenon. The behavioural aspect of music cannot be treated as a distinct level of analysis, but is inseparable from the perceptions and experiences of music. Indeed, the visual input from viewing the facial expressions and gestures of a music performer can profoundly influence a listener's emotional responses to music. (Thompson and Balkwill 757)

Visual input obviously accounts for a large portion of how we respond to many things in our lives: reading the facial expression of a friend after telling them important news, seeing a newborn child for the first time, and even watching a favorite movie. Our visual acuity of a situation can be deeply informed by our past experiences and emotional bandwidth; so when it comes to combining the concepts of music and emotion within the context of film, there can be both similarities and differences among the way that different cultures perceive and experience these occurrences.

The connotations of emotions can fluctuate depending on situational behaviors, and with these fluctuations comes the difficulty of placing a qualitative value that is universally equivalent. For example, the word for anger in English and the word for anger in Japanese may be interpreted by the people of those cultures with varying degrees of intensity and also associated with a different set of situations and behaviors (Thompson and Balkwill 759). Seeing as the same words in different languages come with their own set of inherent meanings and tend to carry specific degrees of intensity, it is extremely difficult to develop a standardized method of quantifying emotional cognition and behavior. *Cross-cultural music cognition* is a sub-field of ethnomusicology and explores the correlation of cognitive processes and emotional

experiences for music across cultures. The evidence from this field of research suggests that “music experiences are also constrained in important ways by the nature of our physical environment, the structure of the auditory system, and evolved strategies of perceptual and cognitive processing” (Thompson and Balkwill 759). With the acknowledgement of these constraints, commonalities across cultures begin to rise to the surface and show us that there are possible, or likely, universal experiences relating to music. A few examples of these include sensitivity to pitch contour rather than exact intervals, sensitivity to consonance and dissonance, a processing advantage for music built on a small number of discrete pitch levels, and perceived similarity of pitches separated by an octave. These commonalities allow for us to understand how deep the connection is between our emotional cores and musicality (Thompson and Balkwill 759-760).

How exactly does all of this information relate to film? Well, there are many connections to be made regarding cultural perceptions of film and the differing emotional experiences among audiences. Western films may not translate the same way in non-Western cultures and vice versa, meaning there could be a disconnect in understanding based on that culture’s perceptions and biases toward the content involved and the culture it comes from. For example, one could imagine that there was most likely little-to-no consumption of Middle Eastern media and film in America during the height of the wars in Iraq in the 2000s. However, even with differing perceptions and biases, audiences are usually in touch with reading emotional and musical cues. Bollywood films serve as a great example of non-Western media that incorporates musical aesthetics and is representative of the values and characteristics of a specific culture while also being wildly popular outside of its culture of origin. This shows that

an audience's ability to both appreciate and comprehend emotional and musical content is not necessarily limited by their understanding of the originating culture itself.

Effects of Film Music on Psychological Transportation and Narrative Persuasion

Evolving Technology Influencing the Music and Sound in Film

Technology advances at a very high rate of speed and often changes the way many fields of industry operate; both music and film are no strangers to this process. With the breakthrough of cinema in the late 1890s, it was not long before music was incorporated into the fibers of the industry. The 1920s marked the silent film era where orchestras often accompanied the showing of films due to the lack of technology able to reproduce recorded sound. The transition from the late 1920s into the 30s became the period of implementing the research and advancements made in the recording world. The establishment and standardization of sound reproduction practices within the theater setting made it viable for accurate synchronized sound sequences to occur; with this led to the ceased production of silent films in 1929 and a conversion to sound films by the early 1930s. Music and sound for film in the 30s and 40s was limited to the use of monaural sound and theaters back then were generally equipped with anywhere from two to six speaker horns (Buhler 278-312). Once the development of projection screens with sound-permeation abilities were common, the placement of the speaker horns would be directly behind the screen to "reinforce the illusion that the sound emanated from the film" (Buhler 312).

Moving on through into the period referred to as the Post-Classical Era in film, which consists of the years 1950 through 1975, there were many technological advancements and

technique developments occurring during this time. The introduction of magnetic tape recording and stereo reproduction capabilities had a large impact on the production and postproduction stages in the music and sound divisions for film. These new technologies made it possible to increase the portability for on-location shooting as well as increasing the fidelity and dynamic range of music and sound. Stereo reproduction provided a greater “illusion of depth” on screen because it could create a vast sense of space therefore improving the quality of the narrative. Much of the attention with this new technology was turned toward the handling of dialogue versus the handling of music. When it came to scoring techniques in film, these stayed grounded in the tradition of orchestra, and the approach to narrative remained within classical confines; however, the 50s and 60s saw the emergence of the use of popular music (mostly rock-n-roll) to attract a younger audience. Scoring a film with pre-existing recordings became much more popular and served as social commentary, as mood setting, and to establish character psychology (Buhler 336-365).

Over the next 30 years, music and sound production only got better and so did the technology. 1975 marked the age of the New Hollywood era and ushered in an entirely new attitude around film production and music and sound design. The introduction of Dolby stereo into the market as well as cheaper prices for audio equipment helped create a shift to producing larger-scale movies, i.e. “blockbuster films,” that were treated as big events (Buhler 367). Movies like *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* proved to be such big successes that theaters that had not yet made the switch to a Dolby stereo system then did so. The incorporation of right, center, left, and surround channels lead to more careful construction of the sound effects and also greater significance placed on the overall sound of

the film; audiences would feel less separation between themselves and the screen. This period also saw the resurgence of orchestral scores, thanks significantly to John Williams and his work on the aforementioned films. Compilation soundtracks remained extremely popular throughout this period and were used in hit films like *Forrest Gump* and *Dirty Dancing* (Buhler 383).

Being dubbed the Digital Era, today's technology has brought further sophistication to the processes for sound design, recording, production, post-production, scoring, and exhibition. The wide dynamic range and frequency response of Dolby digital sound has allowed for a greater audience experience and overall feeling of being submerged in the realm of the film (Buhler 392). As both music and film technology advance, so will the enjoyment of the films being created.

How Music Is Used to Heighten Film

When we see a great film, we oftentimes find ourselves immersed in the narrative. There can be many reasons for this including an interesting plot, captivating cinematography, and thought-provoking dialogue. The visuals may draw us in, but it is the music that keeps us there despite the fact that "unlike other types of popular or art music, much music for film has been composed with the understanding that it will not be consciously attended" (Cohen 879). Even though we may not be paying selective attention to the music we hear, we are still keeping track of its existence and relation to the film subconsciously.

Film music can provide certain descriptive cues that improve our understanding of the narrative within the film. We can rely on these cues to boost our emotional response to the visuals on screen and therefore interpret the specific emotions that are being inferred. All film

genres use music to heighten the effect the film has on an audience. Genres including action, thriller, horror, and of course, musicals particularly rely on contributions from their music. Horror, specifically, is a genre that is largely reliant on music as a tool to intensify the visuals. Visual jump-scares are almost always accompanied by some kind of audible climax. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* showcases this concept of an audible climax perfectly during its famous "shower scene" when Norman Bates begins erratically stabbing Marion Crane. Paired with hard visual cuts of a quick-moving knife are even sharper violin strings that synchronize the movements together. The resulting product is a stinger, which is a short musical phrase that is often indicative of an imminent dramatic climax, that stays with you until the scene eventually falls silent. These assaulting shocks reinforce an innate primal instinct within us that comes from a time when our hearing served as a way to distinguish threats, such as predators, from everyday sounds (Lerner ix). Other notable examples of famous horror film scores include John Carpenter's *Halloween* and Wes Craven's *A Nightmare On Elm Street*. These films apply similar techniques to *Psycho*'s in that they use sharply dissonant climaxes to provoke a response from the audience: "Frightening images and ideas can be made even more intense when accompanied with frightening musical sounds and music in horror film frequently makes us feel threatened and uncomfortable through its sudden stinger chords and other shock effects" (Lerner ix).

An interesting contrast to the idea of music being needed to heighten an audience's experience is the complete lack of music in a film. A recent example of this method is the 2018 box office hit *A Quiet Place* which features a family forced to live in complete silence while hiding from creatures with hyper-sensitive hearing. The film relies almost solely on Foley and

sound effects to create a world of a fear and chaos. This shows us that the absence of music can play an integral role similar to that of a film *with* music.

Thinking about music for film without the general constraint of a genre brings us to movie soundtracks. A soundtrack is essentially a collection of pre-existing songs and/or instrumental music used to shape both the feeling and overall aesthetic of a film. Soundtracks are usually curated by a music supervisor in conjunction with the director and tend to feature popular songs; however, they can also be crafted by a popular artist or musician who was hand-selected for the task and often creating songs specifically for the film. The role of soundtracks and original scores are inherently similar because of how they are used to highlight the emotional undertones/overtone happening on screen, but soundtracks are able to go a step further due to them typically containing lyrical content (Buhler 358-362). Instrumental music paired with visuals undoubtedly has the ability to impart meaning, but with the added context of lyrics, a deeper and more complex interpretation of emotional content can arise.

There are a plethora of films and television shows that model after this concept. Classic 80s movies like *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *The Breakfast Club* all rely heavily on music that was popular both before and at the time of its release. Many of these films have one particular song from the soundtrack that encompasses the overall aesthetic and tone of the movie; that song also tends to be used for marketing and promotion, including use within the trailer. So, naturally this song is the one audiences often associate with the film itself. In the case of *The Breakfast Club*, audiences tend to associate "Don't You (Forget About Me)" by Simple Minds with the film, because of its use in the empowering final scene. The lyrics imply a specific meaning and directly reflect what is happening on screen therefore

drawing the audience into the narrative further and forcing our emotions in one particular direction. These soundtracks take advantage of the fact that “music is especially good at two things: (a) adding emotional specificity and (b) influencing and organizing time. Music can give the underlying or implied emotions of a scene direct expression... encouraging us to ‘read’ the image or scene in a particular way” (Buhler 17). Another instance of lyrical implication comes into play with the recent Netflix Original show *Russian Doll*. The plot revolves around a woman who, while repeatedly dying in a myriad of ways, relives the night of her 36th birthday. Each time her night resets, it is accompanied by Harry Nilsson’s “Gotta Get Up.” The chorus lyrics are reflective of the plot and provide a sense of both irony and hilarity, but as the true darkness of the plot is slowly revealed the audience’s feeling and interpretation of the song changes, and this “recontextualization of a consonant and familiar-sounding musical work [creates] a sense of dread” (Lerner x).

While there are more than enough cases of music being written or selected after a film has already been shot, there are fewer involving the opposite of this process in which the music is chosen or written beforehand and then the film is produced around it. An illustration of this technique is Edgar Wright’s *Baby Driver*. While writing the screenplay for the movie, Wright was able to acquire licensing for thirty-six tracks for the film, many of which were written into the script before filming. Ten of these tracks were specifically used to shape the overall music direction for the film and became the focal point of many of the high-action scenes. The opening scene of the movie is a car chase that is choreographed to “Bellbottoms” by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion (Willman). With scenes being handcrafted around pre-selected music, the viewer’s attention is drawn towards the interplay of their relationship and how one

influences the other. In this relationship, the music is the more dominant partner while the visuals play a more supportive role. Overall, *Baby Driver* serves as a prime example of music being used to shape an audience's perspective of the film narrative.

The Power of the Narrative

The power of the narrative is incredibly influential on our perception of the material given in a film. It can be easier for us to remember information when it is provided to us in a narrative form versus a non-narrative form. Information presented in this way can also persuade us to agree with statements that may go against what we actually believe if it is part of the diegesis and overarching narrative. Researchers M. C. Green and T. C. Brock developed a "transportation-imagery model of Narrative Persuasion that posits narrative persuasion occurs to the extent the audience member is psychologically 'transported' into the described world" (Costabile and Terman 319). As far as the narrative actions of film music are concerned, there is a large amount of research to suggest that music's role is integral in cultivating an audience's understanding of narrative within a film (Cohen 887-888).

There are often times when visuals do not provide sufficient information as to where the narrative is heading, so it is up to the accompanying film music to provide the missing context. This can be done using recurring themes and leitmotifs throughout the film that the audience has already recognized. Research has also been done on this relationship between visuals and music:

For example, [researchers have] suggested that a film's musical soundtrack can provide more information about the narrative than the visual scene itself. The researchers found

that ratings of a scene on various on various dimensions (e.g., beauty, interest, or tension) varied widely when the visual scene was held constant and the soundtrack was changed – an effect that was not duplicated when the soundtrack was held constant and the visual scene varied. (Costabile and Terman 322)

The impact of film music on not only our perceptions and emotional response, but on the actual film itself is an incredible feat to achieve. The importance of carrying out the task of engaging an audience does not rest solely on the metaphorical shoulders of film; it is a shared endeavor that merits clear attention.

Conclusion

Film music, including original scores and soundtracks containing popular songs, provides descriptive cues that improve our understanding of the narrative within a film. With these musical indications we can pick up on the emotional situations occurring on screen as well as be persuaded to form our own interpretations of the context behind the music and its use. From classic movies to modern television shows, the use of music to sway an audience's emotional response is an effective practice and continues to be a fundamental part of the filmmaking process.

The contributions that film music has made over the last century are endless. From its humble beginnings as a masking technique for projector noise (Cohen 881), film music has come an incredibly long way to take on the role it plays in today's movie-going experience for an audience. Music and emotion have always had a closely interdependent relationship with one another. Analyzing these two concepts inside the context of film brings forth ideas of

cultural perceptions and experiences, technological evolution impacting the changing experiences of an audience, and psychological transportation and narrative persuasion. All of these elements work together to show that film music does in fact play an integral role in influencing the emotional response and the overall experience of an audience.

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