Roger Hillman, *Unsettling Scores: German Film, Music, and Ideology.*


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As the author hints by the allusion in his title to Kathryn Kalinak’s 1992 book, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, he seeks to set his subject (music in ‘new German cinema’) apart from music for other films through a point in the film-musical equivalent of literary theory. As such, its polemic tone will probably provoke reactions we have heard and read before: approval and encouragement from some, silence or skepticism from others. The result, in any case, is a persistent, unhealthy gap in discussion between partisans and those unconvinced by some recent models. This reviewer offers an assessment of a different kind, a consideration, using Hillman’s study as a test case, of how this and similar literary-theoretical studies of film music can be broadened and sharpened, then brought within the larger ambit of scholarship that will be appreciated outside of its circle of like-minded readers: how it can achieve more of its potential. The question at hand is not whether Hillman, Gorbman, and other scholars who work on the theory of film music have been right or wrong to take up this venture—in every field there is a place for theory—but whether the theoretical constructs may be said to be limited within their own terms, frame of reference, and need to carried further.

**Is anybody listening?**

Like other authors who follow literary-critical (narrative) models, Hillman studies classical musical excerpts placed in films as (he asserts) cultural references, in this case ironic nationalist associations. This emphasis necessarily takes the attention away from the musical qualities of these excerpts, pursuing the argument along the lines of text, titles and historical context of origin or political context of performance. There are at least three difficulties with this selection of subject. The first is an aesthetic-epistemological issue. If we wish to construct a theory that accounts for film music, it is important to verify that our models and postulates stand up to fundamental questions. As the modern philosopher Gadamer has pointed out, the hermeneutics of texts do not function in the same way as those of poetry or music; no one would interrupt a poem or a piece of music because they have ‘gotten the message’ and need to hear no more. Yet if we follow Hillman, the audience is not listening to the music for its own sake, but only for a specific reference it makes that relates to a narrative. As a consequence, it is clear that in this kind of study the musical pursuit takes a back seat to the text-referential; music is studied mainly where it informs the audience on verbal points.

**How widely does the theory apply? Is it robust?**

It may be objected that music chosen for film from pre-existing classical repertoire is a subject too narrow to support a theory. Most film music is composed for specific films, not selected from works written for other purposes. Theory should be robust enough to stand for a broad spectrum of examples, not just unusual cases. It has been a recent tendency in film music theory to focus an increasing amount of attention on peculiarities with the result that theorists are not so much theorizing as describing odd cases of the use of music. Indeed it seems that the more scholars innovate in narrative theory, while their examples are interesting, the less their arguments apply to most film music.
Exception culturelle

Many writers identify the subject of their interest as a “non-Hollywood” practice, a term that has become almost as fashionable as Hollywood itself. Recent trade law is sometimes invoked in this connection. France is not unique in its longstanding legislation exempting cultural products from trade treaties and bodies (similar exclusions are found in NAFTA and other trade agreements). But in the case of film does the cultural exemption recognize and protect unique national film cultures from assimilation by a (putatively) monolithic American film industry, or are these rules in place only as a means of economic protection? If we cannot identify differences in the product, we must at least partially conclude that the trade-legal principle of cultural exception has little to do with art.

Hillman identifies the use of classical music in German films as a ‘non-Hollywood practice.’ In fact, there is a long list of classical music quoted in Hollywood films. Hillman tries to distinguish the use of classical music in modern German cinema from that in American films by references to the former country’s history, nevertheless allowing that not all audience members know the repertoire or capture the association. This reservation is particularly relevant in the case of a film and musical repertoire referring, Hillman argues, largely to German nationalism in World War II. But one may ask what might be the effect on and interpretation by members of the younger generation of viewers and listeners who are removed from that music? Or indeed what of the impact on audience members outside of Germany?

This brings up a problematical point in the argument, the lack of distinction between the film maker’s intention and the reception by the audience. Recent studies of film music show this mistake (absence of consideration of production) can have significant consequences in interpretation. At the very least, and I do not think this too much to ask, scholars ought to make an effort to verify their suppositions concerning intentions by considering source material related to the production. Often the writings stop short of involving collaborative elements such communications models or sociological data that would advance their work on this collaborative medium. Until they explore production their theories of intention remain untried, untested in an important aspect of film. A glaring example is the plethora of articles advancing a Nietzschean interpretation of Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey based on the title of Strauss’s tone poem. As it turns out, it can be documented that, at a very late stage of production, the film maker asked a relative to suggest a fanfare that would end quickly, nothing more. This evidence marginalizes the Nietzschean reading ‘as gloss’ which now requires a theoretical re-framing, one that in turn suggests other readings, for example, on the semiological, or linguistic, or archetypal. There is, in fact, a Requiem too, in 2001 by Ligeti; what about liturgical aspects of that in the narrative of the film itself?

Examples like Oliver Stone’s use of Barber’s Adagio in Platoon are an obstacle to Hillman’s argument. He is prepared to admit it as an exception of an American composition used as a reference in an American film, and he accepts Mallick’s use of Ives’s Unanswered Question in The Thin Red Line as another exception, but there is more to be gleaned from both excerpts. While we watch the scene of carnage in a Vietnamese village, our attention does not turn to Barber’s transcendental music as a mere nationalistic reference, nor do most of us turn our minds to its playing over the radio at the death of Truman; we are stretched emotionally by the tension between a sublime musical expression and horrifying images on the screen. In other words, this is a clear example of what narrative theorists themselves have termed counterpoint, and rightly so, as one of the more potent observations of literary theory.

As an aside, it has been my informal experience of film-musical counterpoint that in such scenes music expresses a hidden viewpoint or one from outside of the film and not directly representative of the imagery. Does this hold true for new German cinema? Is this a way in which film achieves what is classically defined as tragedy, drama that attracts and repels at the same time? More importantly, there is a musical question: what is it about this music that brings the audience to an extreme position of counterpoint? We can answer this question for the images on the film and the text-referential; why not then ask the same for the music? Surely here there is potential for study and exploration.

To return to the central subject of Hillman’s book, the use of classical music as cultural reference, one could pose a potentially fruitful question that fits well in a post-modern theoretical framework, that of the duality of interpretation (e.g. by audience members who recognize the putative cultural reference and those who miss it, whether because they do not know that music, or do not make the connection). Central to post-

modern literary theory is the proposition that texts, and by extension music and images, are interpreted in different ways (and all may be valid). In the film *Minority Report*, malefactors are arrested before they can commit their crimes, the moral dilemma being that punishment is carried out for the commission of an act that has not yet been accomplished. Would it have been finished, or is this just the inference of the prescient mutants who foresaw the event? The character played by Tom Cruise, a detective in the ‘pre-crime’ unit, conducts his investigation to strains of Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony*. Is this music played on his computer screen (and therefore diegetic) or not? If I make a connection between an unfinished symphony and a crime that has not been consummated, do I divine the intention of the film maker correctly or not? Was the connection intended? Does this example not lead us ineluctably to questions of production history? Who made these decisions and why?

Secondarily, if it was intended, what is the impact of the music on those listeners who do not happen to recognize the piece? If this choice of music was intended for them, is there something about the style of the music that re-inforces an element in the scene, and if so what is it? In the latter case who is missing the point: the listeners who take in the music for itself and its sonic connection to the imagery and drama, or am I missing it because I have stopped listening and left the imaginary world of the cinema to ponder a possible textual reference between Schubert and Steven Spielberg? May we hold that both interpretations are intended? Arguably this use of classical music in an American film is analogous to the use of Wagner and Beethoven in New German cinema within the parameters that Hillman has established. If there is a difference of practice or approach then it needs to be demonstrated.

**Reception and Audience**

Film music theory has succeeded in making elementary distinctions concerning the position of music in film (Kalinak and Gorbman have both distinguished between the source music and the rest of the score, and concerning music that moves from one position to the other). It is surprising that this line of reasoning has been abandoned, or has become stalled (if I may), so quickly. If theory succeeds in these distinctions, can it not go further? Can it not measure and account for questions such as the relative prominence of cues, or the engagement of the audience with the music during the film and whether this varies according to their distinctions? It is well known that audiences are conscious of some musical cues and not of others, but the reasons underlying this are not investigated. Like others before him, Hillman cites fledgling literature on the psychology of music in film, but makes nothing of this line. Surely if the practitioners of film music theory are serious about the imitation of literary criticism they understand that their theories must address questions of listening and viewing, of the habits and modes of attention of audience members.

**The “Narrative” of Film Creation**

If we wish to inquire into the production of films, we have on the one hand the so-called foreground, the narrative of the finished product of pixels and electricity with sonic effect, a resultant art form of mediation, and, on the other hand, in what may be termed the background, or negative space, is a mighty process called production, which includes the creators’ intentions and terms of musical composition and performance. (For some of us, the latter makes up the foreground, or positive space, of our study—and there is no need for any debate that makes that gap wider). If we are to perceive what stands behind a film, we must inquire into how it has been produced, to the contributions of the names we watch roll by on the credits. We must delve into production decisions, conflicts, difficulties, resolutions. We must reconstruct the process by which the film came to be. All of the theoretical work will advance when it is placed within the crucible of production studies, a line that also holds promise for new media.