

The inevitability of the soundtrack in a show

There is a habit to view the soundtrack as an irremovable aspect in the experience of a dramatic product.

This is in fact a custom, which, in some cases, has been transformed into a rule (now written, now implicitly accepted), and no form of show seems to be prepared to give it up: from theatrical performances up to, for obvious reasons, dance in all its forms.

In fact, music played an important role in Athens, as early as the fifth century b. C., in theatrical performances. According to Maria Chiara Martinelli's writings on tragedy and comedy, "tragedy - moment of aggregation of the city community and at the same time locus of a passionate debate, in which the same community used to participate with deep dedication - and comedy, where contemporary facts were mirrored, as well as political and cultural debates, social and civil tensions. Both alternated acting-only pieces to pieces performed in the *aria-recitativo* style and choral songs, to the sound of the "αυλος", accompanied by dance-like movements, and solo songs of actors and lyrical dialogues between actors and chorus."

The relationship between music and text has a special importance in the very moment of their "public" performance, and, it has been emphasized, the choice of music should always fit the themes at hand.

It is widely recognized that music does not play a mere supporting role, but rather one of "emotional conditioning", inasmuch as it succeeds in arousing feelings and impressions, or in emphasizing and underscoring elements suggested by the author of the text. To all effects, music is a performing element we cannot do away with if we want to convey meanings, also at an emotional level.

Unfortunately, very few documents of the music of ancient Greek civilization have survived, and even fewer are left from the age when music was inextricably tied to the major literary production. Otherwise, it would have been interesting to compare the *voμoi* classic style with the "school of the New Dithyramb", in order to try to understand part of the arguments that had developed about the new way to interpret the relationships between poetry (text) and music.

The need for a musical comment was also felt when the cinematograph was invented. Although, in the past century, cinema was born silent, screenings were actually accompanied by musical instruments (mostly piano or organ, but in some cases also small or large orchestras).

Here it may be useful to make a distinction among the different terms we are using. By soundtrack (a definition of cinematographic origin) we mean all that comes recorded on the magnetic band (optical, digital, etc.), whose function is to reproduce sounds in synch with the moving images. The soundtrack, therefore, is not necessarily music. It also includes background noises, dialogues, and silence.

(Therefore, the thesis, supported by some critics a few decades ago, suggesting that the famous movie "Birds" by Alfred Hitchcock did not have a soundtrack, is conceptually wrong. It simply lacked music. Or better, a musical comment.)

¹ Diegetic music is known as source music or "screen music".

(For the records, it has been a while since the concept of “music” has undergone a redefinition according to new theoretical guidelines, whereby it is not disdainful to label organized sounds and noises, too, as “music” tout-court, even if these are hard to associate with notes, or with traditional pentagram notation.)

The expression “soundtrack” has, however, also been used for theater, no doubt improperly, but it has nonetheless been accepted by specialists and practitioners alike, because it is easily understandable and widely shared, *by analogy*, to describe the recorded background noise and the supporting music.

By analogy, I said: analogy with cinema, obviously. Theatre and cinema are linked by a special bond. For years, their relationship has been the object of never-ending, unresolved arguments both in the art world and in the academic world (see note #2 on cinema and theatre). The two types of performance have many things in common, so much so that most of the time spent theorizing about their differences and specificities is tainted by an ‘original sin’, i.e. the inability to credit cinema with the status of an independent, self-sufficient form, defining it instead as the continuation, or the sum of, other, different artistic disciplines.

For a long time, cinema has been viewed as a “drift” of photography. As such, this view does make sense: cinema was arrived at through the evolution of the research on photographic instrumentation, which went hand in hand with increasingly precise experiments on the reproduction of movement. At the end of the nineteenth century, there appeared the famous pioneers of cinema whose names include the Lumière brothers, with their movie camera - which was nothing but a sophisticated photographic camera programmed to take pictures in sequence, or Muybridge, with his studies on the movement of horses, or Edison himself, with the magic lantern and his experiments with the use of light and photographic impression through exposure.

Undoubtedly, downgrading cinema to a “natural” evolution of photography means focusing more on the support than on its nature.

At a later stage, thanks above all to the introduction of sound, there emerged a tendency to associate cinema with a sort of “duplicate theatre”.

The actors, as well as the directors, nearly always came from theatre; and the texts themselves were often adaptations of pieces conceived for prose drama.

The comparison with the (by now) millenarian tradition of theatre initially put cinema in a position of inferiority and, possibly, of conceptual subservience: the first “script-based” movies (I use this term to distinguish them from the other cinematographic products of some relevance, i.e. documentaries) used sceneries borrowed from theater for their settings, privileged full-figure shootings, i.e. those that simulated the kind of view experienced by a theatre spectator, and the acting, too, followed the guiding principles of the theatre of that time.

But the more these two forms of performing art contaminated each other, and influenced each other, the more unavoidable became the tendency to presuppose a separate identity, and the specificity of the “cinema” medium became the object of theoretical analysis, above all thanks to the major works of the Soviet filmmakers. In particular, we are

indebted to Pudovkin and Eisenstein for their important contribution on the development of *specifically filmic* works, characterized by the practice of editing. This meant acknowledging the creation of a cinematographic product through the manipulation and recreation of a space and a time that are never “here and now” (*hic ET nunc* are key features in theatrical performance): the filmic time and space are suspended and placed for good within a support that is unchangeable and valid “forever”.

The experience of a cinematographic product is very different from that of a theatrical show. In theatre, spectators experience the development of the action in the same moment in which it takes place. With their presence, spectators participate in the performing event – which, if we follow this logic, is 'live' (in order to emphasize the state of simultaneous being that exists between the performing action and its reception, we use the term “live”, which also refers to musical events like concerts or *recitals*).

The cinematographic show, i.e. the *movie*, is instead “dead”, ended, perfect and always the same. We watch something that was made in another time and place, whose authors and interpreters could be dead – and this would make no difference. The film is false by definition. Godard described cinema as “a lie in 24 photograms per second”.

The name would be enough to understand this profound difference. The cinematographic work is the *film*, an English word describing the support, hence the reproducibility, the mass production and the possibility to distribute the film (simultaneously) in different places of the world.

Nevertheless, quoting Alberto Angelini, theatre, which is true, seems fake; cinema, which is fake, seems true.

To justify such a statement, we need to refer to the studies of Cristian Metz, who, on a mental level, differentiates between the nature of reality of cinema and reality itself. The latter is, psychologically and physically, a limit, which, in the theatrical performance, conveys the fictional content. The stage, with its material structure of objects and acting bodies, creates a theatrical performance (performance = equivalent to).

The screen of the movie theater, with its colored shadows, offers its viewers a cinematographic presentation. Within such a presentation, the "sound" comment plays the protagonist role. Music can be diegetic or extra-diegetic.

By “diegetic music” we mean that the musical piece we listen to is within the "*diegesis*", i.e. is part of the narrative, of the story that is being told. As an example we can take a character in a movie who plays an instrument, or who turns on a radio, or who dances inside a nightclub, etc. In a nutshell, the term describes music that is perceived in the same way, and at the same time, by the character and by the spectator.

"Extra-diegetic" music is, on the contrary, a “musical comment”, which, in "*diegesis*", i.e. within the “story”, exists neither in that moment, nor in that space: it is an arbitrary background chosen by the director, or by the author, which acts as a musical tapestry or, in other cases, as a true counterpoint to the images: it is the case of the famous Strauss waltz on the images of the spaceships in “2001: A Space Odyssey” by S. Kubrick, or the insistent two-key tune in “Jaws” by S. Spielberg, or the world-famous theme of “Gone

with the Wind” that plays during the equally famous finale with Rossella O'Hara - with dolly and epic ending - flavored with all the rhetorical *clichés* of Hollywood cinema.

Within the cinematographic work, or rather, within every audio-visual product, we usually witness the alternation of sequences that indifferently use diegetic music and extra-diegetic music. In some cases, diegetic and extra-diegetic music coexist in the same sequence: for example when, in “Breakfast at Tiffany” by B. Edwards, the character of Holly, performed by actress Audrey Hepburn, is seen singing *Moon river* at the window, accompanied by a solo guitar (diegetic) and then, little by little, we hear the growing sound of a (obviously extra-diegetic) string orchestra, accompanying her performance.

The choice of one type of musical accompaniment or the other determines a different formulation on the part of the director. Besides, it also characterizes a different vision of the scene's, the sequence's or, in some cases, of the entire work's purpose. If we take cinematographic representation to be the mechanical reproduction of a real event (albeit reconstructed on a *set*), music, if it is there, can only be part of the environment. It needs to be justified: there has to be a concert, a musician, a record player, etc. Otherwise, music becomes a comment, and therefore, to all effects, a straining, a rhetoric expedient, a “trick” or, to use a definition in vogue over the last few years, a “special effect”.

In this case, music does not need to be justified, it just enters the soundtrack, most of the times without the spectator even realizing it. Or she/he might appreciate it: listening to a wind ensemble on images of John Wayne riding, nobody was ever, to our knowledge, led to wonder where the brass band might be hidden in the middle of Monument Valley, a place immortalized in so many John Ford movies.

If it is true (and it is indeed true) that music has the power to influence, in a nearly subliminal way, the spectator's emotional reactions, i. e. to perform an action that gets round the user's threshold of attention, and has a direct effect upon the unconscious, unverifiable level, then one can understand the call for “purity” coming from reviewers and authors of every age.

Consider that Euripides himself was reproached (when not ferociously mocked) by Aristophanes with the following words: “he takes his honey everywhere: songs of whores, songs of Meletos, tunes for the “aulo di Carla”, mournings, dance arias” (*Frogs*, vv. 1301 ff.).

His fault was not to use music in a traditional way, but rather to use it for emphatic purposes – inventing downright excuses for “musical modulations” that had “exclusively aesthetic” objectives. Before the fifth century, the music that accompanied plays had to be very simple, including a “monodic” accompaniment that should not hinder the understanding of words. It seems that every type of piece had its own shape and its own *ethos*, also musically. The latter, as Maria Chiara Martinelli puts it, had “characteristics aimed at triggering different reactions in the listeners: the musical experience was not (...) something merely aesthetic, but (...) it was thought to have true psychological qualities”.

Later, a decisive judgment would be uttered by Plato, who deemed this new art absolutely dangerous, since it arose emotions and passions that were capable of upsetting his own balance.

Something similar also happened in movies, approximately 25 centuries later. Music, along with the other rhetorical “tricks” that act insidiously, at an unconscious level, has a specific responsibility: to deceive the spectator and alter his perception to the detriment of “representative truth”.

In the name of truth, around the mid-90s, a group of Danish movie experts, led by Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, gave life to one of the most interesting provocations of the recent cinematographic season: “Dogma '95”.

Dogma '95, a group of directors, had as its formal objective to countervail “some tendencies” of contemporary cinema.

As can be read in the manifesto, “DOGMA '95 is a rescue action!”

Still, in the manifesto we also read that “the supreme task of decadent directors is always to deceive the public. Is this what 100 years of cinema have brought us? Illusions to convey emotions? What kind of emotion could ever be conveyed through these illusions? Through this free choice to deceive on the part of one individual artist? “

The manifesto reminds us that cinema is always a collective art, and drafts a list of rules, called “Vow of Chastity”.

The rules are 10 in number:

1. Filming must be done on location. [Props](#) and sets must not be introduced (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs within the scene being filmed, i.e., [diegetic](#)).
3. The camera must be a hand-held camera. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; filming must take place where the action takes place.)
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The final picture must be transferred to the Academy [35mm film](#), with an [aspect ratio](#) of 4:3, that is, not [widescreen](#). (Originally, the requirement was that the film had to be *filmed* on Academy 35mm film, but the rule was relaxed to allow low-budget productions.)
10. The [director](#) must not be credited.

The list ends with the director’s affidavit, namely her/his “vow of chastity”, to give up his/her taste and role as a director and/or artist, and appeal to the “supreme purpose”: “(...) to force the truth to emerge from my characters and places”.

The search for truth, the importance of the moment, the centrality of the "here and now" and the disavowal of spectacular special effects (from emphasis to rhetorical tricks, and extra-diegetic music), are the features that make DOGMA 95 the most effective intellectual provocation of the last era of film, especially since this movement comes from inside cinema: its members are directors who question the fundamental purposes of cinema. We would have to go back to the *nouvelle vague* of the 60's (or, although laterally, to English *free cinemas*) to find something comparable.

In that case, too, the reaction was against a certain type of cinema that was judged "cosmetic". That is, distant from reality. That is, "fake".

In the mid-90s, therefore, we see a comeback of theories about cinema. This phenomenon is, as I've just said, important, first of all because the debate comes from within - from directors and authors - and not from communication specialists, from semiologists or sociologists, anthropologists, etc. Secondly, because such criticism had not been made in years, since the argument was centered above all on issues related to content, social impact, economic downturns, the "primadonna" syndrome, and themes that, most of the times, went beyond the specificity of making cinema, both in a technical and in an artistic sense.

That this is a form of provocation that has yielded fruitful outcomes is shown by the fact that, since DOGMA '95's inception, the way cinema is made has changed substantially. But the effects are also evident in the fact that the following year, in 1996, the manifesto's main supporter, Lars von Trier, won the Cannes festival with "Breaking the Waves" - a movie that uses filters, lighting systems, and even *back projection* and the pop hits of the 70s in a way that is unashamedly extra-diegetic. Two years later, in 1998, Lars von Trier shot a movie based on a tragedy by Euripides: Medea. How did he shoot it?

He immediately took a distance from Euripides, declaring that he never read "his" Medea, but only studied the script of another great Scandinavian director: Carl T. Dreyer. Dreyer had written a script based on the tragedy, but had died before being able to shoot it. Von Trier decided to make his movie as a tribute to the filmmaker he considers to be one of his masters. In addition to Dreyer, as another source he used Pier Paolo Pasolini, who, in turn, had made a movie out of the tragedy.

In this work, Lars von Trier does not give up any of his previous cinematographic expedients: music (of great quality, incidentally) is exclusively extra-diegetic. A lavish string orchestra accompanies the images of Medea, who is waiting for death, lying on the "watt", and more music accompanies Jason's final, insane ride in a surreal landscape, whose unreality is emphasized by a yet unknown (in the cinematography of L. v. T.) use of a digital device, the *chroma key*, a sort of technological heir to the old *back projection*.

The result is extremely effective. Despite some liberties, such as the "acclimation" to the Scandinavian "watt", or the rewriting of some passages, which attribute a different meaning to the relationship between Medea and the Aegean king, the spirit of the work has been preserved intact, also, and above all, in terms of the kind of impact the play can have on the spectator.

This was achieved thanks to the use of “tricks”, extra-diegetic music, and an assemblage often based on double exposure and cross-fading: that is, on “specifically filmic” techniques. In fact, the only real betrayal of the text simply consists in introducing a scene that shows what is “not displayable” par excellence: the killing of the children. This is also yet another betrayal of a prescription contained in the “dogma” manifesto.

The great merit of L. v. T. is to have brought back a debate on the specific qualities of the cinematographic product and on the (licit or illicit) use of the possibilities offered by the medium. Rules are given also in order to be broken, but this does not mean that they become invalid, since the essential thing is to ask oneself whether it is appropriate to follow them, to understand the meaning and purpose that leads to the preference for a particular device or technique.

There is a need for a specific set of theories. After all, it is about going back to the origins of cinema.

The theory that music and cinema are closely tied had already been put forward by Eisenstein in the 30s. He thought that audio was superfluous, if not even dangerous, for cinematographic communication. And he went beyond that, expressing a certain perplexity also about dialogues and the use of color. He thought that too many stimuli slow down and hinder the psyche’s operation: cinema is a pre-oral language, like music. And like music it has its own “meaning”, which can be picked up perceptively - the tiny segments organizing themselves autonomously. Eisenstein was a friend and correspondent of great Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotskij, as well as of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. In his “General Theory of the Editing”, he shows some degree of acquaintance with the language and issues of psychology. He writes that “(...) the principle of cinema is nothing more than reproduction in terms of film, footage, shooting and original rhythm (...), which, in general, characterizes conscience since the first steps in the assimilation of truth”. The inner language does not coincide with the word, but works with images and feelings, and is closer to the mental processes used by children and primitive peoples.

Rudolph Arnheim, too, draws a parallel between the form of cinematographic art and music. In order to explain it, he resorts to *gestalt* and to the concept of relevance: the latter is based on the tested principle that a melody is perceived like an organized unity and not like a series of separate notes. On the part of the subject, this entails possessing a mechanism that can integrate the constellation formed by all the individual stimuli into one single configuration.

The analogies with cinematographic perception, which is the overall result of the sliding of single photograms, are obvious. According to Arnheim, the mind has the ability to construct the cinematographic perception “in a Kantian way”. The same phenomenon, described as “character or reality illusion”, i.e. the spectator’s tendency to experience cinema as something real, becomes an integral part of the space offered by the screen, as an attribute derived from the spectator’s perceptive abilities. The very thinking process of the individual during the cinematographic experience should be structured according to the characteristics of the psyche, so as to produce such illusions of truth.

The process, for Arnheim and also for Eisenstein, is analogous to the experience of a subject under hypnosis. The same phenomenon of sensory regression would happen to a music listener, and can also be felt when experiencing ecstatic feelings, or “upsets”, as they were referred to by Plato.

Such a state of hypnosis would be enhanced, in the case of cinema, by the near totality of stimuli inherent in the medium, which gives the author a dangerous control power over the disarmed spectator. L. v. T. actually insists on the analogy between cinema and hypnosis. It is sufficient to consider that the hypnotist is the most frequent personage (character) in his movies: we see him in *Element of crime*, and he is a constant presence as an off-screen voice, in the hallucinating train trip of *Europe*.

And, come to think of it, this is an acknowledgment of the nature of cinema itself. Cinema is in fact a totality (but not a sum) of stimuli, which get organized by the mind of the spectator. All these stimuli are derived from shooting and editing, sure, but also from music, special effects, filters, lighting system, etc. These are, to tell the truth, no different from the so-called “special effects”.

Therefore music, too, is a special effect, since as early as the heyday of classical Greek theatre, because its function was to convey certain specific messages. And it had to do so using the most appropriate expedients, knowing that it had powerful and effective tools at hand. This mechanism has undergone very little variations over the centuries: stories continue to be the “connective tissue” of the presentation and re-presentation of the characters we identify with. We go through stages of detachment, identification, catharsis, etc.

Very few differences, then.

Elsewhere, I have already argued that cinema is one great special effect. I confirm this thesis: the awareness of the impossibility to faithfully reproduce reality forces any serious author to take on specific responsibilities, or alternatively, to decide not to accept them. But always bearing in mind that nothing of what we see on the screen is true. It is always an arbitrary reproduction, the result of choices and selections, both in what we see and in what we hear.

Music, be it diegetic or extra-diegetic, is part of the language and experience of film, and can be used in many different ways.