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# ONÉVA & OE

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## NEW MUSICAL WRITING PROCESSES FOR CINEMA

EDITED BY ROBERTO CALABRETTO, LUCA COSSETTINI  
AND DONALD GREIG



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NEW  
MUSICAL  
WRITING  
PROCESSES  
FOR  
CINEMA





# New Musical Writing Processes for Cinema

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Before the arrival of electronic technologies, music writing practices for cinema were not substantially different from those used by composers of orchestral and opera repertoire. Only in post-production did film music avail itself of the editing potential typical of recorded and electronic music. With rare exceptions, such as Bebe and Louis Barron's soundtrack for *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), it was not until the 1970s when directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky and sci-fi movies incorporated synthesized sounds in the soundtracks of their films. These early attempts to emancipate film music from traditional procedures gathered pace and since the 1980s synthesizers have made it possible to combine traditional compositional practices with experimental processes. Nevertheless, electronic music remained essentially a collection of sound effects, or a means to simulate orchestral instruments, until synthesized sounds were integrated with the distinctive timbres of an orchestra. The revolutionary combination of synthesizers, sequencers and software for music writing in the 1990s resulted in the Digital Audio Workstations which modern-day composers use to produce mock-ups, i.e. digital music demos. Through multi-timbral sampling, complex sound mapping techniques and spectral morphing, it became possible to mimic actual timbres and articulations of classical music instruments, leading to new compositional practices that allowed first the composer and the music team, then the filmmakers, to preview the final score. This new trend accelerated composition and production processes and encouraged hybrid scores, and was welcomed by directors who in many cases had a background in advertising and pop video production. A willingness to accept such new digital processes emerged in part through collaborations with rock and pop musicians and contributed to hybridized musical languages and new composing practices.

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## EVOLUTION OF FILM SCORING

Up until the 1950s, much film music borrowed from the familiar expressive codes of late nineteenth-century music. It was thus superficially associated with musical cliché and general accessibility, all of which contributed to the sense of film music as an essentially inferior or second-rate craft in contrast to consecrated art music and more challenging avant-garde idioms. Film music, being in the service the moving image, had, it seemed, surrendered its cultural value, an assessment rooted in the belief that classical music was, of all the arts, the most autonomous, illustrated most obviously in the notion of absolute music. From the 1950s onwards, music for film began a slow renewal manifested in cautious, although still confused, innovation. The scores modelled on the late nineteenth-century symphonic style were no longer an undisputed point of reference. Directors now began to embrace popular music, jazz and even rock. The role of sound accompaniment was also changing: the sense of music as redundant commentary, which for many years had characterized film music, now appeared tired and even anachronistic. Musicians and directors opted for scores that were capable of acting in counterpoint with images, opening new audio-visual pathways.

It was against this background that we can place the experience of the composers of the new generation: they dealt not just with new aesthetics and composition models, but also with new technologies. This historical perspective in turn sheds light on the new film music language, and substantial changes to traditional harmony and melody, e.g. the blurring of the boundary between sound and noise achieved by electronic means; use of procedures derived from spectral music for creating harmonic areas, sometimes merging, sometimes clashing in different pitch ranges; spectral transformation for smooth harmonic transitions; and overlapping of different spectra. Such new music writing practices have not yet been systematically studied, nor do they feature in traditional composition manuals. Research in this field also fulfils a didactic purpose, providing future composers with musical analyses of selected works and composition models representative of the new film music writing, which today are, in most cases, learnt through practical-empirical experience and thus transmitted orally.

## EVOLUTION OF FILM SCORING STUDIES

Up until the end of the twentieth century, the study of music in film had been informed by aesthetics and narratology; the interaction of soundtrack and moving images was geared to understanding the role of music within the audio-visual dramaturgy. From the early 2000s onwards, critical literature increasingly focused on reconstructing film music's creative processes from the 1930s to the 1980s when writing was done primarily on paper, inevitably involving the study of preparatory materials collected in composers' archives.

The historical shift from paper to audio documents then to IT has led to an uncertainty about sources; the absence of documentation and of the tracking of production from genesis to the final version has all but erased creative histories. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars started to grapple with these issues, but research on the creative process of new music for cinema has become notably more frequent over the last five to six years. The problem of locating and decrypting digital sources means that there have inevitably been fewer reconstructions of the creative process than of the earlier symphonic era. In its place, reconstructions of film music written in the final decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century have relied on interviews with, or in accounts by, the composers themselves. Such approaches have only highlighted the lack of a coherent methodology for interpreting electronic, IT and digital sources, and revealed an equivalent demand for new technological competencies on the part of musicologists and film scholars. What research there is—almost exclusively specific case studies—remains in its infancy. More systematic theoretical work is therefore required, an urgent and fundamental step in redrawing traditional research methodologies on film music writing in order to understand the digital music creative processes that have changed film music.

## RECONSTRUCTING THE CREATIVE PROCESSES

The study of the creative process of the new musical writing for cinema requires appropriate methods able to investigate how and to what extent the development of increasingly advanced technologies might have influenced composition paradigms. The starting point is the theoretical account of the creative processes of electro-acoustic music formulated in critical literature over the past two decades. It is there that questions about sound source processing and the relationships between audiovisual documents and other types of preliminary materials have been raised. Further methodological tools are offered by recent research on the creative processes involved in Computer Assisted Composition (CAC), though because these have taken the form of case studies unrelated to film music there is an obvious need for recontextualisation. As to the question of lability and the ephemeral nature of electronic and IT sources, recent methodologies for the analysis and the critical editing of electronic music are helpful. Such approaches address all the phases leading to the production of a film soundtrack from an historical perspective, including the changes of production processes, and raises for researchers a whole set of questions of fundamental importance. Covering a period from the infancy of film sound to the modern day, this means issues of methodology, definition of the object of study, the heterogenous writing processes and resultant documentary sources such as original handwritten scores, printed editions, composers' sketches and

notes, rough drafts; SIAE programmes (including reliability testing), sketch pads and notebooks, drafts, time counts and specific cues, correspondence with partners, business cards, receipts and other personal materials.

Such work reveals the dense, complex network of relationships between various sound and audio-visual documents—soundtracks, preliminary audio materials, commercial sound recordings, recordings made by sound-effect technicians for musical purposes—and, more recently, software, digital encoding of music (e.g. MIDI, MusicXML, etc.), and computer coding. Research such as this also engages with new electronic organology, sound spatialization, interfaces of sound production and processing strategies (from the earliest electric instruments to the most recent declinations of programming languages), opto-electrical instruments, the relationship between programming and visual representation of sound, and sound libraries.

## VIRTUAL LIBRARIES

In the digital age, more and more composers are making use of computer library repositories of sampled sounds and musical themes. These trends, frequently apparent in popular music, are increasingly extended to “art” music and film scoring. Today, composers can access and contribute to a wealth of audio materials, procedures and languages, where historicity and innovation coexist in a kind of eternal present. The web has become a huge archive that composers can consult to develop their musical ideas. Musicians and musicologists are dealing with a global expansion of a practice of shared patches, sounds, and libraries born some 30 years ago at the dawn of the Computer Assisted Composition.

Today, the production of multi-timbre samplers and increasingly sophisticated interfaces that control the performance parameters of virtual instruments is an industry and a source of revenues for orchestras (e.g. Vienna Symphonic Library). The production of virtual instruments, moreover, is often under the creative direction of cinema composers and sound-designers who develop new libraries that reflect modern cinematographic idioms. Sophisticated though they may be, libraries cannot provide the exact timbres and expressive potential of traditional instruments. Inevitably, the language of film music has been transformed, with composers and orchestrators opting for musical designs suited to available samples, with a strong tendency towards new film music stereotypes. At the same time, new technologies of sound design have presented new creative possibilities that still allow for the distinctive voices of individual composers to be heard. Direct contact between musicologists and film music composers together with industry professionals encourages more detailed analysis of topics not treated in existing literature and deepens our understanding of the practical aspects of software composition. Such work will help clarify the production processes of hybrid scores, i.e. those made using virtual orchestration techniques, and those that blend “real” instruments with simulated equivalents.

# THE ARTICLES IN THIS JOURNAL

This issue of *Cinéma & Cie* presents a collection of papers that share a common purpose of remodeling existent theories developed to analyse “art” music in order to reflect the current aesthetic and production context of film music. Only by addressing specific aspects of more recent film music composition and production, and developing new analytical tools, can we historicize and fully understand the differences between the film music of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

Roberto Calabretto discusses the role of film music in the works of directors Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky, particularly their use of electronic sounds. Tarkovsky, collaborating with Eduard Artemyev, incorporated electronic music in films like *Solaris*, moving away from typical science-fiction tropes. Similarly, Antonioni worked with Vittorio Gelmetti in *Deserto Rosso* to reflect the protagonist’s mental state through electronic music, adding a human dimension. In both cases, noise and music were blended to create a rich and complex soundscape.

Luca Cossettini highlights how Edgard Varèse’s electronic composition is deeply intertwined with his reflections on the relationship between music and film, suggesting that these two art forms are closely connected, almost inseparable. His works, including *Déserts* (1954), *La procession de Verges* (1955), and *Poème électronique* (1959), explored pioneering ways of integrating music with moving images—ranging from fictional to documentary films and multimedia experiences. The digital production tools of today help reveal the visionary nature of Varèse’s aesthetic approach, particularly his understanding of music in relation to visual media. The paper explores the final years of his life, focusing on his studio work and his engagement with technology, showing how these elements contributed to the development of film music.

Donald Greig considers *Crimson Tide* (Tony Scott, 1995), an example of the Hollywood “high-concept” film. Hans Zimmer’s score is a landmark in the composer’s career, consolidating his image as an action-adventure specialist. The article explores Zimmer’s now-familiar work process and key stylistic trademarks such as a male chorus, which acts both commentatively and symbolically. Using Neo-Riemannian theory, the article analyzes harmonic techniques that connect Zimmer’s music to earlier Hollywood traditions, showing his work as more a continuation than a radical evolution of familiar style topics.

Kristjan Stopar analyses the production of Hans Zimmer, one of the most renowned and prolific film composers today, shaping the characteristics of modern film music. His eclectic style reflects his ability to work across different musical genres, while his efficiency is evident in both composition and production.

Since arriving in Hollywood in 1989, Zimmer has revolutionized the traditional music production process, optimizing it through computer technology. While he often employs a traditional narrative method with thematic elements, his stylistic evolution has moved away from classical concepts like thematic development. Zimmer's blend of traditionalism and innovation has significantly influenced the evolution of film music.

Finally, Ilario Meandri, Andrea Bruno e Giulia Ferdeghini study how the digital transition has profoundly changed the workspace of contemporary composers, leading to a new "digital documentality" that calls for updated musicological research methods. This paper presents early findings from ethnographic fieldwork at Christopher Young's studio, emphasizing the importance of studying both documents and production practices. The research combines archival work with oral history and diverse documentary sources, proposing a redefined methodology for examining modern creative processes. Field observations, focused on Young's work for three films (*The Autopsy*, *The Offering*, and *The Piper*), highlight how digital technologies have transformed the compositional process with innovative technical and creative solutions. This shift marks the end of a traditional compositional era and the beginning of a new creative phase, characterized by collaboration, an abundance of musical material, and the increasing marginalization of traditional musical notation. While the findings are not universally applicable, they offer valuable methodological insights for studying contemporary film music.



# Signs of Innovation in European Cinema.

## Electronic Music in Antonioni and Tarkovsky

Roberto Calabretto, University of Udine



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In the process of the emancipation of film music that took place in the first decades after World War II, the filmography of Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky offers multiple points of interest. Tarkovsky's well-established relationship with Eduard Artemyev, matured within the Moscow studio, allowed Tarkovsky to use electronic sounds in some of his films, such as *Solaris*, in a manner far removed from the worn-out standards of science-fiction cinema. Likewise, Antonioni found in the music of Vittorio Gelmetti a suitable aural commentary on the mental disorders of the protagonist in *Deserto rosso*, inserting electronic music into the palette to describe the horizons of the inner human psyche.

In both cases, the presence of noise is effectively combined with music to create a very complex sound texture.

In the years after The Second World War, cinema began accommodating the novelties of the musical experiments carried out by the avant-garde. Despite remaining the preferred point of reference for directors and composers, traditional soundtracks based on the American-derived thematic and symphonic framework occasionally began giving way to electronic music. New universes of sound are capable of entertaining more complex, and in our opinion more interesting relationships with moving images. And more. Rather than the chamber or symphonic music then in vogue, many composers and directors became convinced that electronic music was the true film music.

Luciano Berio, one of the fathers of the Italian avant-garde, had perfectly foreseen that thanks to its freedom and permeability to different psychological situations, electro-acoustic music could be adapted to the soundtracking of radio and television scripts and movie scores.

In one of his famous texts, he writes:

*The musical successes of various experiments conducted on film soundtracks are well known; one need only mention the names of Honegger and Guy Bernard. [...] Walt Disney's cartoons, for example, are veritable anthologies of the occasional use of the tape recorder to achieve certain effects. [...] We know, in fact, that*

### Keywords

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Eduard Artemyev

Electronic music and film

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*in practice, even having to write or just choose the background music for a film, radio or television script, most often results in a compromise between the psychological duration of the spoken text and the musical duration of rhythm, harmony, melody and timbre, i.e. the terms in which sound material is implemented. What we call rhythm, harmony, melody, and timbre that allow us to coordinate a musical fact, such as the music we hear from a tape recorder, can be made available in their free state, almost entirely free of any material identification and abuse by the same and comparable to sonic plasma, capable of conforming to any psychological duration. Understanding that this type of music is particularly suited to soundtrack radio, television and film scripts hardly requires a great leap of the imagination (Berio 1953, 11–13).*

These appeals, as yet subdued and largely unheeded, were joined by requests from enlightened filmmakers to rethink the functions of film music and make it play an active role and not just commentary or support for moving images. Emblematic, from this point of view, are the words of Michelangelo Antonioni who, during a debate, said:

*The music was asked to create a special atmosphere that helped the images reach the viewer more easily. This was, after all, the function of the old player piano in the days of silent film. The player piano in silent films served first to cover the noise of the projection machine, then to emphasise and give greater strength to the images passing over the screen in total silence. The relationship has changed a lot since then, but the music still serves that function in certain films today, one of external commentary, commentary intended to create a relationship between music and viewer, not between the music and the film (Antonioni 1994, 42).*

Elsewhere, he had insisted:

*It is rare for music to merge with images, it usually serves to numb the viewers, to prevent them from clearly appreciating what they see. All in all, I am rather against "musical commentary", at least in its present form. I find something old, something rancid in it. The ideal would be to create a wonderful soundtrack with noises and have it conducted by a conductor... Even if, in the end, perhaps the only one capable of doing so would be the director (Antonioni and Labarthe 1994, 127).*

These words echo those of other enlightened filmmakers, such as Alain Resnais, who in those years called for the need to avoid predictable synchronisation and emphatic and rhetorical emphasis,<sup>1</sup> and even more so, Robert Bresson, whose

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<sup>1</sup> "I think music is rarely used to reinforce the emotion of a scene; no, music replaces the emotion of a scene. At a given moment, the image will be almost neutral and the music will give the emotion; you can replace ten minutes of dialogue with three minutes of music and silent images" (Resnais 2002, 105). Accustomed to the demands of Hollywood cinema, when asked to collaborate on *Providence* (Alain Resnais, 1977),

admonition: "No accompanying, supporting or reinforcing music". "No music" would become famous (1992, 31).

In such a context, in which instances of renewal entailed a rethinking of the typology of sound commentary and its functions within the audiovisual plot, electronic music began taking its first steps.

It had already been used in the early years after The Second World War, albeit in a banal and predictable manner, in science-fiction films. One need only think of the famous *Forbidden Planet* by Fred M. Wilcox (1956), which had already made an association between sci-fi imagery and electronic sounds. The theremin emphasised an "other" state, a context different from everyday life and normality, and lent itself to becoming the sound of contact with something dark, threatening, the subconscious, or with the world "outside the world".<sup>2</sup> It would then take the mastery of Stanley Kubrick, who in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) wisely used György S. Ligeti's material, in this way freeing this cinematic genre from the humdrum sound clichés that Soviet films had long since been abandoned.

Here, electronic experiments coincided singularly with the love certain composers had for oriental music and the timbral qualities of its instruments. In a speech at an international conference dedicated to electroacoustic music held at the Teatro alla Scala on 20–21 November 1999, Eduard Artemyev, Andrei Tarkovsky's musical alter ego, began by quoting a Chinese religious philosopher from the IV century BC, Cguan Zsi.

*I started playing again, connecting the melody to natural life. The sounds followed one another haphazardly, without taking shape, as in the parts of the forest's melody. Spreading widely, but without exceeding in extension, the dusky, vague, almost mute melody came out of nowhere, and stopped in the deep darkness. Some called it dying, others call it flowering. In the movement, in the flowing, it vanished, moving, not clinging to the constant. In the world, they doubted it, leaving it to wise men to study... Listen carefully: the sounds of this music you cannot hear, its form you cannot see; looking carefully, it can fill the sky, the earth as well, embracing six poles with it (Artemyev 2002, 53–54).*

Artemyev, Tarkovsky's favourite musician as we shall see, had later commented that in these words "could be taken as a sort of manifesto of contemporary music, a proclamation that the material of electronic music extends to the entire

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Miklós Rozsa was always reproached for using anachronistic ways of emphatically underlining images. "No synchronisation, please. I don't want any synchronisation" — this was the director's admonition during these discussions.

**2** The use of the theremin has had a long history in cinema, and unique homage has even been paid to its memory. In 1994, in the film *Ed Wood* dedicated to him, Tim Burton entrusted the musical arrangement to Howard Shore in the intention of bringing back the theremin, an instrument that was mainly used in Hollywood as an effect for flying saucers. Regarding Wilcox's film, see Wierzbicki (2005). On the use of the theremin in cinema, see Magni (2002, 17–18), and Doerschuk (1994, 48–51).

audible sound spectrum" (Artemyev 2002, 54).<sup>3</sup> The composer consequently avoided the contrasts then in vogue between electronic and acoustic music by inviting us to find points in common, likewise in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* where its music is uniquely blended with the pages of Johann Sebastian Bach becoming the undefined voice of Nature.

On the other hand, in 1945 even Alfred Hitchcock, in *Spellbound*, had shown how effective the theremin could be in interpreting the states of estrangement and deviance that crowd the narrative of this masterpiece. Twenty years later, in 1964, Michelangelo Antonioni used Vittorio Gelmetti's music in *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*) to describe the mental distress of Giuliana, the film's protagonist in constant prey to phobias and fears. Electronic music was therefore destined to become the voice of a very specific state of the human condition, the furthest thing possible from being the paladin of an unreal science-fiction universe. As we shall see, a number of enlightened filmmakers who were able to grasp the scope of the new technologies appearing on the cinematic scene at the time would bear these functions in mind.

## FROM THE THEREMIN TO THE SYNKET AND THE ANS

The theremin, of course, is a forerunner instrument of those that would soon be used in setting up film soundtracks. In Paris, the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* had begun devoting a small area of their research to a system for film applications in those years.<sup>4</sup> In these Parisian studios, a smooth-band magnetophone that could work synchronously with 16 mm film was used, thus significantly facilitating the composer's task. In contrast to what was happening in Italy at the time, applied music—for film, stage, ballet, radio and television—was a relevant and significant part of the group's activities, although this activity had not yet led to an adequate theoretical reflection on the relationship of music to images.

In these same years in Italy, Paolo Ketoff had created a particular synthesiser,

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**3** Eduard Artemyev has accompanied Tarkovsky's cinema since *Solaris* (1972). In many interviews, the composer has stated that he never knew why the director broke off his partnership with Ovchinnikov, hypothesising problems of personal, rather than professional nature. He went on to say that he admired Ovchinnikov's music, extolling the two scores written for Tarkovsky. As regards his biography, see the interviews by Annelise Varaldiev (n.d.), Tatyana Egorova (n.d.), Galina Drubachevskaya (n.d.), Lilia Suslova (n.d.), Archie Patterson (n.d.) and Margarita Katunjan (n.d.) on the composer's website. Some interviews with the composer and his filmography also appear there. On the collaboration with Tarkovsky, see the interview in Turovskaja (1991, 83–89). On the involution of Artemyev's poetics, see instead the timely and shrewd observations of Pestalozza (1987, 175–79).

**4** The complex problems and relationships Pierre Schaeffer and the GRM had with the audiovisual universe cannot be dealt with here. For more detail see Bizzaro (2011).

the Synket (SYNthesizer-KEToff) that was widely used later in Antonioni's films. Ketoff saw himself as a luthier serving musicians always ready to experiment with new solutions and devise new instruments. These qualities made him highly sought after in the world of cinema which, as Luigi Pizzaleo recalls, "required quick and effective solutions to any technical problem [and those in which] Ketoff had been able to exercise his virtues as a 'genial inventor', ready to modify existing devices or create new ones to meet the needs of the moment" (2014a, 22).<sup>5</sup> Ketoff presented himself as the "link between otherwise distant musical experiences and passageway between two macro-areas of musical practice: film and the neo-avant-gardes".<sup>6</sup> From this point of view, he had succeeded in collaborating with the sound engineer Federico Savina, who remembered him as "one of those artists who knew how to cope with any need" in demonstration of how science could be comparable to sound craftsmanship in his mastery. "If he needed a loudspeaker," Savina continued, "he would build it immediately, without going out to buy one"<sup>7</sup> in proof of his eagerness and readiness that suited him perfectly to the universe of film music production.

After devising with Gino Marinuzzi, the soul of Rome's Studio R7, the *Fonosynth* instrument that tried to combine research with "commercial" activities, including those involving music in the universe of moving images, Ketoff created his unique synthesiser Synket on commission from the American Academy in Rome in 1964.<sup>8</sup>

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**5** For a closer look at the Synket, see Bernardo (1967), Eaton (1967), Pizzaleo (2014b), Zaccone (2005).

**6** "The peculiar status of the figure of Paolo Ketoff, a sound engineer esteemed internationally both in the world of cinema (there are many anecdotes: Roman Vlad recalls that 'if there was a problem, we turned to Ketoff', and on one occasion, Dimitri Tiomkin explicitly wanted him at his side for a month in London), and in avant-garde experimentation (he lent his support to practically every composer with electro-acoustic interests in the area around Rome: Gino Marinuzzi Jr, Domenico Guaccero, Egisto Macchi, Walter Branchi, and Franco Evangelisti with whom, together with the other genial technical presence of Guido Guiducci, he would set up Studio R7 in 1968; Ennio Morricone, who is credited with the initial suggestion for the composition of *Suoni per Dino* in 1969, for viola and two live magnetophones, for which Ketoff also handled the technical aspects of the first performance; Vittorio Gelmetti, the composers resident at the American Academy in Rome, and again, Mario Peragallo and Gianfranco Maselli), makes him an emblematic figure of the interweaving of levels in the music scene in Rome in the late 1950s and the following decade" (Corbella 2009, 65).

**7** Savina emphasises how Ketoff was his fundamental guide in learning the secrets of cinematic sound universes and how standing next to him, he could appreciate the "wide sound" (Calabretto and Savina 2022, 29).

**8** "An instrument capable of arousing the enthusiasm and inventiveness of a generation of Roman composers, having survived the soundtracks of films and television dramas, the Synket lives again today in a specimen restored to full efficiency by the efforts of the Centro Ricerche Musicali di Roma at the Paolo Ketoff laboratory recently inaugurated at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia. [...] The Synket is a compact synthesiser consisting of three subtractive synthesis modules with an equaliser and the possibility of routing external sources into the signal circuit. The conformation of its sound depends largely on the settings of a series of switches located on each module and, to a lesser extent, on 'patching' (i.e. that complex system of connecting inputs and outputs typical of the 'heroic' family of machines like the Moog or Buchla). Like the

The functioning of Synket can be summarised in these terms:

*The instrument can be divided into five main sections.*

*1) Sound Combiner. The "Sound Combiner", as Ketoff called it, is the Synket's main sound-generating section. There are three such modules in the instrument, each one contains a square-wave oscillator, three flip-flop type frequency dividers, a high-shelf filter, a bell filter and three modulators (i.e. three low-frequency oscillators). The square-wave oscillator can be controlled by keyboard or by potentiometer, choosing one of the two control sources. The oscillator signal will then be split into two parallel branches, one going to the switch which will insert it into the remaining circuit of the module, the other sent to three frequency dividers (normally they divide the signal by two, so the output signal will have a halved frequency) placed one in series with the other, whose respective output can be sent to the remaining by the respective switches. The use of these four switches produces the sum of four-square waves placed at an octave interval from each other. It is possible to take the frequency divided signals from the appropriate side outputs. Likewise, it is possible to change the division ratio of the frequency dividers via switches, thus creating very rich spectra both harmonically and inharmonically. Returning to the description of the circuit, a white noise can be sent into the remainder, along with the four-square wave signals, which can be activated via switches. The sum of the signals will then pass through a bell filter and a high-frequency filter: for the bell filter, you have Frequency and Resonance controls, while for the high-frequency filter you have a control for their attenuation.*

*2) Modulator section. There are three modulators and they can work simultaneously or independently. They are equipped with oscillators with frequencies ranging from 1 to 20 Hz, which allow various parameters within the circuit to be varied, such as volume, bell filter cut-off frequency, and square-wave oscillator frequency, and they can be activated individually or simultaneously. Finally, it is possible to reverse the modulation. The modulators are controlled two potentiometers for speed and volume. The modulators can be synchronised with external signals by sending them to the appropriate input or taken from the output to be inserted into other sections of the instrument circuit. The last potentiometer controls the Sound Combiner's overall volume. Unlike those mentioned above, these modulators have a separate module. These are low-frequency oscillators that influence the amplitude of the signal, each with a characteristic waveform: the speed and intensity of each modulator can be adjusted, and the modulation destination can be selected, i.e. the Sound Combiner they will influence. The side outputs permit the output of modulator 2 and 3 signals.*

*3) Multiband Filter. The multiband filter consists of a series*

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Fonosynth, also the Synket meets the need for speed and effectiveness typical of so-called 'applied music' in producing both sound effects and music in the more traditional sense and is aimed at a public interested in obtaining results even without specific scientific training" (Pizzaleo 2021).

of bandpass filters. These have their respective centre-band frequencies one octave apart, it is, in fact, often called an Octave Filter. The cut-off frequency of the individual filters was indicated on the faders of some, so it may be assumed that it is around the same for all of them: 40 | 80 | 160 | 32 | 640 | 1.28 | 2.560 | 5.120 | 10.240. The selected band can be amplified by moving the potentiometers upwards or the amplitude can be diminished even to zero by moving them downwards.

4) Matrix. This is a jack matrix with different inputs and outputs positioned at different stages of the Synket circuit.

5) Keyboard. The Synket keyboard is divided into three smaller keyboards of two octaves each, each of these controls the frequency of the square wave oscillator of its respective Sound Combiner. The keyboards cover a total of four octaves in which the first octave of the lower keyboard corresponds to the lowest and the second octave of the higher keyboard corresponds to the highest: the first octave of each keyboard corresponds to the second octave of the previous one. The lateral potentiometers let the pitch of the respective keyboard be varied in order for vibrato or glissati to be performed. The 'moving keyboard' system lets vibratos be performed (by pressing any key and moving the keyboard sideways). To tune the keyboard, the individual pegs on the back must be moved, each of which corresponds to a key: this is a variable resistance system, in which the resistance value decided by the peg chosen, and therefore by the key played. The priority of the notes, in the case of several notes played, is given to the lowest one (Paradisi 2022).

The Synket was widely used on the Roman music scene in the 1960s and 1970s, both in film and concert. During these years, Ketoff participated in making the soundtracks of films such as *Kapo* by Gillo Pontecorvo (1960), *General Della Rovere (Il Generale della Rovere)*, Roberto Rossellini, 1959), *L'Avventura* by Michelangelo Antonioni (*L'avventura*, 1960), *Bandits of Orgosolo (Banditi a Orgosolo)*, Vittorio De Seta, 1961) and others.<sup>9</sup> John Eaton requested his services in 1968 for the *Concert Piece for Synket & Orchestra*.

The most interesting news, however, came from the Moscow Experimental Studio of Electronic Music, where Eduard Artemyev worked with Andrei Tarkovsky, and both were assisted by sound engineer Semën Litvinov.<sup>10</sup> The

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**9** Recently, the Santa Cecilia National Academy in Rome organized a music workshop dedicated to Ketoff. See Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (n.d.). The Academy also preserves a short video in which Michele dall'Ongaro remembers Ketoff and his synthesiser and short biographical notes recalling his main film collaborations: "At the same time, he took part in the construction of the equipment of the Titanus dubbing plant in Via Margutta; the company also assigned him the soundtrack of two important productions in 1953: *Pane, amore e fantasia* by Luigi Comencini and *Café Chantant* by Camillo Mastrocinque. From 1953 to 1957, he was entrusted with the RCA recording studio. In 1957, he went to work in the studios of Fonolux S.p.A., where he remained until April 1965 as technical director, then—after three years at NIS Film in the same role—he became a freelance recording studio designer and manufacturer of electronic music instruments, an activity he had already pursued since the early 1960s".

**10** In addition to Artemyev, members of the Studio working from 1960 to around

studio's research was based on the ANS synthesiser devised by Evgeny Murzin.<sup>11</sup> Almost as if to establish an ideal continuity from the sound-colour synergic principles of the organ of lights to the photoelectronic transformation of the graphic sign, the ANS (the initials of Aleksander Nikolayevich Skriabin) had been conceived by a group of researchers that formed around Murzin and provided common ground in the research of the musicians at the Moscow Experimental Studio of Electronic Music. Skriabin was a real model for these composers and, even more so, for Murzin, who was fascinated by his music and the combinations of sound and the harmonic aggregations within it, which provided an inspiration for his own sound research (Murzin 2008).

Contrary to what was happening on the Italian music scene, where the avant-garde movements at the Studio of Phonology in Milan kept fairly apart from the cinema and the musical experiments conducted in it, in Russia, the seventh art was a field of experimentation open to the contributions of new technologies. By no coincidence, in an essay addressing the problems in the use of this synthesiser in film music, David Beer emphasises the importance of technological components in designing sound for moving images (Beer 2006, 101).

The main feature of the ANS was to create sounds using the photo-optical method already widely adopted in cinema that allowed sound to be synthesised from an artificially-drawn wave.<sup>12</sup> In this case, the photo-optical generator was designed in the form of several rotating glass discs with 144 sound tracks corresponding to pure tones. The disc was formed of concentric tracks: the one closest to the centre had the lowest frequency, the highest was at the edge. Five similar discs with different rotation speeds produced 720 pure tones that Murzin had derived from a segmentation of the frequency continuum based on psychoacoustics studies.<sup>13</sup> This system was based on the desire to overcome the limits of the equal temperament in order to ideally approach, as we have seen above, oriental cultures, through research that in some ways similar to effort being made by the spectralists. [Fig. 1, next page]

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1980 include Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Edison Denisov, Oleg Buloshkin, Stanislav Kreitchi, Schandor Kallosh, and Alexander Nemtin, who dedicated his life to the completion of Aleksander Skriabin's *Mysterium*. Schnittke, also known in the world of film music, made use of the ANS in the early 1960s as support for traditional instrumentation. A collection of compositions for ANS can be found in *Electroshock Presents: Electroacoustic Music Volume IV: Archive Tapes Synthesizer ANS 1964-1971* (Electroshock Records, ELCD 011, 1999); electronic works by Oleg Buloshkin; Sofia Gubaidulina; Eduard Artemyev; Edison Denisov; Alfred Schnittke; Alexander Nemtin; Schandor Kallosh; Stanislav Kreitchi.

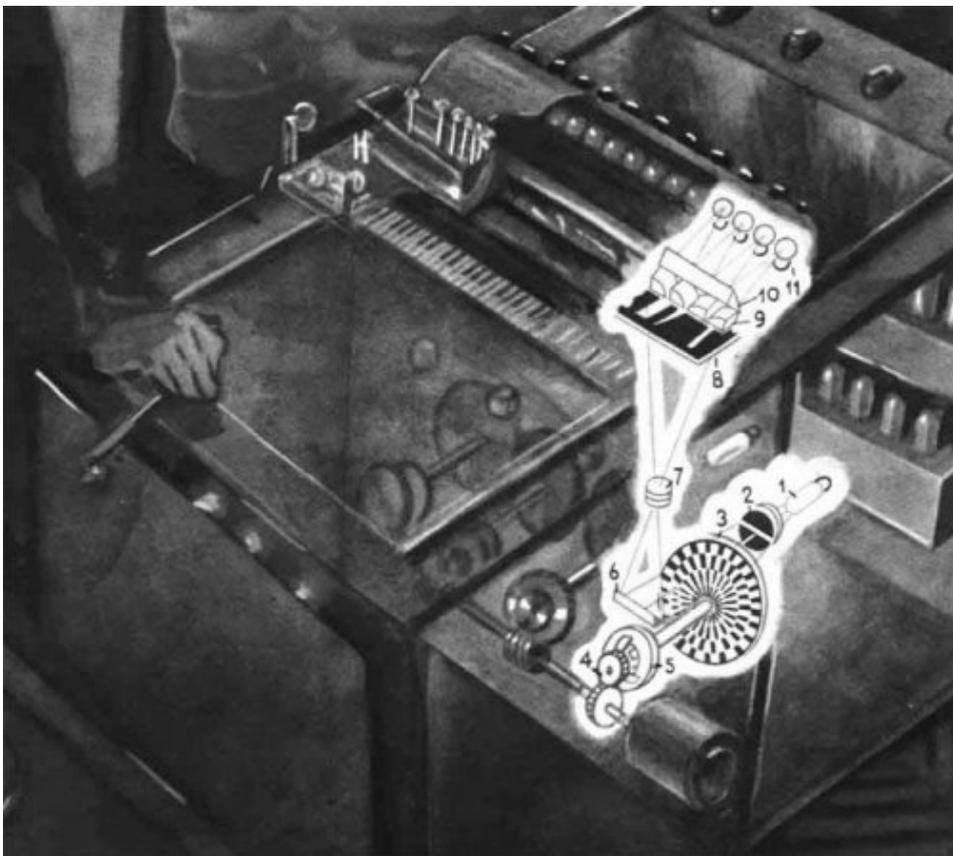
**11** As regards the ANS, see: Beer (2006, 103-08) and Kreitchi (1997).

**12** It must be remembered that cinema makers had been thinking about hand-drawn sound technique since the early decades of the XX century and that in this context Murzin was part of a tradition that also had roots in Russia.

**13** The precise of this subdivision allowed a very high number of sounds to be synthesised in the octave. The premises for the creation of this synthesiser were presented by Murzin himself at the International Conference on Electronic Music Studies in Florence in June 1968.



Fig. 1.  
The ANS synthesiser.



In order to select the sounds necessary for the timbral mixtures of a work, an interface was created—Murzin even called it a “score”—consisting of a sheet of glass covered with black mastic on which scrapings were made to allow light to penetrate selectively. The light beam passed through the interface and the light was modulated by the discs and picked up by a photocell.

The use of mastic also allowed the immediate correction of the resulting sounds: the parts of the plate that generated superfluous sounds were recoated so that the missing ones could be added. The reading speed of the “score” could be adjusted to a complete stop, allowing the composer to work directly and materially with the sound production. Twenty bandpass amplifiers were located on the left side of the main front panel. There was a readout and pitch-control device at the centre of the synthesiser; the operating area was on the right-hand black board; the controls for the twenty bandpass amplifiers and a lever for controlling the tempo was on the lower front panel.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike other synthesisers used in the film world, the ANS offered itself as an instrument capable of creating a soundtrack based on the same constituent elements as the moving images. This is why it was easily perceived as an instrument for the creation of music designed exclusively and specifically for film production. From the very beginning, Murzin had, in fact, conceived the ANS as a music collection tool designed exclusively for such purpose, cinema, in particular, and not just another way to reproduce acoustic music. Last but not least, in “hand-drawn sound” he saw the possibility of giving the composer of the music total control.

*For the first time in the history of music, ANS made it possible to bring together three processes: composing, recording, and performing music. The transition from sound to noise and back again, the formation of complex combinations of harmonic and non-harmonic overtones, “echoing”, noise sounds of different contours and lengths, as well as the possibility of combining various techniques while maintaining control over a graphically recorded score made the ANS a unique studio instrument for composers in its time (Novichkova 2016, 256).*

With Murzin’s death in 1972, the Moscow laboratory was closed and the research it had begun came to an abrupt halt and was entrusted only to the goodwill of Stanislav Kreichi and Andrei Smirnov. The ANS continued its life at the University and then the Moscow Conservatory.

## RED DESERT BY MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

In a context with such portent and signs of innovative signals, these new instruments could be put to excellent use in the sound research of some

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**14** Time ratios depend on the performance of the reading encoding and can be varied without changing the pitch of the timbre and the sounds.

particularly enlightened directors. Antonioni and Tarkovsky, two directors we have chosen as reference points here, succeeded surprisingly well in perceiving the potential of these new languages and instruments by combining them with their own poetics of sound. From this point of view—and as we will see in the case studies presented in this paper—their filmography offers a precious asset in investigating the new sound universes that would be widely used in cinema in the coming decades.

Antonioni's *Red Desert* represents a truly outstanding moment in the history of music for films. As Carlo Di Carlo aptly remarks, Antonioni gave electronic music "an expressive function, as a stylistic and rhythmic cadence of the image [...] to be consumed in the artistic product" (Di Carlo 1988, 181). Antonioni's assistant director, his consultant for musical choices, clearly perceived how far the functions that electronic music is called to serve in Antonioni's cinema is from usual purposes pursued in those years. Di Carlo refers to its "expressive function"—as in *The Cry* (*Il grido*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1957), in the scene where Rosina, after seeing mentally ill people on the loose, runs away in tears from her father who had previously scolded her. He also mentions an equally important stylistic function, such as in *L'Avventura*, in which the sound of the sea, translated and processed on reels of magnetic tape, punctuates long sequences in the central part of the film. Masterful, we might add, is the synthesis of electronic sounds and urban noises that accompanies the vertical tracking shot as the opening credits of *The Night* (*La notte*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961) scroll, that testify to the sound research Antonioni had been conducting for some time.

The music of *Red Desert*, beside the short vocal piece composed by Giovanni Fusco, is by Vittorio Gelmetti. For our purposes, it is worth remembering that in those years Gelmetti had developed a conception of film music in perfect harmony with that of Antonioni. In his many essays dedicated to cinematic sound commentary,<sup>15</sup> he had outlined certain objectives to which composers should address their research in the hopes of developing something for film soundtracks that resembled the experimental music that had led to the erasure of the distinction between sound and noise.

*Only to the extent that all distinctions vanish between music and sound effects, between dialogue and international soundtrack, considering all sound events as music or in other words, all music as a non-privileged sound event, only under these conditions can a discourse on the possibility of a sound film begin to be established (Gelmetti 2000, 6).<sup>16</sup>*

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**15** Among these, we recall (Gelmetti 1964a, 146–47; 1964b, 570–73; 1967, 173–76; 1968, 21–28; 1985; 2000, 6–8).

**16** "I have often stated that cinema does not need 'music' but 'sound'. And this leads us to consider music in its own right, as an autonomous and self-sufficient organism, as the most extraneous form possible in the process of forming the visual product" (Gelmetti 2000, 6).

It was Di Carlo, with whom the composer had collaborated on the documentary *Terezin* (1964), who introduced Gelmetti to Antonioni who, at first, seems to have thought of Karlheinz Stockhausen instead.<sup>17</sup> “Fragments of my electronic compositions that continue the sonic presence of machine noises (refineries, ships, etc.)”, the musician confided in an interview, later adding that, for the film’s soundtrack, the music was not applied “as it was”, as one sometimes reads, but rather adapted over a long series of work sessions. “I spent a month together with Antonioni adapting and editing. Antonioni, who welcomed suggestions, was eventually satisfied” (Comuzio 1988, 13).<sup>18</sup>

Gelmetti proposed two of his compositions to the director: *Treni d’onda a modulazione d’intensità* and *Modulazioni per Michelangelo*.<sup>19</sup> With the first composition, the composer had experimented for the first time with the possibility of applying methods and procedures derived from scientific research with the intention of pursuing a new constructiveness and rational control over the work of the artist.<sup>20</sup> As regards the second composition, *Modulazioni per Michelangelo* (1964), it should be recalled that it was commissioned by the committee created to celebrate Michelangelo with a sound background for

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**17** This hypothesis is supported by the presence of certain records of Stockhausen’s music in the director’s library.

**18** This clarification stemmed from Comuzio’s question: “Antonioni really wanted to pursue his tendency towards the abstraction of music and the mechanicalness of sounds, and to make it clear that objects had the upper hand over feelings. That is why he wanted the music to violently detach itself from Fusco’s romantic, nostalgic, dreamy vocals (sung by Cecilia Fusco, his daughter) of the beach sequence on the island. Has your music been applied to the film in the same way?” (Comuzio 1988, 13). This experience was to prove fundamental for the composer himself and the development of his musical poetics. “The next step (and here the influence of the cinema extends from editing to the very quality of the music, i.e. from structure to syntax) was the transition to the use of material that was, so to speak, ‘prefabricated in style’ (typical of film music)” (Gelmetti 1969, 35). On the genesis of the composer’s collaboration with Antonioni, see also Gelmetti (1971, 45).

**19** A census of the audio sources of *Treni d’onda* was proposed by Giovanni De Mezzo in his work mentioned above. For an in-depth study of the work, see also De Mezzo (2005, 535–75).

**20** During a debate devoted to “the methodology of scientific research in artistic techniques”, Gelmetti had described the close links between his own compositional choices and the possibilities offered by sound materials of electronic origin. “Now the instrument with which this investigation can be conducted undoubtedly seems to me to be formal logic, first of all because it frees us from that sort of mimesis of the performer’s gesture that has conditioned production in this field for so long. By this I mean that the adoption of compositional techniques derived from earlier music (i.e. instrumental music), as a type of ideation, has led us to formulate musical ideas that were essentially nothing more than mimesis of instrumental music. Exactly this new type of material we use now that we order prefabricated excludes in itself, as hypothesis, precisely this mimesis. But this cannot be done on the basis of choices of taste alone because taste is conditioned by our entire cultural acquisition, and so we needed an instrument that would guarantee this type of investigation using rational structures. The working hypotheses formulated in this way are working hypotheses that must be experimentally verified or discarded: in this sense, there is, evidently, a cognitive attitude towards sound material that is scientific in nature and therefore with hypotheses that can be verified or rejected” (Gelmetti et al., 1964, 18).

the room dedicated to his drawings of the Florentine fortifications, the central moment of the critical exhibition on Michelangelo's works staged in 1964 and curated by Paolo Portoghesi on the occasion of fourth centenary of the famous artist's death.<sup>21</sup> The design of this electronic piece continues the research begun previously and, as a fact of extreme importance in the course of Gelmetti's poetics, represents an initial point of intersection between a theoretical moment and a practical occasion; a circumstance destined to be renewed and expanded over time.<sup>22</sup>

After the running of the opening credits in which the elements of the soundtrack—Gelmetti's music, Fusco's vocals and noises from the industrial soundscape of Ravenna—are presented, Gelmetti's music intervenes a few times during the film following the constants of Antonioni's poetics that gives music a sober and non-invasive presence and comments on the psychic turmoil of Giuliana, the protagonist, thus becoming her ideal leitmotif.

To this end, Antonioni comments:

*I would like to say that the neurosis I wanted to describe in Red Desert concerns the question of adaptation more than anything else. There are people who can adapt and others who cannot, perhaps because they are too closely bounded to structures, rhythms of life that are now outdated. Giuliana's problem is this. What causes the character's crisis is the irremediable gap, the mismatch between her sensibility, her psychology, and the rhythm imposed on her. It is a criticism that not only concerns her epidermic relations with the world, her perception of noises, colours, and the coldness of the people around her, but the whole system of values (education, morals, religion) that are now outdated and no longer serve to sustain her. She therefore finds herself having to completely renew herself as a woman (Antonioni and Godard 1994, 256).<sup>23</sup>*

Gelmetti's music appears when, in the middle of the night, Giuliana is gripped in an anguish that seems to suffocate her, so she goes down the stairs clinging to the banister and trudging towards the landing. Here, Gelmetti's modulations are enriched by mixtures of intensity-modulated sine waves. [Fig. 2, next page]

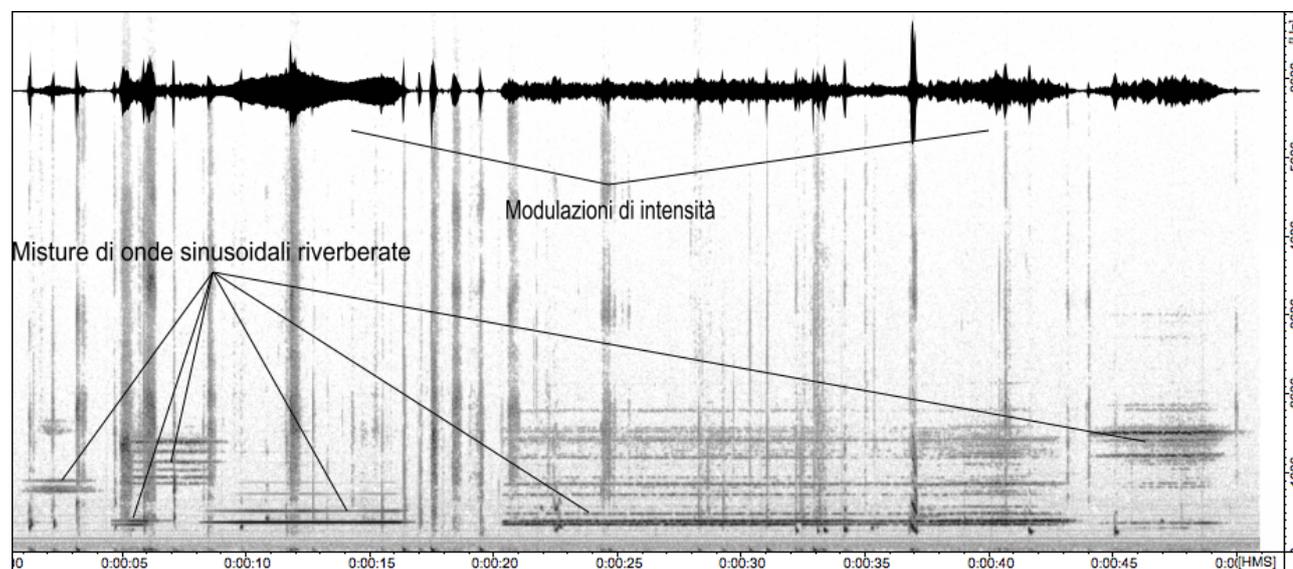
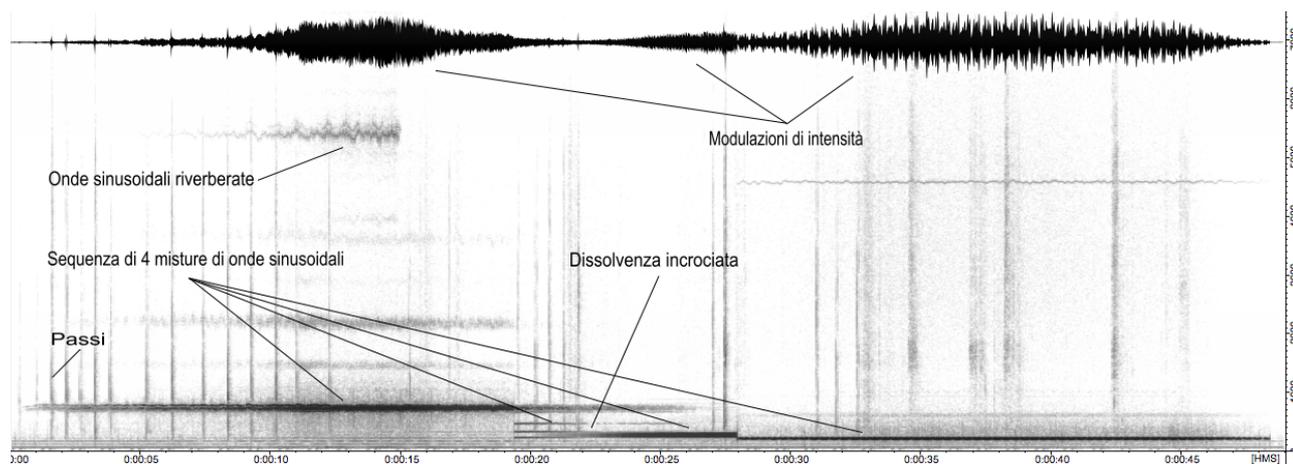
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**21** Gelmetti dedicated a number of texts to describing the work: Gelmetti (1964e; 1964d; 1964c, 81–82).

**22** "It is no coincidence that in first piece of writing, the composer had identified three perspectives opened up by this research: a) the mutation of the destination of the finished musical object; b) the functionalisation of the research; c) the possibility of an interdisciplinary coordination of the research, hitherto conducted in specific fields, on the basis of the operational elements of formal logic" (Gelmetti 1964e, 71).

**23** "However, it is clear that certain psychological effects can be better achieved with a language that comes from the avant-garde than with everyday language (precisely because the language of the avant-garde, among a large stratum of the public, is less consumed)" (Gelmetti 1971, 45).

Fig. 2.  
The scene's analysis



Giuliana reappears together with Corrado when she crosses a street in Ravenna next to the stall of an old man stirring roasted chestnuts or, finally, in the scenes in which she grapples with her son's apparent illness. In the latter case, the reference to *Treni d'onda* is evident.

Her mental disorder makes Giuliana's vision of reality a subjective one that charges the filmic language with other elements of expression,<sup>24</sup> such as the colour that reveals the world as perceived by the protagonist. In this context, electronic music plays a relevant function and moves within an ambiguous condition. In the course of the film, its recurrences in some moments seem to be external to the protagonist's mind, therefore diegetic, and address the viewer to manifest her state of unease; in others, they are clearly Giuliana's own sound hallucinations without any justification instead.

The long sequence in the hotel room where Giuliana visits Corrado comes to mind: the music is openly extradiegetic and punctuates the images in perfect synchronism. At the same time however, the music can also be interpreted as a transfiguration of a reality from outside. At the further occurrence of a sound, in fact, Giuliana interrupts Corrado's attempts and turns her gaze from him, almost as if searching for the origin of this sound and inviting the imagination of a possible location off-screen. This possibility is promptly disregarded in the shots that follow, however, as Giuliana, at the window, draws back the curtain to reveal a glimpse of Ravenna's Piazza del Duomo and not the harbour one would expect to see. A few moments later, the two are in bed, motionless in an unreal pink light. The whole room is pink.

These swings between diegesis and extradiegesis allow the music to assume a mediated level, using a famous category of Sergio Miceli's,<sup>25</sup> to define the auditory hallucinations and sonic ghosts stirring in Giuliana's mind. A far cry from the stereotypes crowding cinema at the time, this use of electronic music playing within the different levels of the film proves most effective in interacting with the particular nature of its images and dramaturgy.

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**24** Using an effective definition pertinent to Pasolini borrowed from literary criticism, we could define the procedure "indirect free subjective". To this end, see Pasolini (1977, 179–81).

**25** It will be useful to briefly recall the meaning of this category used by Miceli in his analyses, which proved particularly effective in those dedicated to Nino Rota's soundtracks for Fellini in which internal and external levels matched the oppositional diegetic level and extradiegetic pair level used in linguistics. Speaking of this pair, Miceli—and here lies the peculiarity of his own code—also speaks of mediated level to indicate "the substitution of verbal language with musical language. [...] One could speak, therefore, of a double empowerment: that which is inherent in musical language and capable of acting on the listener regardless of the logical contingencies of the narration; that which arises from the interaction, capable of placing the spectator into communication with the inner dimension of the characters, who themselves become musical instruments of some kind" (Miceli 1994b, 9). The greatest interactive potential of music with filmic image lies in this function. For an in-depth study of the theory of levels, see again Miceli (1994a, 517–44).

## TARKOVSKY, SOLARIS, ANS

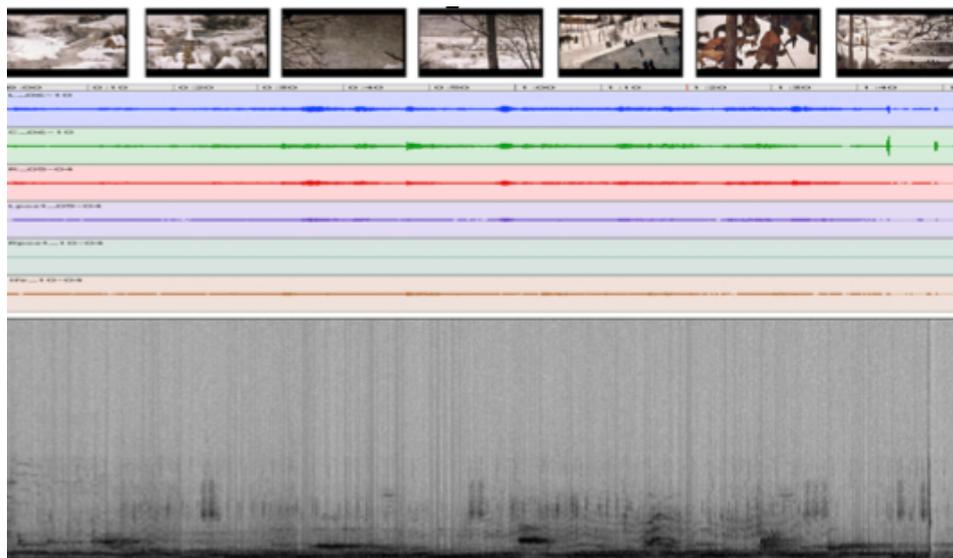
In Tarkovsky's cinema, electronic music is an element of primary importance within the soundscape which, as is well known, consists of many pages of repertoire, especially those of his beloved Bach, synthesis sounds, ambient noises or those recreated in post-production, and any other component capable of giving life to "totally new sound combinations", in the words of Edgar Varèse (1985). The path that led Tarkovsky to develop a soundscape like this is very complex and, above all, constantly evolving. If in the early films Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov's music embraced long segments of narrative, outlining the usual but still original thematic paths, Tarkovsky increasingly reduced its presence, almost as if he wanted to approach the myth of a film shot without music; If the soundtrack was initially an element in the film's narrative context, it then became an integral part of an overall sound system of this whole audiovisual reality, "disappearing as autonomous expression to become an element of a single sensory expression", as Antonioni (Antonioni and Billard 1994, 134) puts it.

Starting with *Solaris*, Tarkovsky began collaborating with Artemyev and the Moscow Experimental Studio of Electronic Music, inaugurating, as we have seen, a new phase in the sound poetics of his own cinema. The many interviews given by Artemyev on his collaboration with Tarkovsky reveal how they worked together on film sound design. The director, Artemyev complains, never attended the recording sessions while he scrupulously followed the post-production stages in which the music was joined to the images. The pre-production stages were very difficult and he would continually select the recorded material and very often only use a fraction of what had been created. Artemyev, on the other hand, always read the film script and analysed the filmed material but never participated in the shooting. This is why discussions and confrontation similar to what happens in any music workshop arose only in post-production.

In the course of the film, electronic music is the privileged sound language to enter into perfect symbiosis with the images. This is therefore real film music: "THE WORLD OF SOUNDS organised in film in a real way" (Tarkovsky 1995, 174, 146. Capitals are featured in the original) as the director categorically affirms. Beyond instrumental music, an art so autonomous that it is hard for it to be completely dissolved in images and so its vertical relationships become effective with them, Tarkovsky is now aware of the infinite resources inherent in electronic music. Although he does not renounce the use of his beloved themes inspired by Bach or other pages of the repertoire, he now entrusts Artemyev and other musicians/sound engineers with almost all the sound accompaniment.

Far from being a sampler of effects typically used in science-fiction cinema or a sound commentary on images to describe conditions of unease as is in *Red Desert*, the electronic music in this film is instead the image of stasis, the absence of a linear evolution of time, and arises from a process of layering that produces an accumulation of sound events by juxtaposition and contrast without a line of development that can be perceived in the sequence of Kelvin's journey

to the planet. The constantly moving aquatic images are also accompanied by Artemyev's music, whereby "the ocean is revealed in film and music as an image of the cosmos, the image of the creator" (Salvestroni 2005, 95). The processes of layering that distinguish Artemyev's language are even more evident in the scene where Harey contemplates Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) in the library. The tonal layering here is very complex: on one hand, it presents the sounds the visual representation would seem to suggest: crows cawing, men's voices, dogs barking, bells tolling; on the other, "the electronic processing goes beyond the mere reproduction of sounds and noises, suggesting an organic link between the subject and the object of listening" (Fasolato 2004, 80).



(The scene's analysis<sup>26</sup>)

The music achieves a true acoustic subjectivity in which the sequence's sonic images is reflected in Harey's willingness to listen: "Harey, the phantom of the earth woman loved by Kelvin and generated from the most secret part of his mind 'undergoes' the fascination of the Bruegelian composition not only through the image, but also through the sound" (Fasolato 2004, 80).

The music, the great "wind harp", will become the icon of Nature in *Stalker* (*Stalker*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979) and throughout the film will not only serve the function of conducting motif but also prove to be inextricably linked to the Zone, resonating and vibrating in the soul of the listener. Over the course of the film, electronic music recurs continuously. Singular is the way it appears at the end of the three protagonists' journey on the railway carriage in which the noise of the wheels on the tracks is transformed with an electronic modulation to give voice to the Zone. In this sequence, the footage of the three travellers is focused on their heads, which are distinguished by a luminosity different from the background. The Zone reveals its presence only through the rhythmic metallic pounding of the wheels on the tracks: it is the space in which the sound spreads and, just when the seamless rhythmic beat turns into an electronic modulation,

<sup>26</sup> The sonogram of the scene is created by Alberto Carlesi.

the soundtrack unveils to us the change in space that has taken place.

*The viewer must sense that something is changing; it is reality that is changing at the expense of another. After thinking for a long time, I realised that this had to be represented by the noise of the rails. At first, I simply added reverberation, then I replaced the natural sound with an "artificial" one. [...] The result is that in the beginning the sound of wheels clattering is natural and later, with regular pauses, it takes on an increasingly alienated, otherworldly character (Petrov 1996).<sup>27</sup>*

The regularity of the knocks on the rails is gradually transformed into a sound fabric that makes the environment resonate in a radically different way: the viewer can now realise arrival in the Zone and perceive the new space-temporal dimensions established by the mysterious place where the protagonists are destined. Electronic music recurs during the three protagonists' journey as the "theme" accompanying the Stalker's ecstasy, in the film's central moment, and reappears in the epilogue when the little girl, the figure who most embodies the Zone, appears. Over the rumble of the train we hear the notes of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, music that the Russian Symbolists considered to be the path to ecstasy, but the fraternal communion and union with Nature offered by the music is promptly disrupted by the clatter of a train.

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<sup>27</sup> Philip Brophy's short review of the film's music also refers to this scene (Brophy 2004, 220–21).

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# The Cinematic Visions and Dreams of Edgard Varèse

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More than is apparent in most of the existing studies, Edgard Varèse's experience with electronic composition, is closely linked to a profound reflection on the relationship between music and film, almost as if the two artistic expressions were to be considered closely linked, almost inseparable. *Déserts* (1954), albeit only in intention, *La procession de Verges* (1955) and *Poème électronique* (1959) pioneeringly investigate different ways of understanding music in relation to moving images: from the fictional work to the documentary film, and to the multimedia experience. Only recently, now immersed in the digital production world of DAWs, does the new medium – as often happens – allow us to shed new light on the “old” analogue world and enable us to fully understand the visionary force of Varèse's aesthetics and the poignancy of his way of understanding music and images. The paper retraces the compositional parabola that involved the author for the last years of his life, setting it down in the recording studios and human environments in which he found himself operating, in order to reconstruct, through the dense network of relationships between technology and thoughts, the milieu that gave rise to one of the multiple roots of film music.

Edgard Varèse was one of the key figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century music. His contributions are of paramount importance in the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century musical thought; they have been analysed in many studies (e.g. Varèse 1972; Ouellette 1973; Vivier 1973; Mâche 1985; Clayson 2002; MacDonald 2003; Meyer and Zimmermann 2006) and continue to offer fertile ground for research, not only in the strictly musical sphere, but also in music for films (Calabretto 2010). The fact that this American composer was enthralled by the moving image is well known. This is amply demonstrated by his 1940 paper, “Organised Sound for the Sound Film” (Varèse 1940), in which he outlined his aesthetics of an experimental film music in the framework of his idea of *art-science* (Risset 2004) as an audio-visual work in which sound and image coexist without hierarchies and in a co-partnership that gives rise to a new form of art.

*Much of the recent criticism of the over-loud blaring of the conventional orchestra throughout the progress of the film—writes Varèse—comes from a realization—conscious or unconscious—that the emotional appeal of the music is too reminiscent of past*

## Keywords

Edgard Varèse

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*experiences and does not correspond directly enough to the actions taking place on the screen. It becomes either an irritant or an opiate rather than a cooperative factor for heightening dramatic effects, or underlying meanings specifically related to the particular moment of the picture, or intensifying emotion [...]. Between this sound score and the dramatic continuity the relation must be one of intimate and interacting connection; a relationship of unity, of form and of rhythm. But this weaving together of disparate sonorous and visual elements which will make of a film a unified whole cannot be achieved by the device of an imitative repetition of the visual (Varèse 1940, 204-7).*

Therefore

*the sound-film and the light-film, using two distinct mediums, should not attempt identity. They should complement each other. Often the most exciting moment of a dramatic situation will be far more enhanced by an abrupt, timely suspension of all sound than by any musical outburst. The simultaneous opposition of dynamics is a more effective device and I wonder that it is so seldom used (Varèse 1940, 206).*

Considering the year in which it was formulated, his avant-garde conception of film music does not seem to have particularly influenced the composers of the time, nor do the filmmakers of its time and the next generation seem to have considered his visions. The only honourable exception, perhaps, is Woody Allen's use of a fragment of *Equatorial* (1934) in *Another Woman* (1988). It is also true that the paucity and inaccessibility of Varèse's production in this field linked mainly to his electronic compositions makes it difficult to investigate this important aspect of his poetics, which must be reconstructed from fragmentary elements, aborted projects, personal notes, and unpublished materials.

## FOR A CRITIQUE OF VARÈSE'S AUDIOVISUAL SOURCES

Whereas much has been done in terms of collection and cataloguing, particularly by Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, to date the audiovisual sources of Varèse's electronic and image-applied production are scattered in many mainly European and North American archives. The most important institutions that preserve these documents include INA, Paris, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Casa Ricordi, RAI in Milan, the Institute of Sonology of the Conservatory of The Hague, the British Library, London, Columbia University, New York, the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., the Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, and Stanford University, not to mention the many private archives of all those ensembles that include his music in their repertoire.

The proliferation of copies, the audio of which is sometimes also reprocessed

to the tastes of the performer, is enormous and constantly increasing. This myriad of documents is matched by discographic editions, which include: *The complete works* published by DECCA in 1998; the classic *The Varèse album* published by Columbia in 1960, commissioned by the composer himself to publish performances of his works conducted by Robert Craft; *The Varèse record* published in 1977 by Finnadar (Catalogue number SR 9018) as a reissue of the famous EMS 401 record referenced by no less than Frank Zappa (Occhiogrosso, Zappa 1989), to which the *Déserts* interpolations were added later on. This record, which became legendary thanks to mention by Zappa (hence a source of certain commercial revenue), was in turn reissued first by Cherry Red Records on vinyl, and is now also for sale in a digital version on the iTunes Store (*Complete Works of Edgard Varèse*, vol. 1). There are also many concert recordings, often made in a "homemade" bootleg manner that can be easily found and downloaded after a brief search on the internet.

The scenario is complex indeed. Things are further complicated by the fact that most sound documents are jealously preserved by the archives that possess them and are not made available to scholars except in the form of digitised versions that most of the time can only be listened to through headphones. These conditions make critique impossible: not having the chance to analyse the original medium and gain access to all the information external to the signal it carries (presence of physical processing, text on the cases, enclosures, tape marks and models that enable dating, etc.) on one hand, and the impossibility of comparing the digitised signals with the software that allows their visualisation and analysis in different domains, on the other inevitably leads to interpretative fallacy. Just as there can be no philology of photocopies on which inks, stratifications, watermarks cannot be distinguished, there can be no criticism of audio sources based on copies whose specifications and parameters of the system that created them are ignored and stripped of the information that, in addition to the simple audio signal, the original document conveys (writings, attachments, dates, marks and models, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

Another complication arises from the absence in many archives of laboratories equipped to reproduce these documents with professional systems. Unlike textual documents, the content of which is immediately appreciable to the eye, audio documents that store the electronic component of the works under investigation are mute without a technological system that allows their reproduction: in other words, a system that re-establishes synchronism with the temporal scanning of the recording process and restores the aural component to the sound events recorded. The reproduction of an audiovisual document is not one without criticalities, *sine interpretatione*, and instead one that insistently poses the problem of the influence of interfaces on the characteristics of the object observed. The comfort of an abstract, finite and discrete encoding as

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<sup>1</sup> The problems regarding the preservation, restoration and critical edition of works fixed on analogue media have been extensively discussed in Cossettini and Orcalli (2023).

found in the world of alphabetical and musical writing that at least permits the separation of the investigation into the two spheres of signifier and signified is entirely lacking. In analogue recording, the acoustic universe is fixed in objects and traces of the sound events that in-formed them. Outside the world of the encoded "text", in the world of objects that become *simulacra* of reality, the instrument of observation and analysis that we use (in our case, audio equipment, firstly, followed by sound editing and analysis software) determines, with its characteristics, the form of the object under investigation. Different tape players, even when perfectly calibrated, will extract audio signals in slightly different manner; different software and different analysis algorithms will highlight different, sometimes even contradictory but mutually complementary (consider the indeterminacy of time/frequency) aspects of sound texture; different diffusion systems will orient our listening to different aspects of the sound. These investigations are always partial, and all of them are insufficient to respond to the complexity inherent in the world of sound recording, yet all of them are essential to "encircling" the object of investigation and providing a representation of it that we must remember is always incomplete.

Although electronic and film music lie in the domain of technical reproducibility, in our case, we are not dealing with serial productions but mainly with handcrafted objects that are often unique and do not undergo a subsequent industrial distribution process, unless they become part of a discographic project or of a soundtrack. Consider, for example, the multitrack audio formats that cannot be reproduced in the most common consumer formats: until the advent of the DVD, SACD, and Blue Ray—excluding the unfortunate season of the four-channel disc—audio formats on the commercial circuit for music and film allowed stereophonic sound diffusion at most. The spatialisation of multichannel works therefore had to be reduced, *flattened* on the frontal plane. For technical and aesthetic reasons, the phenomenology of the transmission of audio documents shows, particularly in the case of Varèse, a large number of variants resulting from both intentional and unintentional processes of copying and transformation (Cossettini 2013). The audio editing processes adopted by Varèse often feature the repetition of the same sound materials that cross the boundaries of the single work. In such a complex scenario historically established methods in philology and musicology often fail to capture the peculiarities of new audiovisual documents. It is impossible, for instance, to employ the equivalence and identity criteria used in textual bibliography studies—edition, impression, issue—in critical study, which are, if anything, more adherent to the study of discography and film production and dissemination. In the absence of general criteria for segmenting the sound continuum, the problem of collating these sources then arises. Is it possible to define an equivalence criterion for audio signal segments? The answer regards the crucial question of the conditions of possibility of the analysis of recorded music. The study of Varèse's electronic and film music must therefore necessarily go through the reconstruction of the systems that created it, intended as technological systems (study of the

equipment of the time) and human systems (study of the relationships between composer, performers, sound engineers, collaborators, directors, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

## DÉSERTS

Varèse's first electronic work, *Déserts*, for 14 winds (brass and woodwinds), 5 percussion players, 1 piano, and electronic tape (1954) also marks the composer's first encounter with film music, as if the two universes were immediately closely related and indivisible. The work consists of 4 instrumental parts interspersed with 3 electronic interpolations.

It is possible to reconstruct the early genesis of the work from an unpublished document written by Ann McMillan and preserved at the Department of Special Collections of the Green Library of Stanford University (MISC 278/1).

*He was at work on a piece he would call Déserts. [...] It was late in 1953, and except for minor changes, the instrumental part was completed. Fred Plaut, a friend and Columbia Records engineer, had helped record the raw material chosen for the tape part: factory sounds of cutting metal, drilling, hammering, and so on... more, including organ sounds, would be added. Now the sounds needed to be assembled on tape (McMillan [unpublished]).*

With these words, McMillan informs us of the beginnings of the composition of the electronic interpolations for *Déserts* and the soundtrack of the film *Around and About Joan Miró* (1955) by Thomas Bouchard (see below). McMillan, a musician and sound engineer, a student of Otto Luening, was a direct witness to the events. It was she, in fact, who worked with Varèse on the first editing of the preparatory materials. Varèse's electronics thus originated far from the professional production studios and instead at his home using an Ampex tape recorder purchased thanks to a fundraising organised by Al Copley, in which Louise Varèse, who did not want to be mentioned, also participated: "Varese wanted one of his own, the minute he saw the tape studio of Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky, which they had rigged up for their composing, in a small gray house on the edge of the Columbia University campus" (McMillan [unpublished]).

The composer's correspondence preserved at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel contain a few estimates from the Ampex audio inc., a company that permits the reconstruction of the recording studio used to record the first drafts of the interpolations, later reworked and completed in Paris at Radio France's Studio d'Essai. The equipment was already at Varèse's home in New York on 22 March 1953 when the composer wrote to his friend Al Copley: "Thanks for the machine. Since the 22<sup>nd</sup> the beautiful Ampex—amplifier—power supply box—

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on the methodology of musical analysis and audiovisual sources criticism, see Cossettini and Orcalli (2015).

microphone—loudspeakers are here, installed and ready to co-operate. I am eager for new technical means, anxious to give birth to new works. As soon as the score in progress is finished (and I must hurry as I have a deadline) I will plunge into new ventures".<sup>3</sup>

The material recorded with this system can be traced mainly to the noises that Varèse captured, ten years before Luigi Nono, in foundries, sawmills and other factories in Philadelphia. The lower quality of the audio, can be traced indicatively—but not definitively—mostly to the lack of drive stability of the Ampex 401A portable magnetophone which, unlike the newer models, mounted the speed control system (capstan/pinch roller) to the right of the head block.<sup>4</sup> The speed was therefore regulated before the tape was read or written; any instability of the drive motor inevitably escaped control. Also significant was the response of the Altec M11 condenser microphone system with a 21B capsule, which nominally guaranteed a working frequency band of 20 Hz to 15 kHz with a signal-to-noise ratio of 48 dB.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the limited means at his disposal, Varèse could only record a few preparatory materials; notes and working ideas. *Déserts* was still a long way off. The opportunity came in June 1953, when Pierre Schaeffer invited Varèse to the Studio d'Essai in Paris—the cradle of *musique concrète*—for the first time, to produce an electronic work with the means made available by French radio.

*Mr Maren tells us that we may look forward to a visit from you in the not distant future, we are delighted and are prepared to give you the warmest welcome—morally at least. Materially, as you probably realize, our means are extremely limited and not in proportion to the really enormous task we have had the imprudence and the audacity to undertake, lucky, however, in being helped to a certain extent by the Radio Française.*<sup>6</sup>

It was only in March 1954, however, that *Déserts* was explicitly mentioned. In reply to a letter from Schaeffer proposing that he participate with *Ionisation* in an international music festival organised by the Centre de Documentation de Musique Internationale scheduled for 21-27 October 1954, Varèse wrote: "au festival d'Octobre j'aimerais, si cela vous est agréable, voir figurer au programme en premier audition: *Déserts*. L'œuvre dure 20 à 22 minutes, est écrite pour un ensemble instrumental de 20 exécutants (bois, cuivres, percussion) avec brèves interpolations (2 channels) de fragments de son

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**3** Letter from Varèse to Al Coplay dated 23 March 1953 preserved at Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel. See also Wen-Chung 1966, 166.

**4** See also *Ampex Series 400 operation and maintenance manual*, Ampex Electric Corporation, Redwood City, California.

**5** See the manuals *Installation and operating instruction for the Altec M11 microphone systems featuring the Altec 21B miniature condenser microphone*, Altec inc., San Diego, California.

**6** Letter from Pierre Schaeffer to Varèse dated 2 June 1953 conserved at Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel.

organise. Je me permettrai à ce sujet de vous consulter et vous demander conseil.”<sup>7</sup>

*Déserts* was not ready by October and was staged on 2 December of the same year in the memorable concert-scandal in Paris forty years after the similar scandal of the premiere of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*. Nonetheless, the meeting with Schaeffer was the initial impetus for the Parisian revival of the electronic interpolations, conducted with Pierre Henry's active contribution.

At Studio d'Essai, Varèse was at the heart of the capital of concrete music. The compositional practices used are those of magnetic tape editing, filtering, modulations. More than the equipment, which was used by many other production studios<sup>8</sup>—and incidentally considered “extremely limited” by Schaeffer himself<sup>9</sup>—it is the cultural environment of the Studio, which Varèse frequented for almost two months, that influenced the acoustic-musical result most. The practice of reduced listening, the investigation of sound morphology, the Parisian workshop practices—personified by Pierre Henry—are reflected in the first version of *Déserts'* interpolations. The material is entirely of acoustic origin, be it the noise of a factory, or the recording of an organ or a percussion ensemble. Varèse reworks noises already recorded in the United States and does not introduce synthetic sounds. The Studio d'Essai with its equipment, the people who inhabited it and its aesthetic approach, left an indelible mark on the work.

The original idea for *Déserts*, unsuccessfully proposed to Disney, envisioned a sound film (Mattis 1992; Scuri s.d.). As early as in the early 1950s, Varèse demonstrated to have clear autonomous aesthetic thinking, which included the potential of the relationships between sound and moving images that went far beyond the simple synchronous and asynchronous, however appropriate it was to Bouchard's documentary.

Varèse's deserts are not only geographical—endless expanses of sand, snow, barren mountains, or astronomical places—but also and above all places of the mind, the human soul, and solitude. “For this multiple conception of desert”, he writes, “visual image and sound will be used each in its unique way to communicate the beauty and the mystery of that solitude which finds such an intense, though perhaps not consciously understood, response in every human heart”.<sup>10</sup> The moving image was therefore the device par excellence for evoking, even before representing, this multiplicity:

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**7** Letter from Varèse to Schaeffer dated 24 March 1954 conserved at Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel.

**8** This is well described in many texts, from the fundamental Moles (1960) to the more recent Gayou (2007).

**9** Letter from Pierre Schaeffer to Varèse dated June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1953, kept at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel.

**10** Undated document conserved at the Department of Special Collections in the Green Library of Stanford University (MISC 1026).

*Visual images and music or, as I prefer to say, organized sound will not duplicate each other. Light and sound are different essences, eye and ear do not behave in the same way, their limitations and reactions are not the same. For the most part, light and sound will work in opposition in such a way to give maximum emotional reaction; sometimes they will join for dramatic effect and to create a feeling of unity. For example, well-timed silences might at times be the only accompaniment of visual turbulence or terror, instead of the usual procedure—the noisily imitative crescendo. Or in some calm, contemplative scene, the music might evoke quite a different event taking place far away and unrelated in mood, but which will help create, through contrast, a feeling of space and time and of universality. These contrasts achieved through the synchronization of simultaneous, unrelated elements would create a dissociation of ideas which would excite the imagination and stimulate the emotions. At other times both sound and image would join in a kind of visual and sonorous counterpoint.<sup>11</sup>*

Despite being a stranger to the world of cinema, Varèse intuited with great lucidity the practices of filmmaking, that orchestral, almost workshop-like work that makes it a shared and collaborative process.

*For the realisation of my project the score will be written first, rehearsed and recorded on the sound track. [...] The dynamic, tension, rhythms (or better RHYTHM, element of stability) will naturally be calculated with the film as a whole in mind. The director of the photography will familiarize himself thoroughly with the score and details will be discussed before he starts his shooting expedition. From the film material he brings back, a choice will be made, a continuity extracted, in which images, sequences etc. will be used to obtain planes and volumes which will be organized and so composed as to obtain a final montage to be fitted to the already existing musical construction. The views of earth, sky water will be filmed in parts of the [American] deserts: [California (Death Valley,) New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Alaska: sand deserts] lonely stretches of water anywhere, solitude of snow, steep deserts gorges, abandoned roads, ghost towns etc. For star galaxies, nebulae, mountains of the moon, existing photographs could be used. Cameras: 35 millimeter, black and white, infra-red, (if desirable colour,) telescopic. The whole must give a sense of timelessness, legend, Dantesque apocalyptic phantasmagoria.<sup>12</sup>*

Nevertheless, his training as a composer still led him to conceive a hierarchy between artistic forms where music precedes the image and must constitute a complete artistic element in its own right that should also have had its own autonomy. Perhaps also for this reason, unfortunately, the project was never realised. From 1954 onwards, the electronic interpolations of *Déserts* accompanied the composer until the end of his life: he made several versions

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11 Ibidem.

12 Ibidem.

in different studios (Eindhoven, Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre),<sup>13</sup> but for as long as Varèse lived it would remain an exclusively musical work.

## LA PROCESSION DE VERGES

In 1955, Varèse composed the music for Thomas Bouchard's documentary *Around and About Joan Miró*, cited in Varèse's catalogues as *La procession de Verges*. He was in charge of the soundtrack at the same time as he began collecting audio material for the interpolations of *Déserts* (Ouellette 1973, 174). The two works are closely related, and not only in the similar, if not identical sound materials. The work is almost unknown because the director's heirs forbid its dissemination. I was able to view a copy at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. and listen to a version of the soundtrack alone at the Library and Archive Canada in Ottawa (Fernand Ouellette Collection).

The events that led the two artists to collaborate are narrated by Diane Bouchard in her contribution *Varèse und Bouchard* (Bouchard 2006). Bouchard asked Varèse to create a soundtrack with excerpts from her works *Octandre*, *Ionisation*, *Intégrales* and *Hyperprism* for her documentary film on Fernand Léger, *Fernand Léger in America-His New Realism* (1945-46), and in 1947 to select some fragments of baroque music for the film *La Naissance d'un tableau* dedicated to Kurt Seligmann, finished in 1950; finally, in the early 1950s, original music from recorded sounds organised for the film on Miró.

In this film, the sequence set to music by Varèse is the only one in black and white and is located approximately in the middle of the film. It depicts the procession that takes place in Verges, Catalonia, on the night between Thursday and Good Friday, also known as the "dance of death". Images and music are clearly detached from everything else: the sequence is preceded by a tracking shot of the churches that inspired Miró, while the following part is devoted to his country studio; the other music is by Antonio de Cabezón, Isaac Albéniz and Enrique Granados.

The sequence begins with an introduction by the narrator, who then falls silent and lets the music do the talking. [Table 1](#), next page, contains a schematic description based on the Library of Congress copy; it is an attempt to highlight the relationships between music and image that emerge upon simply viewing the film.

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**13** Much has been written about the different versions of the *Déserts* interpolations (see for example Ouellette 1973; MacDonald 2003; Gertich 1992 or Clayson 2002; Cossetini 2013), regrettably however, the sole certainty is that today no agreement has been reached even as regards their number. Plenty of legends indeed have circulated around an alleged "original version" whose tracks are now lost, a sort of "Holy Grail", about which a clear answer needs to be given: there is no such thing as an "original version".

# TABLE 1:

## COMPARISON OF THE INSTITUTIONS RAI AND TV 2 IN ITALY AND DENMARK, RESPECTIVELY.

TIMING* IMAGES		MUSIC
0' 00"	Dark streets, lit only by torches	It begins quietly with noises and gentle percussion
0' 07"	Change of frame You can see the men in the procession, the priests, coming towards the camera wearing death masks	Cantato reminiscent of Gregorian melodies.
0' 09"	Change of frame The statue of the Virgin Mary carrying a crown with candles stands at the centre of the procession	Sound developed electronically
0' 15"	Change of frame Close-up of procession	=
0' 20"	Panoramic view of procession: the front line, the middle, the rear Chained women and penitents surround and follow the statue of Our Lady.	Singing resumes.
0' 29"	=	The voice disappears and electronically processed sounds and percussion dominate
0' 32"	=	Only the percussion section continues
0' 35"	=	The percussion seems to beat out the rhythm of the procession
0' 43"	Change of frame The torches can be seen.	Electronically developed sounds and solos
0' 47"	Change of frame The procession is seen	The percussion instruments appear to continue beating out the procession
This is followed by a section with concise editing of both images and sound, without any particular correlation, correspondence, or synchronisation		
0' 59"	Change of frame Close-up of a hooded man carrying a torch	A flute can be heard
1' 05"	Change of frame Medium field view of procession	Holding flute note linking the two shots
1' 07"	Change of frame Long field view, only torch lights can be seen	A "whistle" enters almost in synchrony with the change of frame
1' 16"	Change of frame with fade to black. Soldiers in Roman-style armour can be seen around a statue of Christ	The music resumes the fade-out and continues with electronically processed sounds
1' 19"	=	The percussion reappears and this time distinctly beats the march of the soldiers
This is followed by very dark images accompanied by electronic sounds that seem independent		
1' 31"	Change of frame The image of Christ drawn on a sheet appears. Slow close-up of figure	Silence. A fade-in on soft electronically processed sounds accompanies the zoom
1' 44"	Change of frame; same subject	Percussions enter (slightly in advance of change of frame)
A more concise editing section follows. The music is flowing but unassociated		
1' 56"	The camera's view rises from the procession to the sky, creating a kind of fade to black	The voice remains alone on the black image
2' 00"	Imperceptible change of frame A face can be glimpsed looking in the car in a very dark image. The effect is very unsettling.	With an abrupt dynamic jump, the <i>ff</i> (very loud) processed noises come back in
2' 04"	Change of frame The camera view returns to the procession	Percussion (slightly in advance of video editing)
This is followed by many unconnected changes in both shots and music that nonetheless create a kind of frantic finale		
2' 39"	Fade-out	Fade-out

The music closely follows the filmic narrative, to a certain extent adapting to the descriptive conventions of musical commentary on the action, such as in the Gregorian chants, in the rhythm of the procession marked by percussion, the electronically processed sound corresponding to the supernatural and the aspiration to attain it, the silence over the figure of Christ, the sound-image mismatches that often anticipate the procession, etc. It is evident that Bouchard and Varèse worked together on the editing. Diane Bouchard writes:

*Rief ich Varèse an und sagte zu ihm: "Du mußt unbedingt herkommen und dir das anschauen". Und Varèse [...] sich nicht zweimal bitten: "Ich bin gleich da". Sorgfältig spielte ich den Originalfilm [...] ab. Als es vorbei war, sagte Varèse: "Großartig. [...] Ich werde den 'organized sound' für den Soundtrack komponieren". [...] Dann sagte Varèse zu mir: "Ich brauche ein Verlaufsschema des Films, mit Angaben zu allen Szenenwechseln und genauen Timings". Als ich dies gemacht hatte, stellte sich heraus, daß die Sequenz eine Dauer von 2 Minuten und 47 Sekunden hatte. Varèses wunderbares Stück paßte perfekt zur raschen Bewegung der Bilder, zur Stimme des Priesters, der das Caligaverunt, singt, zum Seufzer, zum abrupten Ende (Bouchard 2006, 322).*

Thanks to this collaboration, Varèse was introduced to the world of film editing. The experience proved to have indelible consequences on his musical thinking, as is evident in the case of the continuous revisions of *Déserts*: after the first enactment at the Club d'Essai in Paris, Varèse proceeded almost exclusively by addition, deletion and replacement of tape segments and local interventions on the volume. The analogies with film editing are obvious. The reconstruction of the technical-compositional processes of Varèse's electronic music must therefore necessarily consider in all its density the concept of "organised sound", which is not confined to composition with tape, but also embraces the experiments in cinema, musical notation, and, not least, the later architectonic-sound experience of the *Poème électronique*.

## POÈME ÉLECTRONIQUE

In 1958, Varèse went to the Philips research laboratories in Eindhoven to compose his *Poème électronique* in close contact with engineers and researchers. The music was part of a global multimedia experience conceived for the Philips pavilion at the Universal Exhibition in Brussels that year, which also featured the diffusion of sound within architecture designed by Le Corbusier and Iannis Xenakis accompanied by both a film conceived and shot by Philippe Agostini and Le Corbusier himself that reviewed the history of mankind and a light show (created with Louis Christiaan Kalff). This brought back into dealing with a work that involved the relationship between music and moving images in a new artistic, exhibition, and technological context. As regards the creation of the music, this was the first time he came into direct contact with synthesizers and

\*There is a slight discrepancy between the duration of the sequence in the copy viewed (2'39") and the duration reported in the literature (2' 47"). In the copy preserved at the Library of Congress, no discrepancy was found. Perhaps the duration first reported by Ouellette, and taken from there, also takes the introduction of the narrator's voice into account.

pure sound generators (e.g. a siren—an instrument so dear to the composer—but here an “optic” siren for the generation of synthetic sounds). This encounter assumed paramount importance in the evolution of his compositional thinking and some of the sounds used in later versions of the interpolations may well have been first generated in Eindhoven. The versions of the interpolations of *Déserts* that the composer developed later at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in New York, clearly demonstrate his intention to go beyond the purely concrete approach that had characterised his first version of *Déserts* and the music for *La procession de Verges*, and to study the possibilities offered by synthesis technologies.

Much has been written about the origin of this work.<sup>14</sup> In a recent volume dedicated to Philips and to the origins of electronic music in the Netherlands (Tazelaar 2013), Kees Tazelaar goes through the stages which led to designing the project, all the way to the studio production and set-up of the work in the pavilion while also underscoring the role played by the Philips technical experts working with Varèse (Willem Tak, Simon Leo de Bruin, Jan de Bruyn, Anton Buczynski, at al.). The genesis of *Poème électronique* was complex. More specifically, the task of defining the spatialization of sound had been long and complicated because it was closely connected to the architectural framework in which it had to be completed and to the technological conditions of the day.

The first tests to assess the possibilities of sound spatialization were completed in early 1957 by Willem Tak alone, in a garage of Strijp III at Philips, set up for the occasion with loudspeakers directly on the walls; these architectural conditions were extremely different from those envisaged by Le Corbusier and Xenakis. The first ideas by Tak therefore differed greatly from what was actually implemented. For example, mention is still made of the walls, ceiling, and roof (in striking contrast with the characteristics of the facility with hyperbolic paraboloids Xenakis was designing) and of stereophonic sound; at least two pivotal elements in the final version of the work are already present, however: 1) sound moving through an exceptionally large number of loudspeakers placed along both axes—horizontal and vertical—enabled by a rotary switch, and 2) artificial echoes (see Tak 1957 quoted in Tazelaar 2013, 121-22).

In September 1957, Varèse travelled to the Netherlands. He immediately enquired about the sound diffusion conditions in the pavilion and the possibilities of spatialization. There are production notes, drawings, templates and sketches at Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel that reveal the various ideas considered by the author in composing the movement of sound in space. Mention is made of different loudspeakers for low and high frequencies—the former built into the walls and the latter, 400 in total, placed all along the facility—of full-range loudspeakers placed in “antiphonal” position at the entrance and exit of the

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**14** The bibliography on the Philips pavilion and on *Poème électronique* is too extensive to be reproduced within the space of this paper. Please refer to Treib 1996; Dobson et al. 2005; Tazelaar 2013 and Izzo 2015.

pavilion, and spatial movement lines for the diffusion of the three tapes on which he was working. Tak's original project was ambitious; its technology was pioneering. In the end, the number of loudspeakers was reduced and the sound "routes" were redefined by Xenakis and physically installed in the architectonic structure only in early 1958. This meant that they were working "blindfold", without any possibility of carrying out tests on the actual operation of the spatialization lines, on the impact of their sound in real acoustic space, and on their relationships with moving images and lights. A 35mm 3-track perforated magnetic tape was used for the final sound diffusion within the architectural space. The sound was projected inside the room and amplified using an array of loudspeakers placed along the structure's walls. Once this work had been completed, a control room that included a player for the 3-track perforated magnetic tape and a 15-track system was set up to manage the control signal linked to a selective amplifier. The latter controlled arrays of loudspeakers or the rotary switch in charge of sound movement. Hence it was the control room that finally made *Poème électronique* possible by mechanically performing it inside the pavilion.

It was a one-off event: after the pavilion was dismantled at the end of the exhibition, the work was disseminated exclusively through monophonic or stereophonic reductions on record or during concerts. Only recently have some reconstruction projects attempted to reintroduce the original experience by taking advantage of the virtualization potential of IT tools. Alongside a number of initiatives that might also be classified as amateurish, the VEP project achieved significant results also thanks to funding it received from Culture 2000:

*The goal of the Virtual Electronic Poem (VEP) project, co-funded by the European Union through the Culture 2000 programme, has been the realization of a virtual reality (VR) environment, capable of reproducing the global experience of the Poème électronique through a philologically accurate reconstruction of the original installation and a technologically innovative VR implementation, which is effective both in the visual and the auditory domain (using stereoscopic vision and binaural/multichannel audio). Starting from the available historical sources [...], it has been possible to recreate the audiovisual show in all its components [...] and to stage it inside a computer graphics reconstruction of the Philips Pavilion. The VR installation gives the user a renowned fruition of the Poème électronique, a unique work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture (Lombardo, Nunnari and Valle 2010).*

Thanks to work completed by the multi-disciplinary team of musicologists, cinema experts, and IT engineers assembled to restore the audio part, the video, the light games, and the modelling of acoustic and architectural space, other projects similar to VEP now provide us with a virtualization of what might have been experienced by audiences at the time. At the same time, *Poème*

*électronique* has enjoyed vast success as a concert piece and now, separated from its multimedia context, survives today especially as a work of pure music.<sup>15</sup>

## THE MIRAGE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES: COLUMBIA-PRINCETON ELECTRONIC MUSIC CENTER

The Dutch experience opened up a new world of sounds for Varèse with which he intended to continue experimenting, also in regard to refining the interpolations of *Déserts*. As can be seen from his wide and frequent correspondence with leading protagonists of American electronic music—not only Ussachevsky, but also Otto Luening, Milton Babbitt, Roger Sessions, Max Matthews, and John Pierce, etc.—Varèse was certainly not unaware of what was going on in his adopted homeland. Precisely in 1959, the year of Ussachevsky's letter quoted here, the Rockefeller Foundation financed the purchase of an RCA Mark II synthesiser at Columbia University intended to initiate the official activities of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Centre (already operational since early 1950). Varèse hoped to take part in the research. With support from Max Matthew, who informed the composer that Columbia University offered more possibilities than Bell Laboratories<sup>16</sup> where he had conducted some experiments in digital sound synthesis, Varèse began working at the New York studio probably in April 1960,<sup>17</sup> assisted by Max Matthews and Newman Guttman, both of Bell Laboratories, and later by Bülent Arel, with whom he would realise the 1961-62 version of the *Déserts* interpolations.

In New York, Varèse was given the chance to use new analogue/digital technologies and new synthesis systems in an aesthetic-cultural environment that was markedly different from the one in Europe. We cannot know for sure which instruments Varèse used at the Centre, but here too the imprint of the working environment and the team assisting him is evident (Ussachevsky 1958).

There is no need to dwell at length on Max Matthew, an MIT engineer and collaborator of John Pierce. His reputation as a pioneer of synthesis and digital sound recording on computers (both of which were realised as early as 1957) requires no attempt at description.

Newman Guttman was a perception psychologist who was among the first

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**15** The history of the publishing process of *Poème Electronique* as part of Varèse's music catalogue (Casa Ricordi s.r.l.) go beyond the scope of this article. See the recently restored edition by Cossetini and Olto (2021).

**16** See the letter Max Matthews wrote to Varèse 19 February 1960 conserved at Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel.

**17** See the correspondence between Varèse and Vladimir Ussachevsky conserved at Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel and in the Computer Music Center archives at Columbia University in New York.

to use digital sound synthesis systems to analyse characteristic aspects of listening. Varèse held Guttman in high regard, and on 29 April 1959 he presented his experimental piece *Pitch variations*, the first one-minute composition of computer-synthesised music, to the public in a concert at New York's Village Gate.

The Turkish composer Bülent Arel had studied sound engineering with José Bernard and Willfried Garret, members of the Club d'Essai in Paris, and was one of the pioneers of "mixed" music (see for instance his *Music for String Quartet and Oscillator* of 1957); called to the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center by the Rockefeller Foundation, he then founded and directed the Electronic Music Studio at Yale University.

In 1963, acting on Ussachevsky's idea, Jacques Barzun, then rector of Columbia University, asked the Kaplan Foundation for a \$1,750 grant, to be added to the \$750 already provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, for the purchase of audio equipment. They should have been used to establish a private studio in Varèse's home at 188 Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village. The letter in which, on 22 January 1963, Ussachevsky asked Barzun to intervene in support of Varèse provides not only bureaucratic and economic information, but also the last important testimony to the composer's approach to the electronic medium:

*for the past three years Edgard Varèse has been one of the composers to whom the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center opened its facilities. A complete revision of the tape part of his work, DESERTS, has been accomplished through a very substantial allotment of the studio and technician's time; Columbia Records brought out the new version, unfortunately neglecting to mention our contribution. Last spring Mr. Varèse decided to learn everything about our studio first-hand, how to operate every knob and switch, and to manipulate the tape recorders himself. We have accommodated him to the best of our ability. However, since last august, including a temporary problem with his health, he has been unable to come, and the work he started remains unfinished.<sup>18</sup>*

Unfortunately, the collaboration did not continue. The composer passed away in early November 1965.

## CONCLUSION

The technical limitations of the time played an important role in Varèsian thinking in relation to film music. If in the original idea of *Déserts* and the music for Bouchard's film the relationship between sound and image is tight, calculated in individual details and editing points, in *Poème électronique*, music and film follow two almost impermeable parallel paths, united only by the aesthetic idea

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**18** Letter from Ussachevsky to Barzun dated 22 January 1963 conserved in the Computer Music Center archives at Columbia University.

behind the multimedia experience. *Poème électronique* closes Varèse's brief and tormented parable with moving images. From the little that remains to us, however, we can draw some considerations.

It is well worth noting that the two compositions that were made for film or multimedia work do not vaunt a tradition characterised by versions or variants (if we exclude the concert version of *Poème électronique*), whereas for *Déserts*, which remains only musical, rewriting continued uninterrupted: the only "static" version of the work is, in fact, the audiovisual version created many years later by Bill Viola (1994), who in a new authorial choice chose one of the many versions of the electronic interpolations (the 1954 version) and "froze" it in his multimedia work, with the sensitivity of also providing a "live" version that leaves wide interpretative margins open to the orchestral conductor's discretion (Albert 2021).

As is often the case in the history of media, there was a natural tendency to accept a new medium with excessive enthusiasm even in the 1950s. Electronic equipment had encouraged an idea already present in the New Music debate raging during the period that facilitated its implementation: the utopia of the perfect structure, frozen once and for all within the physical space of magnetic tape: no need for a performer to implement the musical concept at some later stage and turn it into "music", no disconnection between creation and practice, no coding and decoding, and most of all, the possibility of fixing events and defeating time forever. In the early days of electronic music, magnetic tape was seen as a ploy to capture musical creation directly as it becomes music, thus eluding the entropic process of performance tradition. Something changed in the course of that journey, however, and the initial enthusiasm regarding the crystallising of "perfect" musical structures dwindled: the static fixing of the composition concept probably led to creating work that was already "mummified" from the start, detached from time because it denied the music the possibility of re-contextualising itself through the live action of the performer.

The succession of *Déserts'* realisations is the mark of a practice that cannot be ascribed to the aesthetics of the "open work", since the indefinite variety of realisations does not result from the interventions of the audience or other composers, as is the case, for instance, in Henri Pousseur's *Scambi*, but from a repeated action of the author on the tape. In *Déserts*, Varèse does not abandon the fullness of the authorial figure; on the contrary, he reaffirms it through the different realizations of a work that may be defined as "in motion". If electronics allows the insertion of a new voice, which, however, does not enjoy the immediate variability of live music, nevertheless the electronic medium allows action on the communicative process. Through electronics, Varèse fixes the interpretation of the work, i.e. the sound itself. But once recorded on tape in the manner permitted by the technology of the time, the sound cannot be instantly modified. If therefore the composer also wants to be an interpreter, to renew the act of interpretation with each performance, he or she must resort to studio manipulation, cutting, copying, mixing, and producing new recordings. This is the Varèse way to electronics: to reaffirm, even in the context of new media

context, that the ultimate reason for music, its essence, consists in being able to be recreated through interpretation.

The study of Varèse's electronic production shows us how this great composer could successfully survive the utopia of crystallising musical action. Varèse seems to be continuously restating that even in the case of electronic music, Busoni's concept of the ideal identity of composition = performance = interpretation (Busoni 1910) still applies, an idea that thereafter will be rediscovered in live multimedia performances and visual art. In mixed music that combines a live component with a component fixed on an audio or audiovisual support, the gap becomes enormous: an ever-renewed performance of the instrumental part is confronted with static electronics, condemned to the obsolescence not only of its supports, but also of its acoustic sensibilities in relation to an ever-evolving audio technology. And this is also particularly evident in the projections of Viola's film with the live soundtrack.

At a time when electronic music was at best relegated to the introduction of alienating effects in an *ante litteram* sound design (think for instance of the theremin in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* 1945) or in science fiction films (the soundtrack to *The Forbidden Planet* 1956 composed by Louis and Bebe Barron being of paramount importance and initiating a style), Varèse saw original and pioneering ways forward that film music composers began to understand and fully embrace only years later. Laden with the burden of the symphonic and operatic tradition whose stylistic features they slavishly reproduced in film music, traditional composers of music for films were slow to understand a very simple, almost banal aesthetic concept, seen today after more than fifty years: a new form of art demanded a new form of music. Varèse, in fact, as Calabretto states, invited others to "abandon traditional musical commentary and elevate sound to an element of primary importance in the setting up of the cinematographic soundtrack" (Calabretto 2010, 219). The solution necessarily needed to be found in the new technologies of electronic music and their affinities with film editing technologies, a fact that is evident today in digital audiovisual editing in the integration and standardisation of practices in DAWs, but which few composers, even the big names in electronic music, realised at the time. At the level of aesthetics, this means conceiving a univocal art form in which the spheres of music and film are fully permeable, as if there were no aesthetic boundary between sound and image.

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# Crimson Tide:

## Hans Zimmer, Subliminal Harmony, and Submerged Voices

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*Crimson Tide* (Tony Scott, 1995) is a signal example of Hollywood action-adventure movies of the past forty years and in particular of the “high-concept” movie. The score by Hans Zimmer is a landmark score for the composer and consolidates his reputation for scoring films of that genre. This article addresses the now-famous Zimmerian work process and several stylistic traits, including the use of a male chorus. Choral voices in the film’s context provide both a synecdochic link to the submariners but also function as a commentative chorus. Using Neo-Riemannian theory, the potential contribution of which to film-music studies is still only now beginning to be explored, I examine the deployment of specific harmonic strategies that create a link back to earlier Hollywood film-music practices and show how Zimmer represents less an evolution than a continuation of recognisable styles and idioms.

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*Crimson Tide* (Tony Scott, 1995) was the second movie made by the Don Simpson/Jerry Bruckheimer production team, noted for its glossy, high-tempo action, action-comedy and drama movies in the 1980s. Their first commercial hit was *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), followed by the action-comedy *Beverly Hills Cop* (Martin Brest, 1984), and the immensely successful *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986), *Beverly Hills Cop II* (Tony Scott, 1987), and the less acclaimed *Days of Thunder* (Tony Scott, 1990). These last three were the first of six films made with British director, Tony Scott, who would make a further four films for Bruckheimer (Don Simpson died in 1996).

*Crimson Tide* is set for the main part on a submarine, the USS *Alabama*, and revolves around a conflict between two senior officers: the captain of the ship, Frank Ramsey (Gene Hackman), and the second-in-command, Executive Officer (XO) Ron Hunter (Denzel Washington). The combat-hardened Ramsey has little time for his more pensive XO and, when the boat is crippled and unable to retrieve a half-transmitted message that may prevent the launch of nuclear missiles, overrides protocol and attempts to arrest his XO. Hunter relieves the captain of command and has him confined to his quarters, whereupon the captain leads a mutiny and wrests control back again, only for Hunter to stage a counter-mutiny. The standoff between the two men is resolved when the



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mangled message is finally received, instructing the crew not to launch a pre-emptive strike. In a coda, the two men are reconciled, with Ramsey retiring and Hunter being promoted to captain of his own boat.

Simpson/Bruckheimer movies were described as “high concept”, films that were sold on a distilled premise that usually invoked two familiar movies. The original pitch for *Crimson Tide*, for example, was *The Hunt for Red October* (John McTiernan, 1990) meets *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), the basis of which was a nuclear sub’s computer attempting to launch a nuclear attack, a story not a million miles away from *Fail Safe* (Sydney Lumet, 1964) and *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) (Lysy 2019). The Navy apparently rejected the outline on the grounds that a computer could not operate independently of human control. The revised pitch and subsequent movie might be described as a cross between *Fail Safe* and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lewis Milestone, 1962) or the more recent *The Bounty* (Roger Donaldson, 1984), though the movie has a more obvious direct precedent in the form of *Run Silent, Run Deep* (Robert Wise, 1958) which dramatizes the different approaches of a captain and an XO, played respectively by Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster. In *Crimson Tide*, the conflict between Ramsey and Hunter is dramatically highlighted in a series of stark oppositions: heart/head, simple/complicated, combat-hardened/Harvard-educated, widower/family man, classical music/pop music, old/young, impotent/potent, white/black. These oppositions are given musical form in Hans Zimmer’s score with respective though somewhat similar leitmotifs, more on which later.

Attitudes to Zimmer within film-music scholarship are somewhat ambivalent. His role in transforming film-music practices and adapting to the demands of big-budget filmmaking earns respect, but with that comes none of the slightly breathless admiration conferred upon a composer like John Williams. Part of that hesitation is due to nostalgia; Williams had served his apprenticeship as an orchestrator to such luminaries as Franz Waxman, Alfred Newman, and Bernard Herrmann, and thereby perpetuates a link to the traditions exemplified by Golden Age and Silver Age composers. Williams also exemplifies the old-school film practices, which is to say composing at the piano with pen and ink, and conducting his own music, eschewing SMPTE code prompts and pursuing the more traditional practice of click-track and streamers.<sup>1</sup> The image of the lone composer to which Williams conforms, a creator wrestling only with his imagination, epitomises the myth of the Romantic artist, and that very human image is furthered by an awareness of Williams’s career as a conductor of symphony orchestras.<sup>2</sup> Though Zimmer regularly uses modern orchestras, he has shown himself partial to synthesized sounds, and his mastery of computers and digital technology is well documented.<sup>3</sup> Williams operates very much as an

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYE-mhJ0m5g> (last accessed November 16, 2024), where Williams’s use of streamers can clearly be seen.

<sup>2</sup> On Williams’s career as a composer for film see Audissino (2021a), and for his work with the Boston Pops Orchestra see Audissino (2021b).

<sup>3</sup> James Buhler and David Neumeyer put Zimmer very much front and centre in their student primer and see him as representative of the new approach. (Buhler and

independent, overseeing his own orchestrations and conducting his own scores, while Zimmer entrusts such tasks to a stable of collaborators and associates. He also owns his own company, something that brings with it unproven rumours of exploitation and corporate hegemony, even though many successful film composers credit him with advancing their careers.

In terms of musical style, Williams's music lends itself to traditional and more elaborate musical analysis in a way that Zimmer's does not. It is "complex-for-its-own-sake" music that frequently displays formal features and structures of classical music (Lehman 2019; 2021, 143). It also employs longer-limbed themes like those of Korngold in contrast to briefer and more focused musical motifs that depend on broader musical gestures and affect (Halfyard 2013). Williams's music therefore gives the music analyst plenty to get their teeth into while Zimmer's scores yield relatively less to careful scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> That is not to say, however, that Williams himself has adapted to changing musical approaches in the new millennium, as Frank Lehman's detailed survey of William's evolving musical style reveals (Lehman 2021).

Nicholas Reyland has termed the Zimmerian process "corporate classicism" (2015) while Frank Lehman employs a considerably less freighted term: "Media Ventures/Remote Control" style (MV/RCP) (2021).<sup>5</sup> Reyland's characterisation is fairly light on detail, beyond arguing that Zimmer's and his collaborators' music rely on "'secondary' compositional parameters, such as timbre, texture and rhythm, [to] do the heavy dramatic lifting, with manipulations thereof providing musical nuance and variety" (Reyland 2015, 118–19). Mark Isham offers a terser take on Zimmer's style: "You get the rhythmic drive from a synthesizer and overlay an orchestra on top of it to give you that big Hollywood quality [...Music] has a very utilitarian role. It's just there—it's just churning along. You could write decent music, you could write brilliant music. I don't really know if it would make that big a difference in a film where music is used in that way" (Schelle 1999, 215–16). Isham's final observation is well made; there are moments in both Williams's and Zimmer's films where music is not merely unheard but unhearable. Frequently in *Crimson Tide* it is difficult to discern if music has stopped or has merely been drowned out by shouting and sound effects demanded by the director in post-production.<sup>6</sup>

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Neumeyer 2016, 445–55).

**4** Zimmer's music is not as simple as it might first appear. See, for example, Lehman's account of chromatic transformation in the scores for the "Da Vinci Code" series in Lehman (2018, 114–18).

**5** I detect a touch of damning with faint praise on Lehman's part in comments about Zimmer, though Lehman may well reject my reading of the following: "Part of Zimmer's appeal to filmmakers is specifically that he is not as stylistically chameleonic as, say, John Williams (who can do a convincing Zimmer impression, though I have not yet observed the reverse). Zimmer cannot help but speak in his own, immensely distinctive voice." (Lehman 2016, 33).

**6** "Tony wanted to surround the audience with the feeling of being in a metal structure, to increase the feeling of claustrophobia and what it was like to be on a submarine. He likes sounds to be big and aggressive. A director's feel for both the sound and the film is individual and key to the process." (George Watters, Supervising Sound

The lack of a detailed analysis of Zimmer's music and a general conflation of his working practice with the resultant score has led to the impression of an unvarying musical style. That image, however, is not borne out by the very different idioms in which Zimmer has written. He has frequently collaborated with specialist musicians—Pete Haycock for *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), Lisa Gerrard for *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000)—and has also incorporated ethnic musical traditions—*The Power of One* (John G. Avildsen, 1992), *Beyond Rangoon* (John Boorman, 1995), and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994). Zimmer nevertheless stands charged for a certain Terminator tendency: a reliance on computers, synthesisers, and corporate workflow, all of which is antithetical to the image of the creative individual.<sup>7</sup> The abiding accusation is that Zimmer and his school have reduced film scoring to a set of recognisable, some might say clichéd, formulae. However, as James Buhler points out, Reyland seems to be referring only to the scores Zimmer has written for action movies, though that same focus on action movies elsewhere informs Buhler and David Neumeyer's account of Zimmer's musical style (Buhler and Neumeyer 2016, 447–49; Buhler 2020). In both cases, the corporate classical style is aligned with David Bordwell's notion of modern filmic style as intensified continuity (Bordwell 2002). Different terms have been used for the particularly frantic editorial strategies to which Bordwell is referring, the most visceral of which is chaos cinema, though I note in passing that such a description does not really apply to *Crimson Tide*. Screen direction there is maintained throughout, and the axes of the submarine and its occasional pursuer are consistent, though there is a marked preference for disorientating canted camera angles during moments of high dramatic tension.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship of film style to musical style aside, the role that digital technology has played in Zimmer's scores and those of his collaborators cannot be overstated. It has allowed and encouraged collaboration, a modern solution to the loss of the production-line approach of the old Hollywood studio system, providing composers with access to a library of sampled sounds that enables them to produce more convincing mock-ups of the finished product than any piano demonstration can. Music can be quickly manipulated and alternative versions realised with a few clicks, rather than having to splice in alternative versions or even re-record sections. Zimmer even occasionally writes music in advance, providing directors effectively with his own temp track. Digital audio workstations such as Pro Tools, which have become the industry standard, encourage a more modular design than that of the theme-based scores,

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Editor, quoted in Sonnenschein 2001, 177).

**7** “Criticisms [of] Zimmer...” seem steeped in the notion that the composer should be the sole creator of the music and in the misconception that Zimmer is nothing but a delegator. Similarly, the material facts of how Zimmer works and how RCP actually functions are often misrepresented or misunderstood. As a result, Zimmer is often treated to a level of hostility rarely seen directed at other composers, a fact no doubt helped by his willingness to discuss these issues.” (Kmet 2018, 1).

**8** There is, in fact, one disruption of screen direction in the conversation between Weps and Dougherty. See 01h16'58" to 01h17'16".

facilitating complex cut-and-paste manipulations as a film goes through its various editing stages (Kerins 2015, 138–46). Music is consequently no longer so carefully yoked to onscreen actions but provides a broader sustained accompaniment, “underscoring kinetic poses and the play of affect more than identity or even feeling as an expression of individuated emotion” (Buhler and Durrand 2021, xvi).

The score of *Crimson Tide*, one of which Zimmer himself is proud, stands as something of a landmark in confirming many of the traits of the Zimmerian product.<sup>9</sup> That, at least, is the way that the press and Zimmer’s fans have seen it:

*With Crimson Tide [Zimmer] found the perfect vehicle to launch his new methodology and fundamentally transform film score art in the process. His new modern sound, characterized by powerful, electronica bravado, bold percussion, forceful low register men’s chorus and kinetic, driving string ostinati would revolutionize the cinematic experience and become a dominating force for blockbuster films for almost two decades [...] This score was the catalyst that unleashed the Zimmer revolution, which forever transformed film score art. [...] While Rain Man opened the door to Zimmer’s new methodology, Crimson Tide blew the door off its hinges, ushering in his new sound that would dominate Hollywood blockbuster films for decades (Lysy 2019).*

More succinctly: “The masculine, synthetic style of *Crimson Tide* has been so influential in defining the sound of the countless Media Ventures/Remote Control production house scores that have come since that it’s somewhat awkward to realize that all that electronic bravado derives from *Crimson Tide*, the first and greatest score of their kind” (Filmtracks, n.d.). (The phrase “electronic bravado” that these two quotations share seems to be entirely coincidental). And, even more pithily: “*Crimson Tide* was probably the moment that Zimmer took over the world”.<sup>10</sup>

Despite such groundbreaking status, the score harks back to antecedents, providing a generic link to earlier submarine films and amplifying the film’s awareness of its heritage. Indeed, *Run Silent, Run Deep* and *The Enemy Below* (Dick Powell, 1957) are archly referenced by the character of Lt Bobby Dougherty (James Gandolfini) who quizzes his colleagues on the casts of submarine movies. The score does much the same by adopting musical strategies from earlier scores, availing itself of a familiar inventory of sounds that mimic specific acoustic features of the world of submarines, notably sonar pings.<sup>11</sup>

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**9** “Z: Ironically, despite all the scores I’ve written, there are very few I’m proud of. B: Those are? Z: *A World Apart*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and a couple of cues in *Crimson Tide*” (Blake 1998).

**10** Posting by forum member Other Tallguy on February 23, 2018: <https://www.filmscoremonthly.com/board/posts.cfm?forumID=1&pageID=2&threadID=126000&archive=0> (Last accessed November 16, 2024).

**11** For an account of the “acoustemology of submarine life”, see Koldau (2010). However, Koldau only addressed films made after 1980. Mervyn Cooke (2019, 94) traces

Such sounds are not used as obviously as the score for *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981), where the chugging of diesel engines and sonar pings are used as percussion, but are a significant part of a submarine's claustrophobic sonic cocoon. But there is more telling tie to generic precedents in the particular use of a low male chorus. *Destination Tokyo* (Delmer Daves, 1943), for example, makes use of diegetic onboard carolling and snatches of "The Star-Spangled Banner", and "America the Beautiful" is heard when the sub returns triumphantly to San Francisco; the crew of the U-boat in *The Enemy Below* sing a cappella as they commit the dead body of a colleague to the waves; and *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959) features various male-voice treatments of "Waltzing Matilda", from small-ensemble intimacy to militaristic and drunken. *Crimson Tide's* more recent reference was the choir in Basil Poledouris' score for *The Hunt for Red October* (John McTiernan, 1990).

However, together with synthesized orchestral sounds, "real" instruments, and percussion, here mainly in the form of military side drum, a choir is also a key hallmark of the Zimmerian idiom.<sup>12</sup> Before I consider it in more detail, it is worth addressing the specific genesis of the choral voices in so far as it touches very clearly on Zimmer's emergent work practice.<sup>13</sup> In advance of composing the music, separate sessions were organised in London for groups of thirty tenors, thirty baritones and thirty basses, where each group sang a range of notes on different vowels and consonants. Those samples were subsequently loaded into Zimmer's synthesisers to be used as a compositional aid.<sup>14</sup> The score was then composed and subsequently the same singers were invited to record the choral parts as the standard part of post-production. Two points stand out here: first, it seems entirely likely that the samples have become part of "the sample libraries at Remote Control Productions, which far exceed anything commercially available, [and] are widely recognized to be far ahead of its closest competitor"; second, Zimmer could easily have saved himself the considerable costs of re-recording by using the samples. (Buhler and Neumeyer 2016, 448). That he returned to the same fixer and musicians says much about what Vasco Hexel has termed Zimmer's *Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahme*, which he explains as Zimmer's "strong ethical sense to secure fellow musicians' livelihood [...] painstakingly supplant[ing] samples with real instruments where appropriate".<sup>15</sup>

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the particular use of the sonar ping to *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frenn, 1953).

**12** A "choral ensemble [which] often performs in the lowest depths of the male voices, establish[es] another typical sound for a Media Ventures score" (Filmtracks, n.d.).

**13** I note here my role as one of the singers. Given that I made no contemporaneous notes, inevitably I cannot vouch for my memory, though I have spoken with others involved in the sessions to confirm my pertinent recollections. The date of recording of the choral sections of the score itself, if I am understanding my old diary, appears to be April 4 1995. Harry Gregson-Williams, who had been a boy chorister at St John's College, Cambridge, and who clearly understands voices, conducted the choral sessions.

**14** Further instances of the choir can be heard in the expanded score available on Expanded Motion Picture Score: *Crimson Tide*, Hollywood Records, BV4489-2521-2 (2002)

**15** See Vasco (2016, 141). A footnote explains that *Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahme* "was a popular German government subsidy scheme in the 1990s to create jobs in times

To return to the score itself, rather than the stripped-down themes of *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), an economy that is frequently cited as a Zimmerian trait, *Crimson Tide* features at least one “big theme” and several motifs.<sup>16</sup> That featured in the cue “Roll Tide” is associated not with an individual character but with the USS *Alabama* and, by extension, its crew [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Alabama theme

In D minor, to which for the main part the score remains grimly steadfast, the theme is anthemic and militaristic, self-confident save for its minor key orientation. As Lehman has noted, its first two bars are much the same as Siegfried’s theme in Wagner’s operas in line with Zimmer’s fondness for a Teutonic Theme when it comes to action-adventure films. (Lehman 2016, 40)

Hunter’s theme [Fig. 2], likewise in D minor, has similar contours, though the cadence which returns the theme to its original starting point signals a certain wistfulness that receives its most obvious timbral expression when it is first heard played on acoustic guitar as the XO says goodbye to his family.<sup>17</sup>



Fig 2: Hunter's theme.

Ramsey’s theme [Fig. 3], such as it is, is pointedly thrusting, and possessed of a sequential logic that suggests it might never quite end.



Fig 3: Mutiny/Ramsey theme.

Elsewhere, the most dominant theme is that described by some as the “War” theme [Fig. 4], stated clearly occasionally, though variants otherwise aimlessly meander around the same pitch class [Fig. 5] later allowing a statement of the Dies Irae theme (heard very clearly on the soundtrack album on the “1sq” cue at 02’11”.

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of high unemployment rates”.

**16** For references to the minimalist themes of *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), see Halfyard (2013); Buhler and Neumeyer (2016, 484-86); Hexel (2016).

**17** I venture a guess that the original temp track included music from Jerry Goldsmith’s *Under Fire*. Notable here are this iteration of Hunter’s theme, played on acoustic guitar, the sound of which seems to derive directly from Nicaragua (more recently recycled in *Django Unchained*, Quentin Tarantino, 2012) and Pat Metheny’s contribution in cues such as “A New Love and Rafael’s Theme”. Note also, though, the similarity between the Metheny/Goldsmith tune and Zimmer’s own theme for *Bird on a Wire* (1990). Elsewhere, the rhythmic panpipes heard in other cues from *Under Fire* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1983) may well have inspired Zimmer’s use of the same orchestration (ignoring its ethnic inappropriateness) to signal tension.



Fig 4: War theme.



Fig 5: War outline.

The militaristic bent of the music, determined in part by the arpeggiated structure of fanfares, is for the main diatonic but, as with other Zimmer scores, subject to panchromatic inflection. It is here that Neo-Riemannian theory serves as a valuable tool. Developed relatively recently, mainly in the USA by such scholars as David Lewin, Richard Cohn and others, it has been taken up by film-music scholars such as Scott Murphy and also Frank Lehman. Lehman's book (2018) develops a methodology that seeks to account for the most distinctive harmonic topoi found in Hollywood music since the 1930s though more particularly on New Hollywood that explain and to a degree shape spectatorial response. The most useful term here is *leitharmonie*, which immediately expands and develops the oversimplified and somewhat discredited idea of the *leitmotif*. As Lehman shows, emotional states are conditioned and amplified more by harmonic language than guided by leitmotivic identification. While harmonic gestures are semantically mutable, their meanings with a delimited cultural form such as narrative cinema are relatively fixed. Harmonic instances also function as punctuative effects, moments where the soundtrack scream for the spectator's attention just as much as a dynamically contrastive musical moment or a filmic jump cut. And, particularly in the case of action-adventure movies since the 1980s with their dense soundtracks, harmonic shifts are repeatedly used by composers to make their music stand out from the sonic carnage. To take but one example from *Crimson Tide*, a sequence that runs from around 00h41'30" to 00h44'06", during which time the *Alabama* makes contact with the enemy Russian sub, the music ratchets up through a series of octatonically related  $T_2$  and  $T_3$  (i.e. transposition of the chord up a major second and a minor third respectively) from Cm, though  $D\flat m$ , Em, Gm,  $E\flat m$ ,  $F\sharp m$ ,  $F\sharp^{dim}$ , Am,  $A^{dim}$  and up to Cm by way of firmly stated triadic chords to reflect the rising tension and jeopardy onboard the American submarine.

However, the score's more significant and recurrent shifts are an LP progression from Dm to  $B\flat m$  and a PL progression from Dm to  $F\sharp m$  ( $G\flat m$ ); and on occasion, two consecutive LP progressions lead from Dm to  $B\flat m$  to  $G\flat m$ . Often that movement will resolve more conventionally via AM, Am or  $A^{dim}$  to Dm. The LP/PL progression, a movement by chromatic third, elsewhere designated the Tarnhelm progression from its use in Wagner's Ring (Bribitzer-Stull 2015, 131-56 passim), is for Lehman "perhaps the most stereotypically cinematic of all pantriadic procedures". (Lehman 2018, 68; Lehman prefers not to refer to such procedures as "chromatic mediants" [...] which suggests the diatonic functional notion of a mediant chord". [Lehman 2018, 68]). The progression "bear[s] a strong attraction to the affective "dark side" [...] [and is] the tonal calling card of

Darth Vader, Voldemort, Gollum, and many other memorable cinematic villains". (Lehman 2018, 101)

The first instance of Dm to F#m in *Crimson Tide* occurs at 00h01'06" as we cut to a "live" news broadcast from an aircraft carrier from an onscreen post-credit text ("The three most powerful men in the world: The President of the United States...The President of the Russian Republic...and...The Captain of a U.S. nuclear missile submarine"). The clear function of the music here is as dramatic punctuation, signalling the danger that the Russian rebel forces pose. The same harmonic lurch is reprised at 01h04'05" as we cut from an uneasy conversation between Cob (George Dzundza) and Hunter to an exterior shot of the sub. Here, it is the sea itself that stands as the menace.

The shift from Dm to Bbm operates somewhat differently elsewhere: rather than demarcating narrative episodes, it underlines and exaggerates social tension. An early example occurs when the senior crew are having dinner. Ramsey teases Hunter about what Ramsey sees as an unnecessary and inappropriate theorisation of war. As the discussion builds, the music progresses from Dm to Bbm, thence to F#m (Gbm) and AM,<sup>7</sup> before returning to Dm. This double Tarnhelmic shift points towards the danger that Ramsey, a hard-ass as he is described by Weps (Viggo Mortensen), poses; Ramsey does not examine a problem from multiple angles and is more inclined to follow orders without question, a course of action that does not allow for error or accident. Heard in this cue are two highly significant motivic figures that are concurrently doubled in orchestral parts but primarily borne by the male chorus. The first is an articulation of the Dm/Bbm/F#m (Gbm)/AM figure, a rising triadically based figure with added seconds [Fig. 6] sung by the low bases. It is elsewhere heard when Ramsey wrests back control and orders that Hunter be arrested. For example, from 01h24'06" to 01h24'26".



Fig 6: Menacing figure.

The other similarly outlines the harmonic progression but in the tenor part, a simple melodic oscillation [Fig. 7].



Fig 7: Motivic cell.

The progression from Dm to Bbm to F#m (Gbm), achieved by a movement of the tonic downwards (or upwards) by a major third, lends the score symmetry and organic cohesion, which the Tonnetz diagram demonstrates [Fig. 8].

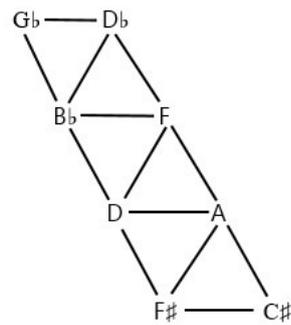


Fig 8: Tonnetz diagram of main harmonic structure: Dm/Bbm/F#m.

Note also that because the G<sub>b</sub>/D<sub>b</sub> axis being enharmonically identical to the F<sub>#</sub>/C<sub>#</sub> axis, a 3-D toroidal representation produces a (pleasingly) tubular structure.

The use of low male chorus in the score is of particular interest throughout. It is prominent towards the end of the Ramsey/Hunter debate, clearly cycling on the vowels [eɪ] and [u], and in the later cue, the menacing arpeggiated figure is assigned to the low basses. The chorus is first heard when the senior crew is briefed (the musical cue runs from 00h08'49" to 00h11'22") but is considerably more present when the Alabama prepares to dive. There, we hear the first of two iterations of the hymn "Eternal Father, strong to save" (aka the "Navy Hymn"), which was adopted by the US and British navies and became associated with seafarers more generally. The hymn acts as a benediction on the mission and a prayer for the safety of the crew. Its role as such is confirmed later in the film when the XO gives the order to seal the bilge bay, thereby saving the boat though sacrificing some of the men. (01h12'32" to 01h14'07"). (Strangely, the chorus is replaced at moments by a very obvious choral synth pad, perhaps because time ran out in the recording studio, a fairly common occurrence). Throughout the film, the chorus is metonymically linked to the crew and simultaneously appeals to the spectator's empathy, standing in for the spectator as well. Neither fully diegetic nor entirely nondiegetic, the chorus exists in the space commonly referred to as the fantastical gap. That liminal status is confirmed by the use of words, which, as I have noted elsewhere, are customarily avoided in nondiegetic music where the order of the day is faux languages or nonsense syllables (Greig 2021). In the case of *Crimson Tide*, that particular logic is taken one step further with consonants being entirely absent and different vowels sung by different parts, sometimes homophonically, and occasionally run together, i.e. a -e-i-o-u ([eɪ] [i] [aɪ] [ɒ] [u]). Potential meaning is thus even further mitigated than the standard default setting of random syllables derived from Latin or invented languages.

But the choir is more than merely timbral extension; it is part of an extended strategy of musical humanisation that echoes social dynamics. It is often heard when Hunter, a university-educated, part-time philosopher, is onscreen, such as the discussion in the officers' mess (see above), when he is forced to make his decision about shutting the bilge door, and in the final confrontation with

Hunter as they await the EAM message. Other instances are when Weeps has to decide whether to retrieve the launch codes from the safe or not, where the harmonic sequence of Dm/AM7/C<sup>dim</sup>/Gm/Dm/Ab<sup>dim</sup>/AM/Dm accompanied by voices loosely cycles on the vowel sounds [eɪ], [i], [aɪ], [ɒ], and [u] (01h18'44" to 01h19'15"). In both of these cases, the choir underscores moments of self-questioning, expressing human doubt and uncertainty.

However, the more arresting calibration of choral voices with specific filmic elements is the alignment between the choir and exterior shots of the submarine. This happens on several occasions, though not universally. Nevertheless, once noticed, the correspondences are striking. The first instance is a shot at 01h04'55" of the USS *Alabama* and the Russian Akula-class sub that reveals the proximity of the two vessels, this a moment before the crew itself realises. Later, when the *Alabama* is attacked by the Russian sub, the onboard scenes that show and describe the Alabama's attempt to evade enemy torpedoes are supplemented by exterior shots at 01h08'14", 01h08'34", and 01h08'52". Each of these shots prompts an ominous synthesized vocal roar. That same sound accompanies exterior shots of the sub after it has been hit and sinks inexorably to the depths (01h09'28", 01h09'49", 01h10'14", 01h10'38", and 01h11'18"), the last which uses the "real" choir.

What is the reason for this quirky alignment of voices with exterior shots? One explanation would be that they build on empathy for the submariners, signalling that lives are in peril, but jeopardy alone is surely not sufficient here. It explains to the use of the naval hymn when the crew desperately try to save the boat but does not take account of the alignment of voices with exterior shots.<sup>18</sup> As noted, the first instance is the shot at 01h04'55", which provides the viewer with information to which the crew are not at that moment privy. As such, this is a rare case in this film of a shot being pointedly signalled as being from the perspective of the omniscient third-person narrator. Subsequent exterior shots of the sub as it sinks are narratively redundant; the interior shots and the dialogue keep us constantly apprised of the state of the boat. I have argued elsewhere that "the voice is a forceful synecdoche of human agency" (Greig 2021, 39); here, that logic is transferred to narrative agency. The exterior shots reveal the narrative hand and simultaneously evoke and exploit the particular properties of the human voice as actant, aligning music self-consciously at the film's meta-commentative level, much like a chorus in Greek tragedy, stepping outside of the narrative and tying a potent part of the orchestral palette directly to narration itself.

As noted earlier, the film composer of action-adventure films is, particularly in the era of muscular sound systems such Dolby 7:1, Dolby Atmos and the like, has to compete with a meaty cacophony of sound effects, screamed dialogue, and explosions. Music is increasingly required to make its point with economy,

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**18** The naval hymn begins at 01h12'34" and lasts until 01h14'08". (Note that this is the sequence in which a very obvious synth pad is used for a short while).

and often the overlap between musical timbre and special effects blur, nowhere more so than synthesized sounds produced by composers, a particularly Zimmerian trait. Zimmer has shown himself to be one of this new cinema's most successful exponents but there is musical intelligence at work. Furthermore, the strategies that Zimmer pursues and at which he is so skilled, hark back to the Golden Age of Hollywood and to the musical dramas of Wagner and others upon which that tradition so obviously draws.

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# Traditional Language With a Flair for Innovation: Hans Florian Zimmer's Compositional Process

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Hans Florian Zimmer is one of the best known and most prolific film composers in the world nowadays. His work defines the characteristics of present-day film music and is regarded as one of the most efficient practices in the field. Zimmer has expressed himself in different styles, making his language one of the greatest examples of musical eclecticism. His efficiency is equally evident in the field of production. Since his arrival in Hollywood in 1989, Zimmer has changed the entire production process that had been standardised since the 1930s. He has succeeded in bending an entire system to his own needs without any opportunism. He has optimised and rationalised musical productivity through the use of computer technology. Zimmer's work demonstrates a fundamental connection between production innovation and compositional eclecticism. Despite this, he frequently employs a traditional narrative method: thematism. However, his stylistic evolution and reinterpretation have distanced him considerably from concepts such as "theme" and "thematic development" of the classical tradition. Zimmer's traditionalism and keen sense for innovation merge to create a new result that also allows us to understand the latest evolution in the history of film music.

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*"Don't worry about what anybody else is going to do.  
The best way to predict the future is to invent it".*

[Kay in Wessner 2011, 87]

Hans Florian Zimmer is one of the most acclaimed and prolific movie score composers in the entire cinema industry. His work is widely known and used in both audiovisual field and in concerts.<sup>1</sup> It reveals various of the characteristics of contemporary movie scores, and his creative process is considered one of the most effective in his field. Like other film music composers, Zimmer has expressed himself and continues to do so in a variety of styles that make his language one of the greatest examples of musical eclecticism, an essential

<sup>1</sup> Bear in mind that since 2015 Zimmer has been giving live performances accompanied by trusted orchestral musicians and sound technicians. The Hans Zimmer Live Tour is now a media event of international breadth that has basically transformed Zimmer's role from movie score composer to performing musician and frontman (See <https://www.hanszimmerlive.com/>, last accessed February 25, 2024).



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virtue that is required by any media composer today. Different phases and methods of composition can be discerned along a path of plurilingualism that began in the 1980s and led to Zimmer's results. Among others, Zimmer is distinguished by the anti-academism that has always characterised him: initially working in popular music without scholastic preparation, he was long defined a "lightweight" composer, and only in recent years he has been acknowledged as one of the most influential composers together with Ennio Morricone and John Towner Williams. This is true as far as aesthetics are concerned, even more so in regard to his production method: since he first arrived in Hollywood in 1989, Zimmer began changing the entire chain of production system that had been consolidating since the 1930s when the first sound films were made. Zimmer succeeded in skewing an entire system to his needs, less for reasons of opportunism than the need to accelerate and optimise musical productivity through the use of computer technology.<sup>2</sup>

Zimmer's practices of composition and production are intrinsically interwoven and interdependent, altering the creative process work by work as the case requires. More and more today's scores for movies and other audiovisual media are defined by the use of technology in support—and often supplement—of organic-acoustic material. The Daw—digital audio workstations—, invariably present in the recording studios of today's audiovisual composers, make passages smoother and easier in both the compositional process on paper and its complement on the sequencer, the reference software installed on the computer, the heart and fulcrum of the composer's work, the extension of his or her creative ability.<sup>3</sup>

The high-tech environment has served as a unifier for Zimmer, one of the first composers to attach so much importance to electronics with the integration of timbres and sounds so naturally in an acoustic ensemble. However, Zimmer's role as composer leads him to a compositional process and to a purely musical creation of rhythms, melodies, harmonies. This links Zimmer also to a traditional narrative method and the use of thematic writing that makes the music both more defining and easier to memorise in the film's context case by case. The thematic music was used in silent films, and with the advent of sound it became

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**2** Owing to its importance and scope, Zimmer's scores for cinema should certainly be examined from different points of view. For more details on the genre and Zimmer's training in aesthetics and production in regard, see Stopar (2015–2016).

**3** The computer and its sequencer, which require connection to a MIDI keyboard and—when desired by the user—an external hardware for memory implementation and consequently faster Daw control, often features two or more screens for the simultaneous management of the musical material and a rough synchronization of digital cues. Music tracks are created within the moving images provided by the rough cut of the movie being made. Details regarding musical technology and its components go beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, is important to always bearing in mind that Zimmer's compositional practice is interwoven with the use of technology, the different libraries of acoustic instruments and electroacoustic sounds, mixing, sound design, and soundscaping. For more details on these topics and their use by Zimmer, see Corbella (2010), Kompanek (2004), Meandri (2012).

a key part of a film's musical layout, especially in Hollywood. This method of writing characterises the language of many past and contemporary composers; a language determined by themes, "referable to a melody [...] formed of symmetrical or asymmetrical motifs or phrases, hence divisible, dynamic in nature, and generally with a complete musical sense of its own" (Miceli 2009, 613).

The musical theme applied to moving images—particularly in Zimmer—serves as a leitmotif associated with a specific situation or character at symbolic, referential, or direct level. Also widely employed by Richard Wagner, this function has been progressively simplified by cinema's new media. As Roberto Calabretto writes:

*Associating a character with a motif or theme has always been an effective tool for aesthetically connoting protagonists and situations in a story and organising the cinematic narrative from a temporal point of view at the same time, thanks to the immediate intelligibility that a musical theme offers. [...] Cinema has wielded [the leitmotif function] by mediating its complexity in various ways and attitudes, many times in simplistic and reductive manner. [...] Such use can clearly not be related to the original purpose assigned to it by Wagner (Calabretto 2010, 103).*

Nevertheless, the leitmotif function or thematic association (Bribitzer-Stull 2015) lends itself handily to the audiovisual because it furthers the comprehension of the story "recalling to the spectator's memory not only people or things through identifier procedures but rather situations, so by means of which facts rise above the normal passage of time" (Calabretto 2010, 105). In similar words, Zofia Lissa believes that the Leitmotif fills a need for the continuity, structural unity, and integration of the information characterising a character, thus insinuating certain psychological details to the observer that visual images alone cannot provide (Lissa 1965, 84).

In order for the leitmotif function to be effective, the musical theme itself must first of all be effective. Calabretto (2010, 106) adds: "It is obvious that the thematic typologies that punctuate the history of film music are very diverse and respect compositional needs [...] of different kind". Many movie score composers have employed the musical theme in a variety of styles throughout musical history: from Max Steiner, Bernard Herrmann and Henry Mancini to the more recent Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith, Williams and Morricone. Each of these composers used their own language and method of thematic writing. Throughout his career, Zimmer as well developed his own compositional method with the creation of a theme as the basis for the work. This is why his composition demands such considerable attention: without a theme, in fact, especially in Zimmer's case, the score lacks its most distinctive, original and recognisable feature. From time to time the composers face a difficult situation: the considerable amount of good or mediocre, superlative or discreet music inevitably leads to a saturation of rhythmic, harmonic and melodic material.

In light of these elements, creating innovation becomes complex. Zimmer ranks among best thematic composers in Hollywood especially for his great sensitivity in adhering to the filmic narrative without ever renouncing coherence at structural level, whether it be harmonic, melodic or merely tonal. Such concepts were also always very important to Morricone:

*[The composer] must invent structures of his or her own that take the film's form and the director's style into account. For example, the repetition of a thematic idea (even if only in timbre) assumes value precisely due to its reiteration. Although the form of the piece cannot be predetermined, it must assume that of the director's shooting and editing: form that becomes form through image (Miceli and Morricone 2001, 63).*

Continuing, Morricone considers the editing and length of the different scenes to be fundamental in composing the score with an identifying thematic core. The same is true of Zimmer, even if he does not always consider aspects of editing or scene length in the process of creation. In other words, he frees his thematic creation from the pace of cinematic narrative. Zimmer composes one or more carrier themes through which the entire score can later be developed before reflecting on the respective cues agreed with the director and music editor at an earlier stage in the process. This method implies the development of a concept, a thematic and stylistic core around which the entire score is created. The concept may consist of several themes, which must always be united by at least one musical parameter, whether this be rhythmic, melodic or instrumental. Morricone explains:

*In order to work well in a film, music must have and preserve its formal characteristics—tonal ratios, melodic ratios, if you will, rhythmic ratios, ratios between instruments—in short, a correct internal dialectic. Whenever this formal (and previously, technical) correctness of the music is applied to the image, the result will certainly be much better (Miceli and Morricone 2001, 63).*

This scheme is used by most thematic composers and the conceptualization for each of them is from time to time quite similar. Jerry Goldsmith explains: "What I really try to do is to take one simple motif of the material for the picture, and a broad theme, and construct it so they always can work in concert with each other or separately" (Goldsmith in Cooke 2010, 229). From a different perspective, Karlin and Wright explain the thematic development that lead to the core concept:

*You can't conceptualize the central character unless you understand him. Your musical impression of that character can become the concept. At its simplest, this can be superficial, but if the character has any psychologically interesting reactions or feelings, the music can function most effectively for the film by characterizing these internal attitudes (Karlin and Wright 2004, 115).*

Such criterion is applied in all Zimmer's work. Violinist and composer Michael A. Levine, a longtime Zimmer associate, explains: "I have never met anyone better at getting inside the heart of the story than Hans. That ability, to me, is the essence of film scoring" (Stopar 2014). Music editor Adam Smalley sheds further light on Zimmer's style of writing and the score's conceptualisation:

*[Hans] writes 15–20 minutes of music and it can encapsulate all the themes he did. It could be the bad guy, a good guy, the love theme, the adventure theme. And he does it without pictures because the early days the pictures are always in flux. So Hans will write what we've coined '1m1x' and he'll sit there without any kind of visuals and just start his impression. And he'll do a proper suite without being chained to the visuals (Sundance Institute 2014).*

This method implies a total understanding of the film project, the central topic of the film narrative and what the film aims to communicate on an emotional level. In most cases, the inspiration for a good concept comes from the main character. Sometimes this idea is so central to the concept that it coincides with the filmic idea entirely to perfection.<sup>4</sup> In any case, however, assimilating the entire filmic story is the fundamental requisite for developing a score and a concept that are as coherent as possible. Before composing, Zimmer reflects on the characteristics and communication capacity of the film and its characters by studying the script or rough cut. The vision of the images and the leading actors can provide inspiration in creating the main thematic ideas. In 2013, Zimmer explained: "When I write the score, I only think about the characters and the story. [...] You have to fall in love with the characters, and at the same time, you always have to put a part of yourself into the character" (Amatranscripts 2013). What counts is to be able to take impressions directly from the characters and the filmic narration and make them your own, because "what a film should do is to tell you a story. Music can really help that process, but unless you're careful, it can also undermine it" (Zimmer in Seger and Whetmore 2004, 204). In order to avoid this kind of mistakes, he always confers with the director, his prime source of inspiration:

*Most of the time it comes out of conversations with the director, though we don't talk about music — we talk about whatever it is*

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<sup>4</sup> Zimmer is certainly not the only one in this regard. Consider just a few examples: in his score for *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström, 2000, music by Rachel Portman), Portman developed a theme for the protagonist Vianne (Juliette Binoche), a wandering gypsy who settles with her daughter in a small French village. The same theme is varied throughout the filmic narrative and takes on a central, identifying role in the entire score. In *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003, music by Danny Elfman), the entire score is inspired by the theme for the main character Edward Bloom, an old man in the custom of telling fantastic and absurd stories about his life somewhere between reality and fiction. Here again, the concept is developed from the theme devised for the narration's protagonist but then characterises the entire work. The same can be said of *Superman* (1978) or *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000, music by Rachel Portman), and of other examples as well.

*we're talking about and the notes are very much secondary. That's the problem, you see, because I always go 'Oh, the notes are secondary!' And then I sit there forever not coming up with them—I find it immensely difficult to write anything (Zimmer in Wherry 2002).*

Exchanging ideas and conversations with directors often leads Zimmer to postpone his writing—not a very common occurrence in the industry—as he meditates on aspects entirely marginal to the composition itself. “I don't touch the piano until I have a point of view, until I know what I want to write. I just don't know the notes, but I know what I'm trying to make them mean!”, he explains (Hans Zimmer interview 2006). This is because he is seeking a direction, a thematic idea that describes the unfolding of the film as engagingly as he can. In a recent interview, the late James Horner stated: “the music has to be emotional, you still have to touch people's hearts” (Horner in The Guardian 2015). And that is precisely the point for Zimmer and many other past and contemporary composers as well.

In order to involve the audience as directly as possible, Zimmer and other thematic composers make extensive use of melodies in a tonal or modal language, thus making the music pleasing to the average ear and, above all, easier to distinguish while watching the film. Finding the right concatenation of rhythms, values, and pitches that is original, characteristic and recognisable may conceal more than a few difficulties, however. David Raksin, one of the most important composers of the Hollywood Golden Age, explains:

*You know, melody has practically disappeared from the world; every so often you get a guy who knows how to write one, but most guys are afraid because, as Oscar Wilde once said, to be understood is to be found out. And the biggest way to risk that is to write a melody (Raksin in Morgan 2000, 12–13).*

In these terms, the melody is the way in which the public receives and understands you. At the same time, it is the most risky and difficult result to pursue. When the theme is recognisable and it works, in some cases it achieves great acceptance however: many times, the cinema has offered themes whose melodies have remained imprinted in the memory of the audience even years after the first film release.<sup>5</sup> In order to aspire to results of depth, a composer have to open herself of himself completely to the personal compositional

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**5** Consider in this sense *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989, music by Danny Elfman), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, music by Alan Silvestri) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994, music by Alan Silvestri), the collaboration between Steven Spielberg and John Williams: *Star Wars* (1977), *Indiana Jones* (1981–2023), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, music by James Horner) or going back much further in time, *Gone With The Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939, music by Max Steiner). To understand the immanence of a melody, consider also the short fanfare theme composed by Alfred Newman in 1933 that still accompanies the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox logo today.

process, but first of all she or he always have to remember certain fundamental aspects that make the theme effective: recognisability, evocative immediacy, pleasantness, and above all, simplicity. The effectiveness of a theme lies in its simplification and the reduction of the musical material.<sup>6</sup> Zimmer himself explains that “a tune doesn't have to be a lot of notes, but you have to have purpose, you have to know what you're saying”. He continues: “One of the things Stanley [Myers] told me is 'you got to have the tune: if you don't have a tune, you have nothing'” (Karalis 2012).<sup>7</sup> The composer himself has emphasised in many interviews that his melodic writing is “stupid and elementary” (Zimmer in Wright 2014). Almost in reply, Morricone said: “I have often simplified themes with two notes, with three notes, [...] giving up the theme to create a musical and instrumental fact around it” (Morricone in Calabretto 2010, 114). This idea takes form particularly in Zimmer's latest productive period, albeit through an aesthetic that differs from the conventional narrative thematic development: the theme is transformed and evolves in timbre and into a fragment that can be recognised by a given rhythmic sequence and the frequent use of a characteristic rhythmic-melodic *ostinato*, by a given instrument or even by association with a simple interval.<sup>8</sup>

Building from this firm foundation, Zimmer began to compose. Despite his plurilingualism, constant use of technology and timbral invention, owing to his desire to simplify his characteristics, his thematic writing is often in just one key and diatonic with a propensity for D minor, which in his opinion is the most assuring and expressive<sup>9</sup>—whereas in romantic comedies he shifts to major keys,

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**6** Miceli clarifies in this sense: “the fact that a theme can/should be easily memorised implies a drastic reduction of stylistic-formal solutions in the modal and tonal realm” (Miceli 2009, 613).

**7** Myers was a British composer, the man behind an aesthetic and dramaturgical revival through his relations with directors John Mackenzie and Stephen Frears in the decade 1980–1990. Myers chose a young Zimmer as his assistant and electronic programmer, initially assigning him small and insubstantial additions of synthetic sounds to his scores. Zimmer often likens his apprenticeship with Myers to a training school in the field for his future career of movie score composer. For more detail, see Stopar (2015–2016).

**8** Beginning especially with *Interstellar*, Zimmer's works present a structure in which harmony assumes a central role to the detriment of melody, which is basic to the development of a theme. Calabretto explains: “Sometimes [...] the renunciation of the theme is complete and the composer drafts motionless chords within which sound events happen. [...] Going beyond theme makes the presence of the melodic parameter irrelevant” (Calabretto 2010, 114).

**9** Zimmer's opinion is linked to personal perception: each tonality can be comforting according to the composer's abilities and lead to an expressive musical development. Goglio and Setti write: “A piece based on one key rather than another assumes a particular expressive quality to the extent that the music cannot be performed differently without changing in its substance the sentiment it communicates. The composer's choice of key is therefore never random because each one has its own particular resonance field and a consequent affinity with the inner tone, which at that precise moment characterises the musician's experience” (Goglio and Setti 2011, 79). Piana develops the same concept: “Tonal language is presented as being grafted as much into the physics of sound as much as into our cerebral reception capacities. It

especially C and F major—adding accent to degrees of subdominant, dominant and submediant in long values. He then develops these techniques in different musical styles: jazz, classical, pop, rock, folk music, symphonic-orchestral, and in the latest period in minimalist reiteration of different rhythmic patterns. In any case, because as a composer he is very attached to the dynamics and gradations of the instrumental mass intensity, during his thematic composition Zimmer often opts for *crescendos*, enabled by modulating from one key to another nearby and even by adopting different acoustic and/or electro-acoustic instrumentation, accelerating the texture through rhythmic-melodic *ostinatos*. In most cases, a final coda in *diminuendo* leads to a conclusion with a return to the principal key and the final exposition of the main theme's phrase through solo instruments in *mf/mp*.

Similar developments in dynamics are often present in Zimmer's orchestral themes, composed through melodic-narrative language with common phrasing—usually eight bars, in which the theme is bipartite (*Backdraft*, Ron Howard, 1991; *The Rock*, Michael Bay, 1996; *Rush*, Ron Howard, 2013)—or through minimalistic language (*The Da Vinci Code*, Ron Howard, 2006; *The Thin Red Line*, Terrence Malick, 1998; *Inception*, Christopher Nolan, 2010; *The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan, 2008; *Interstellar*, Christopher Nolan, 2014).

The theme's carrier phrase is often developed from a rhythmic-melodic *ostinato* or inspired by a precise intervallic nucleus. "Everything I write comes from an idea, from a certain interval, a minor third for example", the composer clarified (Zimmer in Hans Zimmer interview 2006). This provides insight into other well-known achievements related to minimalist language such as *12 Years A Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) and the abovementioned *The Da Vinci Code*, *Inception*, and *The Dark Knight*.

What transpires from Zimmer's rather simple compositional techniques is the immediacy of his thematic writing. He explains: "I try in all these scores, within the first second or two something evocative, to fit the DNA of whole thing inside it" (Zimmer in Bond and Kendall 1997, 18). This idea frequently returns in Zimmer to the extent of providing a historical reference model: the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67, *Allegro con Brio*. His extreme preference for this work comes from the immediacy of its brief opening phrases. "The Beethoven 5<sup>th</sup>: any kid can go ta-ta-taaaa...how did you know something so simplistic could become this cathedral of sound and so evocative?", Zimmer observes (Zimmer in Golden Age Media 2010). Almost fifteen years later, albeit more generically, he explained the same concept concisely: "The thing I love about music is that you can move people within a second" (Zimmer in Spice 2024).

What determines the theme's sonic impact is the choice of instrumentation: pitch concatenations, intervals, rhythms and *portamento* are linked to the

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is both a reinforcement and a burden that seems alien to the naturalism of classical theory" (Piana 2005, 140). The perception of pitch, tonality and harmony is also explored in depth by Borio and Garda (1989).

ensemble that creates the melodic line. In this regard, every composer makes use of her or his favourite instrument or orchestral section: when Williams was composing *Star Wars*, he could count on a collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra, and has indeed collaborated with them many times from then on. This has led to a predilection for the brass section as well as the piano, which is more suited to accompanying dramatic or autobiographical films. Choices of this kind are also linked to the composer's first experiences as a jazz pianist that lent him a natural approach to writing for the piano. The same can be said for Alexandre Desplat, who turned to writing for the woodwind section because of his youthful experiences. In many of their works, Alan Silvestri and John Debney develop melodic and harmonic material through the technique and mechanics of the guitar as the performers they are. In this way, they both reach similar harmonic and melodic solutions. Also the younger Ramin Djawadi and Heitor Pereira are good guitarists and their language is based on the technique of the instrument for the same reason. In cases like these, although the inspiration for melodic development comes from previous experience in instrumental practice, it does not impose writing for only one instrument: the film composer must therefore necessarily be able to develop themes for different instrumentation, in this way aspiring also to commissions of various kind. This is the Zimmer's case, linked to piano and guitar practice since adolescence but nevertheless capable over the years to compose themes and melodies for brass, clarinet, ethnic wind instruments, strings and cello—the latter his favourite instrument because in his words is one of the most expressive in terms of timbre and melody—right up to electronic and electro-acoustic instrumentation and the reinvention of the timbre of classical instruments, Zimmer's first and ultimate characteristic. In this sense he describes his work for the recent *Dune: Part Two* (Denis Villeneuve, 2024):

*I need five resonators because I have this vision of how things are supposed to sound! When [I'm] not haranguing [my] synth man, [I'm] sending [my] virtuoso woodwind player Pedro Eustache to the hardware store to buy lengths of PVC piping or demanding something ungodly from a heap of stolen sheet metal. "Do you bow it? Do you hit it? What do you do with it??" I was driving people crazy! (Zimmer in *Spice* 2024).*

The composer is not always driven to thematic-melodic writing by previous experience at practical level but rather by inspiration and imagination at the aesthetic level and aided by a staff of orchestrators and arrangers who enable his compositional ideas and make them coherent. Equally important in this creative process are the performing musicians: figures from whom Zimmer draws inspiration and with whom he shares his thematic ideas; the latter are not involved passively, but actively right from the preliminary stage in which they discuss possible developments or arrangements with the composer. Such has been the case with cellist Martin Tillman, soloist in *The Dark Knight*, violinist Aleksey Igudesman (*Sherlock Holmes*, Guy Ritchie, 2009), guitarists Pete

Haycock (*Thelma&Louise*, Ridley Scott, 1991), Heitor Pereira (*It's Complicated*, Nancy Meyers, 2009) and Johnny Marr (*Inception*), singer Lisa Gerrard (*Gladiator*, Ridley Scott, 2000), and American music therapist and singer Loire Cotler (*Dune: Part One*, Denis Villeneuve, 2021).<sup>10</sup>

Zimmer's range of choices—both instrumental and stylistic—for melodic thematic development may now be considered vast, and therein lies his great success: being able to employ innovative language in timbre and colours, always remaining linked to traditional thematic-leitmotif use.

At the composition level, an initial achievement for Zimmer in any given film project nearly always lies in the main theme and the development of the score concept, in his case called the “*1M1X Suite*” presented by Smalley (Sundance Institute 2014) and shared by other composers, including James Newton Howard, Howard Shore, Jerry Goldsmith and John Williams. For as much as these achievements are fundamental to the score, they are merely building blocks in a larger picture: themes must be appropriately assembled and combined with moving images. These thematic expositions may differ from the commercial soundtracks and find a different but at the same time standardised method of application in certain moments of the filmic narrative.

To begin with, inserting themes throughout the filmic narrative is a frequent practice because it permits natural evolution linked to temporal linearity. Their use is determined by the editing and length of scenes and sequences that mostly do not consent the presentation of the entire melodic theme phrase. In this sense, many composers develop the thematic material through the sensations produced by motifs. As Brown writes:

*Even the most toneful of composers rarely allow their melodic creation to remain intact throughout an entire score. Among other reason, the cinematic situation often affords only enough time for a motif taken from a melody (Brown 1994, 42).*

The length of the scenes and the manner of audiovisual editing often preclude the development of the theme in its entirety. It is simpler to include only one part of the melody at the base of the theme: the motif. Although only briefly, this motif must convey feelings and emotions that are often associated with the main characters or certain situations, and this determines the use of the leitmotif function. Most of Zimmer's works feature this type of function, facilitated by the use of the important technique of variation, which allows the same theme to be progressively articulated in different ways and heterogeneous musical developments in favour of the narrative to be created. Variations in film music are simple, immediate and easily understood:<sup>11</sup> Zimmer composes

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**10** Both parts sung offer all the prerogatives of a good melodic theme: they are recognisable, pleasurable, and evocative. Although incomprehensible, their sapient use of melisma communicates underlying emotions and pleasures well-suited to cinematographic language.

**11** Kalinak claims: “The leitmotivic score achieved an integral structure through

them personally, even if assistance from additional composers and arrangers is evident. Levine explains: "During my collaboration with Hans, my job was whatever was needed—mostly arranging" (Author's personal interview with Levine 2014). This important testimony is enriched by that of Jackman, who has long been a composer of additional music for important scores by Zimmer and is now an independent composer in his own freelance infrastructure: "Hans gives you a cue map. He's written a 2'30" piano piece, with loads of key changes, the mood of the movement. So, you've pretty much got all the ammunition, emotionally" (Jackman in Hurwitz 2007). Zimmer makes a first draft of the material, then checks the work done by collaborators who must often choose the most suitable instrumentation for the variation or arrangement. This lets him concentrate more on writing the original theme. "It is not uncommon for Zimmer to call on additional composers to 'flesh out' his ideas after he has composed the principal motifs and themes for a particular cue, especially on large film projects with tight schedules", Wright claims (Wright 2015, 321).<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his career, Zimmer has mainly made use of two types of variation: agogic tempo and instrumental variation. The agogic tempo variation is, in fact, the most widely used and the "most elementary" (Miceli 2009, 623): it is based on the contraction or dilation of the melody of the theme or of a part of it, implying also a change in rhythmic values. Variation of this kind may underlie instrumental variation, which consists of a knowing use of the expressiveness and timbre of a given instrument to convey emotions and sensations. These techniques, adopted by all the most famous composers, facilitate the thematic evolution in scores with multiple themes, whereas they are indispensable in scores with a single theme because they obviate an otherwise unavoidable rhythmic-melodic repetitiveness.

It is understandable, therefore, that every score can have several variations for several themes. Based on a comprehensive audiovisual analysis of Zimmer's filmography, it was possible to identify six case histories of score at thematic level:<sup>13</sup>

- Monothematic without variations: very rare.
- Monothematic with short secondary insertions and variations: usual.
- Monothematic with variations: usual.
- Bithematic with variations: usual.

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repetition and variation. This structure was tightened through relationships constructed among the various motifs" (Kalinak 1992, 108).

**12** Such is the case in *Dune: Part One*, in which Zimmer uses a minor key motif for a female voice (Cotler) then varied for cello, with cellist Tina Guo as performer. Similarly to as in *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), Zimmer's latest minimalist language is clearly evident in *Dune*, in which he uses a vast number of collaborators to create a unique sound universe that is indispensable in making the film and its narrative even more effective and engaging.

**13** Each type of score below is accompanied by the frequency with which Zimmer has used it.

- Bithematic with secondary themes: frequent.
- Plurithematic: very rare.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the number of themes and variations used, what nearly all Zimmer's works and many others in the mainstream share is the presentation of the main theme in the opening scene of the filmic narrative: this method clearly serves narrative functions. In many cases the opening scene is one of the film's most important and carefully crafted moments. Miceli writes: "The presence of a theme placed [...] over the opening and/or closing credits reinforces the hypothesis of all-encompassing meaning the creators intend to attribute to it" (Miceli 2009, 613), in a practice highly reminiscent of the *Overture* in opera. Zimmer displays a flair for this vaunted by very few mainstream composers, often giving a coherent, meaningful and comprehensive idea that allows the theme to explaining the meaning of the entire film.<sup>15</sup>

Four thematic achievements that clarify the main theme's evolution and plurilingualism can be selected here, starting with the opening scene in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford, 1989). Presented in the opening sequence, this main theme addresses the protagonist Daisy (Jessica Tandy), an autonomous and self-sufficient woman bent by old age and a human need for sensitivity. The film's first scene shows us Daisy in a fixed shot in her own room, preparing herself for usual morning outing. After an initial fragment of violins and piano in a minor key, the melodic clarinet phrase in C major —with the quite simple classical harmony I-IV-V-I for each phrase in period, determined by downwards motion in intervals of perfect fourth with the third degree lowered by a semitone in the period cadence, typical of blues and swing—begins in synchrony with the cut and the vision of Daisy walking out of the room. The music describes the woman's autonomy and her strong, assertive character despite her age, and her intent on going out in her car alone.

The image shows a musical score for the opening scene of the film *Driving Miss Daisy*. It consists of four staves: Violini (Violins), Pianoforte (Piano), Clarinetto (Clarinet), and Metronomo (Metronome). The Violini part starts with a melodic line in a minor key. The Pianoforte part provides accompaniment with a 'ppp' (pianissimo) dynamic. The Clarinetto part enters with a melodic phrase in C major, which is highlighted with a blue box. A vertical red line is placed at the beginning of this clarinet phrase, indicating the start of the main theme.

Img 1: carrier theme from the opening scene of *Driving Miss Daisy*.<sup>16</sup>

**14** Personal subdivision based on a comprehensive audiovisual analysis of Zimmer's filmography (Stopar 2015–2016). This list contains another subdivision into three groups: monothematic, bithematic, and plurithematic scores. It can help to explain Zimmer's compositional method even further. It is certainly impossible to present the works of each case in detail here. For further details in this regard and others, see Stopar (2015–2016).

**15** As regards the creation of the main theme, in 2000 Zimmer expressed himself in these terms: "We all have craft, we all have technique. But the moments of inspiration, that's where it really happens for composers" (Zimmer in Black 2000).

**16** Personal transcription. The vertical red marker indicates explicit

After starting the engine, Daisy is unable to control the vehicle and causes an accident in the driveway from which she emerges unharmed. The music falls silent during this event, a crucial stop because it leads to the hiring of the co-star, driver Hoke (Morgan Freeman). The clarinet phrase is repeated equally in sync with the title, as if to imply that the theme is expressly dedicated to Daisy's main character around whom the entire film revolves.

A second iconic result Zimmer achieved was the main theme for *Sherlock Holmes*. On this occasion, an agogic tempo variation in *Adagio* accompanies the locations and immediately draws the audience into the atmosphere of the filmic tale. The short fragments<sup>17</sup> are harmonically stable with tonic on the base (D-A) while the melodic line is characterised by semitones between first and second note of each fragment and by an 'up and down' progression which gives the impression of constant moving and flurry. These brief moments present the protagonist, his intelligence and neuronal hyperactivity, and will be occasionally varied throughout the filmic tale. They can be heard for the first time right at the beginning when viewing the *Warner Bros.* logos, customised for the occasion, and placed over a cobbled street with a very specific purpose: to make the spectator understand the film's location and historical setting.



Img 2: opening cue in *Sherlock Holmes*.<sup>18</sup>

*Inception* provides a third example that nicely exemplifies Zimmer's thematic-compositional practice, even if there's no fragments or melodies but rather a chordal succession that proceeds by intervals of a perfect fifth and descending semitone (F - C - E - B), a typical expedient of Zimmer's minimalist language that offers the harmonic basis for the orchestral exposition at the end of the filmic

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synchronisation with the editing cut and the vision of the main character's walk; the blue marker highlights the carrier phrase.

**17** Motifs, fragments, and progressions are all short forms with a reduced succession of notes that allow the theme to be introduced or interspersed. Miceli writes: "Motifs are understood as a reduced succession of sounds with an accomplished melodic character but unlike the theme, cannot be subdivided. The lower the number of its composite sounds—two may suffice—, the greater the chances that in repetition it will work as an ostinato" (Miceli 2009, 613). Adopting these short forms leads to so-called semi-themes and thematic bridges: "A semi-theme [...] is a melodic segment capable of manifesting itself either autonomously, generally relying on the technique of variations or as an integral part of a theme and without excluding cases in which a semi-theme is juxtaposed to a theme from which it is not directly derived, even if it has elements in common" (Miceli 2009, 619).

**18** Personal transcription. The blue marker shows the melodic fragments that make up the theme.

tale.<sup>19</sup> This introduction is followed by brass in *sf* and *crescendo* to coincide with the appearance of the *Legendary Pictures* logo. When the waves come into view, the music ceases and the soundscape fills with live noise.

Img 3: incipit from the opening cue in *Inception*.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the best-known examples of Zimmer's recent filmography include the opening scene for *The Dark Knight* and the related exposition of the "theme" for the Joker (Heath Ledger), which is also characterised by cinematic minimalism, constant reiteration of the melodic material, and the almost impressionistic attention to musical timbre at the expense of melodic-narrative evolution.<sup>21</sup> In *The Dark Knight* and in recent works, Zimmer increasingly composes themes and scores aimed at the continuous auditory discovery of the same musical material. Similar language, of which Zimmer is certainly the major initiator and representative, is now a new standard of composing for the cinema and media: it facilitates emotional involvement thanks to a "relevant function of sense-motor induction with pleasurable effects [...] for the viewer" (Cano and Poti 2004, 52).

In *The Dark Knight*, as also in *Inception*, melodic-narrative and thematic writing fades even more. It becomes idiomatic of the late Zimmer, which is evident in *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), *Dune: Part One* and finally *Dune: Part Two*.<sup>22</sup> The *glissato* of the cello, performed by Tillman and accompanied by

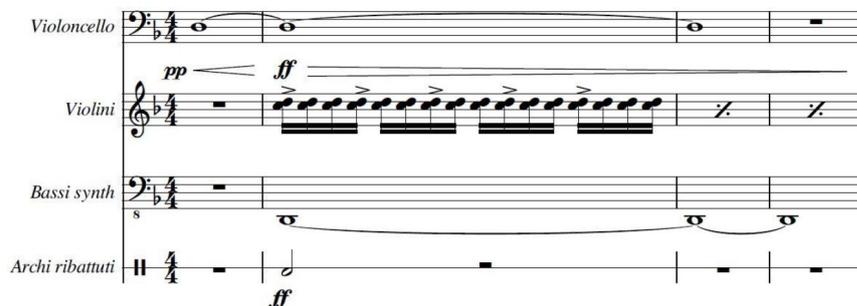
**19** After constructing the theme for the latter part of the filmic tale, Zimmer used the track for the release of the commercial soundtrack, the now well-known and overused *Time*.

**20** Personal transcription. The blue marker highlights the chordal succession of the carrier phrase.

**21** In 2010 Demers explained: "Minimalist music has become synonymous with predominantly American music featuring rhythmic and melodic repetition, tonal harmonies, and textural transformations that unfold slowly through a process of accretion" (Demers 2010, 69). The *Minimalist* music used in audiovisuals loses the characteristics of the historical current of the 1960s completely. Musical minimalism developed in a way that was not exactly univocal. Its language was heir to different schools of thought: from that of John Cage, which combined cyclicity, the use of sounds, noises and silence to that of the East and India, and even Buddhism, hypnosis and Zen philosophy. It spread throughout the United States from the 1960s thanks to four authors of almost the same age: La Monte Young (1935), Terry Riley (1935), Steve Reich (1936) and Philip Glass (1937). For an in-depth look at musical minimalism, among many texts and monographs, Philip Glass's autobiography (2015) would be a good place to start.

**22** Despite the fact that situations of this kind no longer involve actual themes, many composers including Zimmer continue to call these developments "themes" out

the minimal rhythmic *ostinato* by the violins and strings repeated for various audiovisual synchronies during the filmic narrative, provides a sonic identifier for Batman's antagonist, the Joker, without melodic-narrative texture but an unambiguous, clear, and extremely emotionally involving agglomeration of timbres instead.



Img 4: opening cue and Joker's theme for *The Dark Knight*.<sup>23</sup>

Many other examples could be taken from Zimmer's filmography. What the four examples above have in common, i.e. the presentation of the theme or one of its phrases or fragments in the opening scene, is certainly not innovative or exclusive to Zimmer's work: many films with music by other composers, from blockbusters to adventure or comedy genres, feature similar methods of application. Consider, among others, *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997, music by James Horner), *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013, music by John Williams), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, (Tim Burton, 2005, music by Danny Elfman), *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001, music by James Horner) or even *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994, music Alan Silvestri). What is clear in both Zimmer and these other authors, in addition to presenting the central core, the concept, the thematic-melodic idea around which the entire score will gravitate from the start, is the intention to emotionally involve the viewer and make the intervention recognisable. The concept is important for the comprehension of the filmic narrative, and if it is developed with coherence and sufficient clarity, "then [...] it will give it strength and unity, [...] a unified approach that helps maintain the film's dramatic integrity" (Karlin and Wright 2004, 107).

The concept enables the development of a variable number of themes: this means that throughout the film, in addition to the main theme, several thematic developments, fragments or phrases, addressed to different characters or certain sequences will be presented. This allows Zimmer to diversify his scores by number of themes, from monothematic to plurithematic.

Even if a score can contain a variable number of themes, over the years cinema has offered standardisation by developing works with a limited number of themes. After presenting the main theme, in some projects Zimmer also

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of convention and due to their use in the narrative.

**23** Personal transcription. Overlapping electric guitar parts must be added to the cello.

develops the score around the same main theme, and whenever variations are lacking, the entire work becomes repetitive.<sup>24</sup> To remedy situations like these, at the start of his career Zimmer tended to expand the theme presentation through the entire film by adopting the principle of a “sub-dynamic arch” within the narrative.<sup>25</sup> In many other examples, he relies on instrumental or agogic tempo variations, brief fragments, harmonic progressions, motifs and rhythmic figures for bridging. In agreement with the director, he may also choose to intersperse the original score with pre-existing songs of different genres. Fairly standardised Zimmer thematic use can be heard in *Rush* (Ron Howard, 2013), a monothematic score to which songs are added to contextualise the historical period of the 1970s in which the film inspired by true events and the rivalry between Formula One drivers Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) and James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth) takes place.

The concept of the original score composed by Zimmer lies in the main theme. The main theme from the respective track in the commercial soundtrack *Lost But Won* begins with a solo cello part that exposes the main phrase: the instrument evokes drama, melancholy, and pride, all emotions that give insight into the events narrated. As usually, Zimmer composes in D minor natural and insists on the tonic, submediant, and subdominant degrees that are so frequent in his melodic writing.



before the German Grand Prix race in which the Austrian driver risked his life in a serious accident. After an introduction by violins in chordal passages of semibreves, the cello solo takes over, accompanied by the *ostinato* of the electric guitar and bass. The music flows without evident synchrony during some abstract images and others, regarding the preparation of cars for the race.



Img 6: first presentation of the theme.<sup>28</sup>

This is followed by a brief but significant theme's variation by the brass section and electric guitar, an ensemble that will be given more space in the film's second half.

As usual in dramatic action films, Zimmer uses the orchestral sections to give instrumental emphasis and variation to the main theme phrase and celebrate certain events within the narrative. The theme is presented by the string section during the sequence in which Lauda, despite medical advice to the contrary, returns to the track in the Italian Grand Prix after his accident in the race in Germany. Zimmer re-proposes the same melodic cello theme in an *Adagio* agogic tempo variation with harmonic accompaniment by violins. This variation describes the fragility and the protagonist's determination in melancholic and at the same time introspective tones until the violins return in minimum values at intervals of descending thirds (D – F, C – E) interspersed with synths kept in high frequency that give the cue in synchrony with Lauda's closing of the visor in the pit lane after giving a last look at his wife. The synchronisation and subsequent interruption of the music reinforce the main character's concentration and bring us back to the start of the Grand Prix race.



Img 7: variation of the carrier theme.<sup>29</sup>

The race is accompanied by background noise, TV commentary, and electric guitar riffs up to the moment Hunt went off the track and gave Lauda a notable advantage. The close-up of Hunt and the montage cut is followed by an aerial view of Lauda's car in synchrony with the exposition of the same theme phrase, this time varied instrumentally through the entire string section and accompanied

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thing I'm remembered for is what happened on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1976, while I was chasing him ... like an idiot."

**28** Personal transcription. The blue market highlights the carrier phrase.

**29** Personal transcription. The red vertical marker indicates the explicit synchronisation with the protagonist's closing of his visor.

by percussions. This variation foreshadows the subsequent orchestral exposition that celebrates and emphasises the images at an important moment in the narrative: after the accident, the protagonist returns to drive and makes a totally unexpected fourth place finish. After crossing the finish line, Lauda takes another lap before offering himself up to his fans. Similarly to as in *Inception*, this moment is celebrated by the exposition of the brass, the strings *ostinato* and the harmonic accompaniment by the women's choir.

Img 8: exposition by the brass section of the main theme in *Rush*.<sup>30</sup>

This is how Zimmer reaches the climax of his thematic exposition, repeated equally during Hunt's victory of the championship and Lauda's withdrawal from the last Grand Prix race of the season. In the last sequence of the film, however, simultaneously with the main character's off-screen monologue, yet another exposition of the theme enhances the score before the end credits begin rolling with the cello solo followed by the orchestra.

The main theme is exposed on fifteen occasions during the film, nine just in the second half, and is not addressed only to one of the two main characters, but to the entire filmic plot. In agogic tempo and instrumental variations, the same theme serves different functions: whereas the cello solo accompanies the images and adds drama, the orchestral exposition provides celebration and emphasis. Above and beyond the variations, it is worth noting that in *Rush* the theme is always presented entirely, with its alternating motifs or fragments with clear purpose within the filmic narrative. Miceli explains: "Solemnity and the search for epic depth generally lie at the heart of extended themes and motivic-thematic concatenations" (Miceli 2009, 616).

Whether Zimmer's scores are monothematic, bithematic or plurithematic, expounded by melodic-narrative principle or expressly based on minimalism, timbral sensations and the creation of a unique and unambiguous sonic universe, their development along the filmic narrative almost always undergoes continuous evolution, similar to that present in *Rush*: in most cases the main theme, the core of the concept, is inserted in the first film sequence and is then varied throughout the narrative, emphasising the salient moments of the story through the leitmotiv function. By this principle, Zimmer creates moments that

<sup>30</sup> Personal transcription. The vertical red marker indicates the explicit synchronisation with Lauda's car as it crosses the finish line. The blue marker highlights the second part of the theme's phrase.

remain clearly defined in the viewer's memory, assuming iconic dimension in the filmic narrative.

Regardless of the number and nature of his themes, the core in Zimmer's work lies in the concept that later branches out to secondary or other primary themes at his discretion or the desire of the director. Thematic writing becomes the most distinctive and renowned part of his work. As other colleagues, this is why he nourishes an honest intellectual attachment to his various thematic creations. His numerous personal statements make it clear with exuberance, sarcasm and sincerity the extent to which the themes of his scores are fundamental to him in his creative and compositional practice. In regard to his creative process and thematic development, Zimmer has openly stated:

*I digest it, sleep it, dream it. Try to see what it smells like, what the scent of it is. Searching for themes is like hunting animals. You hunt, you hone it down, I have to get all of my rationalizing out of the way first. It's got nothing to do with thinking (Seeger and Whetmore 2004, 207-08).*

Zimmer's extensive use of thematic writing, whether melodic-narrative, minimalistic, or more closely related to sound design, emphasises the extent to which although he is an aesthetically innovative composer, he has also aligned himself with the thematic language of tradition. As Wright properly claims:

*Zimmer creates what he calls minimalist music taken to a romantic level [...] building on Wagnerian codes of dramaturgic unity and classical Hollywood continuity, as well as sampled colors that clarify narrative details (Wright 2015, 325).*

Allusions could therefore be made to a new ramification of thematic composing linked to an aesthetic vision based on timbre and the search for a sonic universe that is both original and characteristic from project to project. This is especially true of his later production and compositional period. These new achievements distance him considerably from the concepts of "theme" and "thematic development" of classical order, placing his work among that of the innovators in the genre with results of notable interest in understanding the evolution of film music. What is remarkable in Zimmer is his ability to develop a language as appropriate as possible for moving images and to understand from time to time different narratives, presented by different directors and played by different actors. Even with some repetition at stylistic level, Zimmer has been, and continues to be, the best example of how maintaining success—in any field—depends on being able to adapt, evolve and improvise when necessary, because, as Charles Robert Darwin wrote, "in the long history of humankind [...] those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed" (Darwin in Campanini and Hutchins 2014, 4).

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# The New Digital Documentality of Contemporary Film Scoring Practices.

## Preliminary Results Based on Participant Observation at the Studio of North American Composer Christopher Young

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The digital transition has radically transformed the atelier of the contemporary composer, leading to the emergence of a new “digital documentality”. This change necessitates a renewal of musicological research methodologies concerning contemporary creative practices. This paper presents the preliminary findings of an ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Christopher Young’s studio, highlighting the need to consider both documents and production practices. This approach has led to the development of an eclectic study methodology that integrates archival work with the investigation of oral histories, utilising a wide range of documentary sources and leading to a redefinition of the inquiry method. Despite the difficulty of replicating such a large-scale study, both synchronically and diachronically, we believe this research can provide meaningful methodological guidance for musicology concerned with source criticism in contemporary productions. Field observations focused on the music production of Christopher Young’s team for three films: *The Autopsy* (David Prior, 2022), *The Offering* (Oliver Park, 2023), and *The Piper* (Erlingur Thoroddsen, 2023). Fieldwork revealed how music teams integrate digital technologies into the compositional process with original technical, experimental, and creative solutions. The flexibility introduced by the digital transition represents one of the most significant challenges for contemporary musicological research on film music interested in reconstructing the compositional process.

<sup>1</sup> The authors developed this text cooperatively and therefore share its contents, methods and perspectives. This work was conceived as part of the research activities of the Turin Unit for the PRIN 2020 project “New Music Writing Processes for Cinema” (PI Roberto Calabretto). Some paragraphs, substantially modified and here placed in a new context, are taken from an earlier study published in Italian (Bruno, Meandri, and Ferdeghini 2021-22). The research was organised as follows: Andrea Bruno carried out the participant observation period in Culver City and Los Angeles, from December 15, 2021 to March 12, 2022. The materials collected and produced during the field research were later analysed by Andrea Bruno and Ilario Meandri from June to October 2022 and October 2023 to March 2024. The writing was divided as follows: Ilario Meandri wrote § 1, 3 (from the words “These terms describe local processes” to the end) and § 6. He also drafted together with Andrea Bruno the flowcharts in Fig. 2. Giulia Ferdeghini drafted the flowcharts in the Appendix, § 2 and the Bibliography. Andrea Bruno wrote the remaining paragraphs.

### Keywords

Film Music Digital Documentality Contemporary Film Scoring Christopher Young/Film Composer’s Studio Digital Film Music Production Compositional Process

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While it is not possible to generalize contemporary compositional processes based on a single field observation, however extensive, we believe we have witnessed the end of an era in the artistic, professional, and personal journey of the composer and the beginning of a new creative phase, paralleling the broad aesthetic and production revolution in the contemporary music industry. In this context, some points seem to gain greater importance: the centrality of the collaborative team; the abundance of musical material and the layering of sources; the auralization and marginalization of musical writing.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present the preliminary findings of ethnographic fieldwork focusing on the compositional process of the renowned American composer Christopher Young. The participant observation extended from December 15, 2021, to March 12, 2022, at Christopher Young's studio and residence in Los Angeles and aimed to gain a better understanding of the compositional techniques employed in contemporary practice, as well as of the professional interaction between the composer, members of the music team, musicians, and film production staff. The observation focused on the simultaneous production of the scores for three distinct films: *The Autopsy* (David Prior, 2022)—third episode of the Netflix anthology series *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities*—and Millenium Media's *Abyzou* (Oliver Park, 2023), released in theatres as *The Offering*, and *The Piper* (Erlingur Thoroddsen, 2023). During the observation period, it was possible to collect a wide range of audiovisual materials and digital documents on the film scoring process of the mentioned works.

While a previous paper, published in Italian (Bruno, Meandri, and Ferdeghini 2021-22), focused on the intertwined compositional processes of these three films, this essay endeavours to explore the new digital documentality generated by the contemporary creative process. It is widely known that the digital transition has radically changed the atelier of the contemporary composer. The resulting emergence of a new digital documentality must necessarily lead to a renewal of musicological research methodologies on contemporary creative practices. The array of digital technologies involved in the composition process constitutes a fertile ground for creative exploration and experimentation, and various artistic teams incorporate these technologies into their daily work, giving rise to innovative technical and creative solutions. Field observation reveals how different music teams can assimilate the new means at hand with original technical and creative solutions. While this attitude is not unique to digital practice and, as we have elsewhere attempted to demonstrate (Meandri 2013) has always characterised creative processes in relation to compositional technologies, the digital transition has opened the door to unprecedented flexibility in the composition process, a reality that remains largely unexplored, representing one of the most significant challenges for contemporary musicological research on film music.

# METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT WORK

In recent years, there has been a notable surge in research within media anthropology, transcultural, and transnational studies, focusing on contemporary production systems through ethnographic or *quasi*-ethnographic approach.<sup>2</sup> This trend reflects the need to consider both documents and production practices, giving rise to an eclectic study methodology that integrates archival work with the investigation of oral memories and exploits a wide range of documental sources, ranging from traditional textual resources to audiovisual, electronic or digital ones. The radical technological transformation in the working environment of composers has led to a redefinition of the method of inquiry. Contemporary musicological practices recognize that no one type of source necessarily has etiological priority over the others, and different types of sources can be complementary in reconstructing the creative processes and production history of a soundtrack.<sup>3</sup> Participant observation allows for the granular reconstruction of production practices, contextualising the production of resources (documental traces of the creative process) in the context of the interactions that generated them. Nonetheless, participant observation in these contexts has several limitations. Given the idiosyncratic nature of individual production practices and their continual transformation, a generalization about contemporary practice should flow from the collation of ethnographic data from different production contexts and, even within the same context, observation should be repeated over time. However, replicating the methodology on such a large scale, synchronically and diachronically, is challenging. While Young's cooperation provided unprecedented access for our research, such openness remains an exception in a field traditionally resistant to external observation. Despite these limitations, we believe this work produced significant results leading, in the context examined, to an initial exploration of the new digital documentality of the compositional process. Such an exploration provides meaningful methodological guidance for musicology concerned with source criticism in contemporary productions.

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**2** We first used the term *quasi*-ethnographic (Meandri 2024) referring to the use of research methods borrowed from ethnography or sociology within disciplines such as musicology or media studies, in which fieldwork has not historically played a central role but is gaining new importance in the research perspectives of the last decade at least. The adoption of these methodologies does not necessarily require the researcher to adhere to the methodological and deontological paradigms of ethnography, hence the prefix *quasi*. For a broader review of ethnographic approaches and methodologies, both in the field of ethnomusicology and popular music, specifically regarding the context of recording studios, we refer to the recent collection of essays edited by Giuriati and Facci (2024).

**3** See for example Calabretto (2010), Sapiro (2017), Viviani (2018).

## PRODUCTION CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Christopher Young currently heads a music production company, Ilsley Music Inc., where a small team of collaborators, with whom the composer has developed a carefully structured working method, operates.<sup>4</sup> At the time of our participant observation, Young's team consisted of six members: composer Jared Banta served as the scoring assistant, while composers Max Blomgren, Jung J. Lee, and Daniel Wehr worked as music programmers, with composer Brandon Brown functioning as Young's personal assistant and aspiring composer Muye Yu participating as an intern.<sup>5</sup>

Although our focus is on the making of *The Autopsy*, it is important to briefly summarize the context in which the field observation began, with key events outlined in Fig. 1. In May 2021, as we were beginning to plan our research period at Christopher Young's studio, the composer was starting to work on the soundtracks for two films funded by the same production company, Millennium Media: *The Piper*, along with *Abyzou*, both belonging to the horror genre. *The Piper's* plot centres on the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and features a diegetic piece, the *Concerto for Children*, a composition for flute, children's choir, and orchestra endowed with evil powers. Since the music is scheduled to be partially performed on set, the composer's involvement is necessary in the pre-production stage. By June 2021, most of the pre-production material needed for *The Piper* had been discussed with the director and handed over to the production company's music department. With the beginning of summer and the completion of this first phase of work, filming of *The Piper* began. Meanwhile, Young started working on *Abyzou*, which required a completely different approach and the creation of an entirely electronic score. Despite using extensively proven processes, the creation of the electronic score of *Abyzou* turned out to be more complex than expected. The work thus overlapped with the beginning of a third project, *The Autopsy*. Between November and December, when our participant observation period began, Young was busy

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**4** Christopher Young, born April 28, 1957 in Red Bank, New Jersey, studied music at Hampshire College and North Texas State University, completing his training at UCLA under David Raksin. In the early years of his career, he primarily worked in the horror genre, scoring films such as *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) and *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (Tony Randel, 1988), which marked a significant turning point in his style. In the 1990s, he broadened his scope, collaborating with directors such as Norman Jewison, Curtis Hanson, and Sam Raimi, contributing to films like *The Hurricane* (1999) and *Spider-Man 3* (2007). He currently teaches composition at the University of Southern California (USC) and continues to work across various film genres, including recent projects like *Pet Sematary* (2019) and *The Empty Man* (2020).

**5** As is customary for Christopher Young, all of his collaborators are freelance composers who attended Young's classes within the Scoring for Motion Picture and Television Program (SMPTV) at USC, initially joining the composer's studio as interns. Banta, Blomgren, Lee, Wehr and Brown have been working with Young for several years.

on these two fronts. The team was working at full speed on David Prior's film when, in mid-January 2022, Young was asked to partially rewrite a song for the end credits of *Abyzou*. Also in January, while *The Autopsy* was still in full swing, Young resumed work on *The Piper*, which was finally entering the post-production phase. Complicating matters further, Young and his associates also had to manage a complex relocation at the same time: the changing production conditions required reducing the production costs incurred by the composer's company, necessitating the abandonment of the Culver City studio. On March 1st, 2022, Young thus moved his business to Santa Monica, opening a new studio in the garage of his home, which had been emptied and turned into a temporary location for what would in the future become the composer's new home studio.

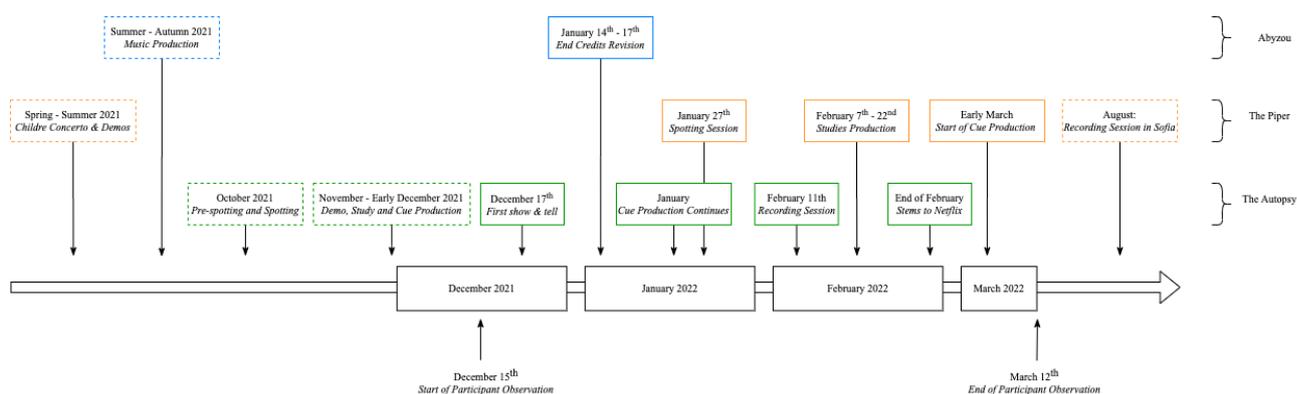


Fig. 1. Work context 2021–2022 and participant observation period.

Young's compositional process underwent radical changes throughout his career. It is important to try to contextualize what was observed in Los Angeles about the different working methodologies Young experienced over time, which have been reconstructed with the composer. It is known that Young's style and professional identity were significantly influenced by the work and figure of Bernard Herrmann (Fichera 2016, 316–317). On the one hand, Herrmann's stylistic elements reverberate in Young's writing (examples include the use of the ostinato technique and particular attention given to timbre that results in meticulous and, to some extent, extreme orchestrations). On the other hand, and this is the aspect that is particularly emphasised here, Young has for years embraced the rigorous and precise professional ethic famously professed by Herrmann, based on the ideal myth of the "total" composer who, while operating within a highly collaborative system based on the division of roles, defends and preserves authorship over every aspect of his work. In Young's case, this ethical approach translated into difficulty in delegating certain stages of the process to other people: especially orchestration, which intimately defines the composer's stylistic identity. Secondly, this ethical stance also resulted in Young's initial resistance to the production changes imposed by the system, leading to reluctance in embracing digital writing technologies and new composition methods, under the belief that it is preferable to conceive and write one's music exclusively with pencil and paper.

Young's early years in Los Angeles were characterised by constant and

exhausting music writing, carried out on the verge of self-isolation. It was not until 1989, during the making of *The Fly II* (Chris Walas), after a series of resistances and to avoid a nervous breakdown, that Young decided to resort to using orchestrators for the first time (Schelle 1999, 412).

While continuing to produce very detailed sketches and retaining the title of co-orchestrator in most of his work, Young took another crucial step at the end of the '90s when, due to unexpected scheduling conflicts, the post-production of two very different films overlapped: *Rounders* (John Dahl, 1998) and *Urban Legend* (Jamie Blanks, 1998), both requiring a substantial amount of music. The composer needed to find a solution to speed up production time without using additional composers, so he devised a system based on dictating the sketches to his assistants. The success of this strategy, refined over time, allowed Young not to use sequencers and music notation software himself. Young explains the principles governing this choice:

*My writing process stems from the early days when there were no mockups. Eventually, I sketched my cues, but in the earliest days, I used to orchestrate directly as I composed. Without mockups, the cue was heard for the first time on the scoring stage (except for a piano rendition performed for the director). Ultimately, this means that all you had to depend upon for whether or not the cue was going to work was what you had in your head. [...] These days I have to do mockups like everybody else [...] to preview my cues to the director. The way this works in my studio is that my initial sketch still comes from sitting in a room with the picture and playing on the piano what I hear in my head. [...] The initial musical direction of the cue is still dictated by my head and not by the technology. [...] The aid of a computer can quickly turn into a crutch, and before you know it, the computer is making up your mind for you.<sup>6</sup>*

Young's compositional practices underwent another significant change when he produced the complex electronic score for the film *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012) entirely digitally. Lacking the necessary skills to work independently on the virtual score, Young prepared a series of preliminary compositions, whose conception and structure were detailed on paper sketches, sometimes utilising unconventional notation systems, and whose realisation was entrusted to collaborators (music programmers) who worked under the composer's close supervision. These compositions are referred to as *studies* in the composer's and his collaborator's nomenclature.

In the terminology employed at Young's studio, studies are musical ideas designed to establish an overarching mood and dramaturgy. These ideas are subsequently adjusted, if not drastically recomposed, directly to the images at a later stage. A study is thus a piece composed during the initial phases

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<sup>6</sup> The passage is taken from an unpublished manual of composition for film music authored by Young himself and used by the composer in USC courses (*CY Book* [unpublished] § "Unit III: Scoring a Feature", pp. 169-170). Courtesy of the author.

of devising either a hybrid or entirely virtual score. Studies are proposed to directors as potential conceptual or compositional approaches to follow during the soundtrack production process (consequently, they are not yet synchronised with the visuals). Studies are produced using a library of sampled sounds created specifically for the project. They typically revolve around abstract ideas: no central themes or motifs are developed, rather simpler phrases, rhythmic patterns and unique timbral effects, sometimes with a technique partly reminiscent of pointillism. Originally, the studies technique was primarily employed in the context of films with predominantly electronic soundtracks. However, the effectiveness of this compositional method has led Young and his team to adopt this technique for orchestral scores as well.<sup>7</sup>

*Demo* is another recurring term at Young's studio. *Demos* are mockups of any musical idea composed for an orchestra or other real ensemble. They offer alternative melodic proposals for what will become the central themes of the film and are presented to filmmakers during the early stages of score conception (and thus, like the studies, are not yet synchronised with the visuals). Demos are usually produced for solo piano. Sometimes they can be enhanced by the addition of a solo part integrated into the virtual piano mockup (as, we shall see, will be the case with the banjo for *The Autopsy*). The structure of demos is essential (melody + accompaniment). Once completed, the composer and team members listen to them entirely, during some meetings. Each team member is asked to express a preference among the various alternatives. Following these sessions, the selected alternatives are sorted by the composer and the score assistant and sent to the director. The latter, in turn, chooses the final option based on his preferences.

In addition to studies and demos, Young's studio still employs mockups, i.e. the customary virtual simulations of a cue widely used in film music practice. Mockups are synchronised with the visuals and are used for final approval of the cue before the *recording session* for all-analog scores, or before final processing for hybrid scores.

While the actual processes underlying the creation of studies, demos, and soundtrack composition in general can be, as we will see shortly, very complex, it is possible to abstract the logic of demos, studies, and mockups as follows:

1. demos exclusively focus on thematic and motivic materials. They are not synchronised to images and are used in the preliminary stages of the work for auditing purposes (referred to as *show & tell* in Young's studio terminology) with the filmmakers. Additionally, demos serve as a tool for the composer's team to evaluate and select the most effective thematic and motivic ideas;

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<sup>7</sup> In Bruno, Meandri, and Ferdeghini (2021–22) we document how the composer employed the *studies* technique to compose the orchestral score of *The Piper*, with which we will not deal here. In the case of *The Piper*, this technique, originally conceived for the genesis of virtual scores, proves extremely effective even when applied to a traditional score.

2. studies are either musical vignettes or palettes of sounds designed to establish a conceptual framework and general mood or atmosphere for the underscore.<sup>8</sup> They may or may not incorporate thematic or motivic materials. Like demos, studies are not synchronised to the visuals and are utilized in the initial stages of the process. They function either as a method of internal music team selection of the most effective underscore concepts or as a validation tool during the show & tell stages with filmmakers;
3. mockups can descend from demos and studies when these preliminary materials take on the appearance of actual cues now finally synchronised to the images. Mockups can include both thematic/motivic and non-thematic/motivic material.

These terms describe local processes. They are, at the present state of our knowledge, non-standard practices, and it is therefore appropriate to define them through the use of general schemes [Fig. 2]. These patterns, as we shall see, are abstractions of processes that may be, in the history of a single film production, much more complex; but they nonetheless give us insight into compositional practices in Young's studio.

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<sup>8</sup> *Underscore* and *source* are the pragmatic distinctions that composers (though not all) resort to in technical documents that are drafted during production (e.g., summary sheets. See Karlin and Wright 2004, 45). In practice *underscore* replaces, although the overlap is not total, the term "extradiegesis," while *source* stands for "diegesis." Hagen (1971), also quoted by Kassabian (2001), employs in place of *underscore* the term *dramatic scoring* and further distinguishes as *source scoring* the range of possible situations of *source music* used for dramatic purposes, with an ambiguity that cannot be resolved at either the *source* or *underscore* level (what, with another nuance, Sergio Miceli calls the *mediated level* in Miceli (2000, 359). On the use of these terms and on the diegetic/extradiegetic opposition see Neumayer (2009) and Alessandro Cecchi (2010).

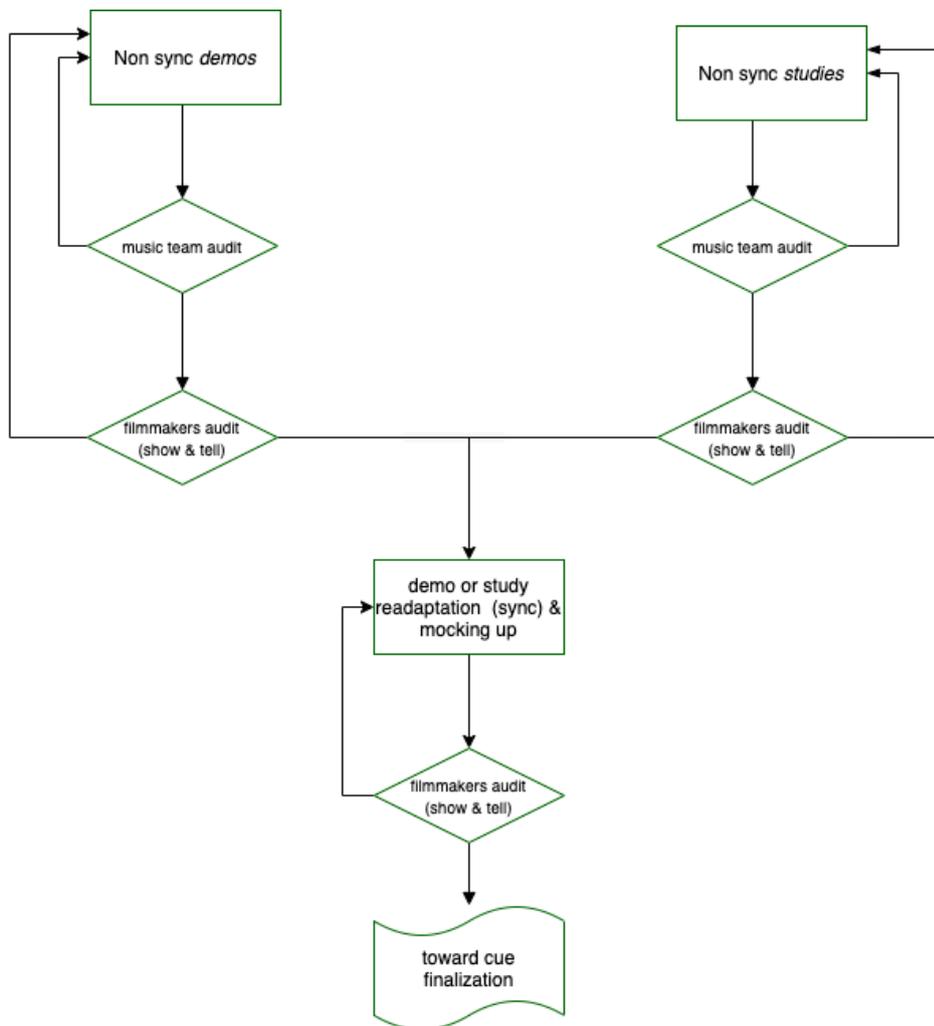


Fig. 2 A generalization of the composition logic of demos, studies, and mockups.

## PRODUCTION PHASES OF *THE AUTOPSY*

The making of *The Autopsy* can be examined by delineating the four main phases during which the composer and his team schedule and organize their work: the *spotting session*; the preparation of studies and demos; the actual composition of the underscore; and the *recording session*. To make the various stages clearer, the aforementioned diagram to be found in [Appendix 1](#) could be of some help throughout the reading: each stage and substage of the process has a labelled mark corresponding to the description in the text.

### 1. The Spotting

It is important to note that, in contemporary film music production, the spotting session no longer marks the composer and his team's first viewing of the film. As a matter of fact, before *The Autopsy's* spotting, the Netflix music department provided Young with the film along with three audio tracks: one for dialogues, one for sound effects, and one for the *temp track*, consisting of temporary music selected by director Prior. Therefore, at the time when the actual spotting session happened, on October 26, 2021, the composer had

already watched the film a few times, either on his own, on his iPad, or with his team, and had identified key issues for discussion. The pre-viewing allowed the team to annotate and comment on the director's music choices (temp track) and to brainstorm on the general mood to be conveyed through the musical score (A1).

### 1.1. Preliminary Meeting

Preceding the main spotting session, a preliminary meeting with *The Autopsy's* director, David Prior, took place on October 18 (A2). During this initial meeting Prior—a knowledgeable *connoisseur* of film music—discussed with Young his concept for the title track sequence, exemplified by the use in the temp track of a piece by Georges Delerue from the soundtrack of *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983), written for string orchestra and solo banjo. Although budget constraints necessitated limiting the accompaniment to a string quartet instead of a full orchestra, Young expanded on the idea of using the banjo to characterize not only the opening and closing credits, but also the entire soundtrack and the specific setting of the story: a small mining town in Pennsylvania, where coroner Dr. Carl Winters (F. Murray Abraham) conducts autopsies on miners who died under mysterious circumstances.

As for the core sections of the film underscore, certain technical decisions were taken: on one hand, sequences involving the sheriff and the local police investigation into the miners' disturbing deaths would feature a hybrid score, created by digitally manipulating aleatoric,<sup>9</sup> non-synchronised music, pre-recorded at Young's studio with a string quartet and banjo ensemble; on the other hand, all sequences concerning the alien with whom the protagonist confronts at the end of the film, would be scored with pure electronics, created by the manipulation of sound samples.

During the meeting, the scoring assistant took notes to draft the so-called *preliminary notes* [Fig. 3]. This file lists all the music cues of the temp track. For each cue a working title, an "M number", time-in and time-out codes are annotated, along with a brief description of the corresponding film action or differing music entry and exit points suggested by the composer. Young's commentary, if any, is added at the bottom of each cue. The spotting notes also include a list of categories in which each cue finds place.

- Character Music: title track and end credits music for string quartet and banjo, to be recorded during the recording session that will take place near the end of the process.
- Hybrid: the musical commentary for the police investigation, made of aleatoric music, first recorded at Young's studio and then digitally manipulated.

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<sup>9</sup> In the "emic" context of Hollywood mainstream music production, the meaning of "aleatoric music" differs slightly from the concept, aesthetics, and formal technique of avantgarde music, which is well-known by "classically trained" musicologists (e.g. Pendereckyan writing for sound masses, extended techniques for strings, woodwinds, etc.). On this topic we refer to: Meandri and Guizzi (2014–15); on "aleatoric" virtual instruments see Meandri and Gilodi (2022).

- Alien: the music related to the alien, composed around digitally manipulated sampled sounds.

<b>1m1</b>	<b>OPENING</b>		<b>SCORE</b>
<b>*** ENDS MUCH LATER ***</b>			
<b>Alien</b>			
MUSIC	TEMP		
IN	<b>+01:00:03:01</b>	<b>+01:00:03:01</b>	On first title card
OUT	<b>+01:02:19:00</b>	<b>+01:00:47:00</b>	Tail out under mining equipment sounds
	<b>02:16</b>	<b>00:44</b>	
<b>1m2</b>	<b>MINE EXPLOSION</b>		<b>SCORE</b>
<b>*** STARTS MUCH LATER ***</b>			
<b>Alien</b>			
MUSIC	TEMP		
IN	<b>+01:02:19:00</b>	<b>+01:01:14:13</b>	On cut to elevator bell for quitting time
OUT	<b>+01:02:19:00</b>	<b>+01:02:19:00</b>	Hard out on explosion FX
	<b>00:00</b>	<b>01:04</b>	CY suggests we merge 1M1 and 1M2 into one cue
<b>1m3</b>	<b>CARL ARRIVES TO MEET WITH NATE</b>		<b>SCORE</b>
<b>*** STARTS LATER ***</b>			
<b>W-PA Character Music</b>			
MUSIC	TEMP		
IN	<b>+01:02:28:15</b>	<b>+01:02:21:07</b>	Before fade up to spider web
OUT	<b>+01:04:30:02</b>	<b>+01:04:30:02</b>	As they start talking in the hallway
	<b>02:01</b>	<b>02:09</b>	CY - Start a few seconds later to allow time to digest the explosion
<b>1m4</b>	<b>FLASHBACK - FINDING ABEL'S BODY</b>		<b>SCORE</b>
<b>*** STARTS LATER ***</b>			
<b>Hybrid</b>			
MUSIC	TEMP		
IN	<b>+01:07:39:09</b>	<b>+01:07:28:01</b>	Dissolve to recollecting what happened
OUT	<b>+01:09:17:13</b>	<b>+01:09:17:13</b>	Begin hold + tail before officer vomits
	<b>01:38</b>	<b>01:50</b>	CY - Start a little later as we push in on Nate's hands clasped on the desk

Fig. 3 Excerpt from the preliminary notes of *The Autopsy*.

## 1.2. The Spotting Session

By the time of the actual spotting session, there had already been several preliminary meetings where, by examining the temp track, some important issues had already been looked through. This is why this particular session could be completed in just a few hours, whereas in the past, spotting sessions might have lasted over a couple of days.<sup>10</sup> Despite remaining a crucial step in the process, it no longer carries the same thrilling sense of creative excitement, as recalled by Young.

The session was held at Young's studio, lasted about three hours and was fully recorded on digital audio devices. Director David Prior, composer Christopher Young, scoring assistant Jared Banta and programmer Max Blomgren (A4) were all present, with Blomgren responsible for the film's playback. In a relaxed and cozy atmosphere, guided by the predetermined temp track list, Young and the filmmaker went through the music spots, without rewatching the entire film. Prior shared his observations on each cue, explaining the motivations behind each temp track choice, and detailing the inner characteristics and dramatic needs of the related sequences. Whenever the picture was incomplete—editing

10 See Karlin and Wright 2004, especially chapter 4.

was yet to be refined, special effects or other features were still missing—, Prior provided a vivid description of what the final version would look like. Young and scoring assistant Banta—who was free to interact with the director—questioned him and speculated on the possibility of adding cues to the various thematic categories. Entry and exit points of cues were discussed among the participants and occasionally changed based on the composer's suggestions, as well as the opportunity to combine two subsequent cues to form a longer, composite one. Sporadically, Young expressed his puzzlement about the presence of a cue where he would have preferred to allow silence to speak. After about three hours, *The Autopsy's* spotting session came to an end.

### 1.3. After the Spotting

To ensure that the information was accessible to all members of Young's team throughout the film's post-production process, immediately after the meeting Banta transcribed the spotting notes. He initially stored the audio recordings of the session on the studio's cloud storage (Dropbox), divided them into chapters using Cubase, and then summarised the content in a document which contains all the remarks and instructions provided during the spotting session for each cue. With this information at hand, the scoring assistant updated the preliminary notes and converted them into the definitive cue list, outlining the correct timing and label for each cue to be composed (A5). This new document served as a vital reference during working sessions, facilitating the quick creation of summary diagrams. These diagrams, regularly printed and provided to the composer, allowed the scoring assistant to monitor progress and update the studio team's schedule as needed.

## 2. Demos and Studies Preparation

Once the key elements upon which the score would have been grounded had been fixed, its actual composition could begin. The first step consisted of creating different materials for each of the dramatic categories outlined within the score, providing director Prior with alternatives for later selection.

Young began to tackle the opening and closing credits of the film—the tonal material that falls under the "Character Music" category and must be composed for string quartet and banjo—by producing a series of demos. It might be worth repeating that in Young's team's jargon, the term *demo* indicates the piano mockup of a melodic idea, which, if accepted, will either establish the leitmotivic architecture of a score or, as in the present case, be integrated into the opening credits sequence.

Young's customary working method during this phase is to seclude himself with a piano (whether at home or in his studio) and, instead of writing down a standard score on music sheets, record every concept that comes to mind (or fingers) onto audio devices (A6). These recordings include all necessary indications to transcribe the music into sketch form. After Young finalized four different ideas, all in song form (one in ABA structure, two in AABA, and one in AABB), the takedown of the sketches was accomplished by the scoring assistant on November 3-4, 2021 (A7). These sketches were shared with the programmers,

who created piano mockups for each of them (A8, A9, A10). As Young owned a banjo among his many instruments, and one of the programmers was skilled in guitar, the latter was asked to record the banjo line for each idea. These recordings were later incorporated into piano mockups (A11). During a specific team meeting arranged for demo playback (A12), Young encouraged everyone to express their preferences and advocate for them, before submitting the chosen material to the film director for evaluation. After listening, Prior's request was to adapt two different mockups to the picture, as he was still undecided about which fitted best (A13, A14).

Next, the development of the "Hybrid" and "Alien" categories of music began. When dealing with fully electronic or hybrid scores, Young employs a tested method, strongly reliant on close collaboration between the composer and the programmers, as well as on an iterative set of actions. This is, in fact, what happened with *The Autopsy's* underscore portions. These materials stemmed from a series of preliminary studies (inspired by the repeated viewing of the film, though not yet synchronised with it) which, as previously said, are preparatory pieces, generated from sampled sounds either created or collected by Young and his team for the specific project. Typically, the thematic or motivic texture of the studies is quite rarefied; rather, they may be based on the development of rhythmic patterns and on timbral experimentation. As the process progresses, the studies will be integrated and adapted to fit the film, forming the backbone of its underscore.

The creation of the studies followed a similar process to that used for the demos: Young either improvised on the piano or vocalised a set of ideas, which he then captured using memo records (A15). These recordings were then provided to the programmers, who, in the meantime, had been thoroughly instructed to build a library of original sounds (A16). The leading voice of the soundtrack, the banjo, was the first element to be sampled, using Young's own instrument. Then the composer resorted to a favourite practice to create an ominous, tangible musical presence for the alien: he recorded his own breaths and moans, providing some raw material to be digitally manipulated. This technique, also referred to as *body music* (2016–17, 48–58), represents a peculiar trait of Young's style.

What remained for the composer to accomplish was the most challenging aspect of the underscore, namely the sampling of a string quartet. Young would have preferred to sample a real quartet, though the available budget did not permit doubling the recording session already scheduled in February. Therefore, Young opted to gather suitable string quartet samples from the digital libraries he already owned, albeit considering this a temporary solution. These samples would eventually need to be replaced in the hybrid mockups once the real quartet was recorded and the necessary parts composed anew (A17, A18, A19).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, three films were in production simultaneously: *The Piper*, *The Autopsy*, and *Abyzou*. Although recycling and reusing materials is hardly a common practice at Young's studio—due to the composer's policy

of creating, cataloguing, and storing all sets of specific sounds for each new electronic project—this figured out to be a good opportunity to benefit from some discarded sound material collected for *Abyzou*.

After completing timbral and sample selection, one of the programmers began developing the studies for *The Autopsy* (A20). Subsequently, upon finishing work on *Abyzou*, Young and the other two programmers joined in (A21, A22). This phase of the process granted Young's working partners some autonomy, but despite the composer's lack of skills with Cubase and Logic, he retained control of the musical writing: for example, he vocally performed effects and timbral figures he had in mind, frequently confronting with the programmers who used Young's recordings as a steady reference. Having long been working together made the understanding of Young's peculiar kind of *grammelot*—which resumes and codifies the composer's recurring stylistic features—immediate for the programmers and translatable into music.

Once initial drafts of the studies were complete, Young entered a comprehensive review phase, with his guidelines evolving over time into more precise directives. This and other steps in the process took on a highly iterative nature (A23). Each programmer utilised their own digital audio workstation to implement and edit the studies, before submitting the work to Young. Young would always conduct revisions by sitting beside them, attentively listening to the compositions once or twice at first, often with closed eyes, and then providing his general remarks or identifying specific areas for further improvement. Minor adjustments were addressed immediately in Young's presence, while more substantial revisions required new and detailed instructions from the composer. Young actively encouraged team members to contribute their perspectives and opinions on the project outcomes. The composer frequently sought validation, and he openly recognised how regular interactions with his team helped him foster confidence in the music he was producing.

During this crucial phase, the scoring assistant, although not directly involved in programming, could act as a mediator between programmers and the composer. If a study presented particular challenges, Young would ask the scoring assistant or even a second programmer to join him in examining a specific workstation's output. Programmers, in turn, might seek the scoring assistant's opinion before submitting what they had been working on to the composer.

Following each review session, as the programmer implemented the requested changes, the composer evaluated output from another workstation. This iterative process continued until the composer deemed a piece ready for submission to the director for approval. Notably, during periods of peak activity, when all workstations were fully operational, Young tirelessly alternated between them, reviewing different studies or, as it has been documented during field observation, assessing music written for various projects.

Once all studies received validation from Young, the composer convened the team for a comprehensive review of the entire music production (A24). After having solicited everyone's feedback, if no further changes were needed, the

scoring assistant was tasked with forwarding the material to the film director (A25). Ultimately, the director received seventeen studies, totaling approximately sixty minutes of music.

By the first week of December 2021, Prior had listened to the work and responded to Young via email. Intrigued by the results, he expressed interest in immediately synchronising some studies with the edited film (A26); and, as the outcome pleased him, he granted approval to the composer's work, allowing him to progress to the next phase of the process, by the onset of the second week of December.

### 3. The Underscore

The same iteration of collaborative actions undertaken by the composer and programmers during the production of the preliminary studies continued into the transition from the studies and demos to the actual underscore (A28, A29, A30, A31), which unfolded as follows.

Director Prior selected two out of four demos of the cue for the opening credits—belonging to the “Character Music” category—which constituted the initial portion of the underscore that had to be completed. In a relatively straightforward task, considering that the demos already roughly matched the dramatic outline of the sequence, Young and programmer Jung J. Lee worked on adapting them to the film, improving synchronisation, refining orchestration, and augmenting the cue mockup by adding some sampled strings to the piano melody and previously recorded banjo accompaniment. The finished work would then be presented to the director.’

The studies for the remaining sections of the underscore—“Hybrid” and “Alien” categories—were in the meantime handled by scoring assistant Jared Banta, who was attempting to synchronize some of them to the film. In so doing, he took on a leading role—that once would have been played by the music editor—in determining the dramatic and narrative structure of the score. Such an endeavour essentially generated a second temp track, this time comprised of original music and adapted to the film's dramatic deployment. Some studies fit a sequence so seamlessly that it later required relatively few adjustments to turn them into proper cues, while other times the final cue would have differed significantly from the base laid down by the scoring assistant.

In early December 2021, when Banta had synchronised a certain amount of sequences that underwent Young's evaluation and approval, it was time for the programmers to convene for assignment of the processing of the various cues (A27): the three had known each other for many years, therefore they managed to allocate tasks themselves according to each one's inclination, fostering a collaborative and non-competitive environment.

A robust practice at Young's studio involves employing a multiple-choice strategy when beginning to edit the cues. Initially, a variety of alternative versions are developed for as many cues as possible, although this approach gradually fades as Young gains confidence in the overall balance of the score. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, in the making of *The Autopsy*, only a single musical option was prepared for the most complex cues. Additionally,

finding suitable preliminary studies for certain film sequences proved quite challenging. In particular, the final act of *The Autopsy*, which is almost scored wall-to-wall with music, posed significant difficulties for Young to such an extent that, despite the abundance of material already available with the studies, new cues had to be composed from scratch. Pressed for time, Young worked directly at the sequencer with the assistance of the programmers, maintaining close contact with director Prior either via email or in person. As a matter of fact, the director visited the studio multiple times to participate in cue audits, as we already mentioned referred to as *show-and-tell* (A32). The first of these audits took place on December 17, 2021. At least four cues were ready for Prior's review during this session, allowing him to hear the first thirty minutes of the underscore. Prior participated in three more audits at Young's studio, with the final one, on February 7, 2022, being the most significant as it preceded the recording session. During these meetings, the director and composer discussed, among many things, Young's proposal to depart from strict synchronization of the music with the film events, aligning with contemporary trends in film music, while Prior favoured a stronger, more traditional music-to-picture approach.

Finally, in the later stages of underscore production, Young deviated from some of the principles that initially guided the creation of the music. The most notable change concerned the prominent feature of a string quartet and solo banjo as the score's defining sound. In fact, string arrangements were expanded to mimic an orchestra in more than one cue through layering tracks and adding double bass lines. This made it necessary to record a string quintet during the recording session.

#### 4. Recording Session

The recording session focused on capturing the performances of the string quintet, tasked with playing the music for both the opening and closing credits, as well as the aleatoric sections intended to replace the temporary samples in hybrid mockups. With a limited budget to invest in this operation, two key individuals were of fundamental help: the scoring assistant, Jared Banta, and a music contractor recommended and contacted by him. Banta played a pivotal role in negotiating with Netflix to plan and set up the recording session within the allocated budget (A33). He participated in the meeting between the contractor and the composer, where they selected the musicians and arranged the recording session's breakdown (A34). He was also responsible for finding and booking a suitable recording studio and hiring sound engineers to oversee the recording process. Finally, he was tasked with preparing various materials, such as the scores for each cue to be consulted in the control room—including those containing the passages of the hybrid cues to be re-recorded that had been spotted earlier by a programmer (A35)—; the score parts for the musicians; the click tracks for cues requiring synchronization; and orchestrating all the music to be recorded (A36).

The night before the recording session for *The Autopsy*—which took place on Friday, February 11, 2022, from 9 am to 2 pm at Sonic Fuel Studios owned by

composers Christopher Lennertz and Tim Wynn (A37)—Young and Banta met to review once more every part scheduled for recording, while checking the scores prepared by the latter for the following day.

One hour before the session began, Banta and Daniel Wehr, the latter designated as “librarian” for the occasion, arrived at the recording studio to set everything up with the sound engineers. While director Prior was unable to attend due to illness, the music contractor, despite being indisposed, oversaw the session remotely to ensure compliance with the contract terms between Young’s studio and the musicians, and provide breaks for them every thirty minutes.

Throughout the session, Young remained standing in the control room examining the scores, and, in between the takes, he instructed the musicians, particularly focusing on the challenging aleatoric passages. This meticulous work came right after Young and his team were satisfied with the recorded takes of the opening and closing credits. There was constant interaction between the composer, performers, and the rest of the staff: especially during the most difficult parts, Young ensured that everyone understood the results he wanted to achieve by gathering them in the booth to listen to the mockups.

No pre-mixing was conducted during the session, and once concluded, the raw material was promptly sent to Young’s studio by the sound engineers (A38). Integrating the newly recorded parts into the mockups was a time-consuming activity entrusted entirely to the programmers, who also handled a significant part of the music mixing, which required little supervision from Young, as he was preoccupied with studio relocation (A39, A40, A41). After the edited mockups were finalised, Young validated them. Then, Max Blomgren, the programmer who had participated in the spotting session and overseen the integrations, prepared stems<sup>11</sup> for each cue and forwarded them to Netflix for the final soundtrack mixing (A42, A43).

## DOCUMENTARY TRACES OF THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

In this section, we aim to summarize, from a broad perspective, the various documental sources generated during the process of composing the film’s soundtrack. Of course, it is not possible to draw generalizations based on a single case study. A collation of diverse case studies, possibly belonging to different production systems, may eventually lead to a real census of digital and analogue sources utilized in contemporary production processes.

However, we believe that this work can at least offer an initial framing of the

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**11** In the world of film audio mixing, the term “stem” refers to recordings that are created from multiple individual tracks. These stems are stereo mixes that are produced cue by cue and are derived from various audio tracks or virtual instruments samples that are used to create the final audio mix.

documentary types that can be employed in contemporary practice and that are crucial for a reconstruction of the compositional process. For each of the previously identified phases, [Appendix 1](#) will present, alongside the flowchart, a synoptic table listing the different resources (R) produced in each phase, while the following paragraphs have the task of contextualizing their use or production.

The documents we consider in this study were obtained during the field research through sharing with researchers the Dropbox folders used in the course of composition. They consist of approximately 150 Gb of materials pertinent to the making of *The Piper*, *Abyzou*, and *The Autopsy*. Here we will only consider materials related to *The Autopsy*. It is important to note that the Dropbox folders do not contain all the documents produced during the compositional process. For example, the processing files of the individual DAWs are not stored in the materials we have. The fact that no mention will be made of this document type—such as Logic X folders or packages, Digital Performer or the like<sup>12</sup>—does not mean that these files do not exist or cannot be found in further investigation, but they are simply not part of the types of documents used for the exchange of musical information among the members of the music team during the composition process. The fact that files in the proprietary format of the individual DAWs are not exchanged during the composition process or that exports in platform-independent formats (such as AAF or OMF)<sup>13</sup> are not used, but that the team prefers to work on more manageable and portable files, is obviously worthy of comment and we will return to it in the conclusion.

Even limiting the discussion to only the materials in *The Autopsy* we are still faced with an impressive amount of resources (about 7300 files). We have therefore decided to adopt a synoptic rather than merely enumerative criterion, which would have been sterile as well as impractical here. The criterion is as follows: for each phase we list one or more significant documents present in the studio's project folder, avoiding dealing with similar documents (e.g., all the .wav takes of a recording session) but taking care to list at least one resource per document type produced in each single phase.

## 1. Watching the film (A1)

The first phase of the process revolved around the copy of the film sent by the Netflix music department to the composer's studio (R1). Among the various pieces of information contained within the file's title, we learn that it is version

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**12** Interestingly, Young's studio has not standardized music production software in use, which are at the discretion of music programmers. Each programmer uses his or her own preferred DAW and Cubase and Logic are the main DAW used for music production at Young's studio.

**13** These are platform-independent standards designed precisely for the interchange of materials between different audio or video editing software. The format is designed to encapsulate the information needed to transport digital media "such as audio, video, graphics, and still images as well as the rules for combining and presenting the media" (Open Media Framework 1994,1).

1.0 of the *Picture lock*, in other words, an edit of the film closely resembling the final version, ideal for refining special effects and working on the soundtrack. Subsequent updated versions of the edit (fortunately limited to special effects, with no significant alterations to the film's duration) were regularly sent to the composer.

The film was accompanied by the three channels of the temporary soundtrack (R1, R2, R3)—dialogue, music (MX), sound effects (SFX)—specially separated to facilitate the realisation of the music.

## 2. Preliminary meeting with David Prior (A2)

An audio file, lasting 41' 51", contains the recording of the first meeting between David Prior and Christopher Young, which took place at the composer's studio on October 18, 2021 (as indicated in the document title). Upon listening, it is possible to recognize the voices of the composer, the director, and the scoring assistant, Jared Banta.

## 3. Spotting (A4, A5)

The spotting phase produced at least two documents of primary importance. The first encompasses the recording of the entire session, which, for *The Autopsy*, spans a total of 2 hours, 47' 47", and is actually divided into two audio files (R6, R7).

The third document consists of the spotting notes. Although still titled *Preliminary notes* (R8), it is already complete with the information meticulously transcribed by the scoring assistant during the spotting (updated entry and exit time codes for each cue; cue category; and any comments provided by Christopher Young).

## 4. Demos: voice memos (A6)

This audio document (R9, untitled, but belonging to the category of voice memos) is a recording of Christopher Young working at the piano on one of the melodies proposed to the director for the film's opening credits sequence (here referred to as the *opening tune* by the composer). Young can be heard playing the harmony on the piano and singing the melody over it; later he can also be heard playing the melody, several times and at different speeds. Later on, the composer looks for a variation of the melody that could serve as contrasting material. The recording has a duration of 12' 07".

## 5. Demos: takedown (A7)

The primary documents generated at this stage of the process consisted of recordings of working sessions during which Christopher Young provided the scoring assistant with instructions for transcribing the melodic ideas to be presented to the director. The composer demonstrated, using the piano, the material intended for each instrument (banjo, violin I, violin II, viola, cello). These instructions were organised into three audio files (R10, R11, R12).

## 6. Demos: realization (A8 to A11)

The making of the demos resulted in a multitude of documents (around 131 resources). Here, we highlight only a small selection, specifically those files related to the third proposal, whose melody was selected by David Prior as the foundation for the film's opening credits cue. A folder, titled Idea 3, contains the stems of the demo, which at this stage are still performed on the piano (R13, R14). Additionally, the same folder includes a subsequent version of the demo where the banjo part has already been incorporated.

## 7. Studies: Sampling and Library Creation (A15 to A19)

The development of a library of sounds specifically sampled for the film is one of the project phases that yields the most extensive documentation. Among the approximately 2800 resources stored, we present here a condensed selection.

- In a voice memo (R16, again untitled) Christopher Young demonstrates, using his typical method of singing and playing at the piano, various effects he aims to achieve with the banjo.
- A textual note (R17) outlines the naming conventions for files at this stage of the process. Such instructions were regularly compiled by the scoring assistant, distributed among team members, and adhered to by the music programmers to ensure the clear and orderly circulation of materials between locations.
- An audio file (R18) contains a recording of a session of breaths and moans performed by Christopher Young himself. The initials "DW", which can be read in the title of the document, indicate that the recording was edited by music programmer Daniel Wehr. Wehr selected the most compelling sounds from the recording and, following Young's instructions, transformed them into a palette of sounds used to create the musical material associated with the alien and his spaceship. These samples are stored in audio resources R19 to R23.
- Within a project folder (R24), most of the material obtained from sampling the banjo is compiled. For example, two recordings realised by programmers Daniel Wehr and Jung J. Lee (the latter being the instrumentalist) are included. The first recording (R25) features a series of experiments where the banjo strings are played with a bow (*Banjo\_bowed*, duration 38' 01"). In the second recording (R26), the performer executes patterns suggested by Young by plucking the banjo strings and then uses the bow again to create sound textures, which are subsequently manipulated digitally to produce a series of pads (*Banjo\_phrases to Pads*, duration 12'16").

## 8. Studies: realization (A20 to A27)

The studies created for *The Autopsy* total seventeen in number. Mixed and exported in WAV format, they were sent to the director and archived in a folder labeled *STFULL MIX*. Additionally, stems were prepared for each of them. As an example, we consider study number 15, which is constructed around a series of

rhythmic patterns performed on the banjo. Its production yielded the following materials:

- an audio file of the fully mixed track (R28), sent for David Prior approval;
- the track is further broken down into its constituent parts, resulting in an additional four audio resources (R29 to R32).

## 9. Cues: realization (A28 to A30)

Here we outline the types of sources originating from this stage of the work, detailing some documents related to the production of cue 1M01, one of the most intricate pieces in the entire soundtrack of *The Autopsy*.

The archiving system adopted at Young's studio for *The Autopsy* entailed collecting various versions of the cue gradually exported by the music programmer for validation by the director in a designated folder (R33). Through the analysis of this material, it is possible to reconstruct the key stages of refinement of the cue under examination, before the final version was approved. As per the norm, the letters "dw" indicate that Daniel Wehr is the music programmer assigned to implement the cue.

- R34: The second version of the cue ("v2"), here titled *Opening*, in full mix. The file's title also provides the exact time code of the cue entry.
- R35: The fifth version ("v5") of the cue. The cue's entry time code is slightly different from that of the previous version.
- R36: the ninth version of cue 1M01 ("v9") bears a new title (*Mine Explosion*).
- R37: Cues could be exported not only in WAV format but also in an audiovisual format, enabling filmmakers to experience them synchronized with the scene. Such fragments contain only images and music, but no dialogue or sound effects.
- R38: This document comprises a recording of a working session between Christopher Young and the music programmer, during which the composer listens to and provides feedback on the cue. Daniel Wehr and his colleagues often recorded these sessions, as the directions provided by the composer were often numerous and highly detailed.

## 10. Show-and-Tell with David Prior (A32)

A PDF document, compiled by the scoring assistant, consolidates the information gathered during the initial review with David Prior. Using the recording of the meeting as a reference, the scoring assistant created a table documenting the director's comments and requested revisions for each cue. Similar documents were generated for internal use at Young's studio following each show-and-tell session, as well as after the spotting.

## 11. Orchestration and Recording Session Preparation (A33, A36)

The scoring assistant was responsible for orchestrating the cues to be recorded during the recording session and must also prepare the instrumental parts. As the implementation of hybrid cues progressed, the originally envisioned string quartet passages evolved and became denser, necessitating the use of

overdubbing during recording. For example, in the case of cue 1M01, the string quintet was expected to record three layers (or “passes”) of different materials, which were subsequently recomposed and overlaid during mixing.

The instrumental parts are organised in folders, each labelled with the title of the corresponding cue. In the synoptic table, we detail the documents (R41 to R55) contained in the folder pertaining to cue 1M01 (R40).

## 12. Identification of Sections to be Re-recorded (A35)

A PDF document (R56) was derived from an Excel table prepared by music programmer Daniel Wehr. It outlines several hybrid cues and, for each of them, specifies the sections to be re-recorded during the upcoming recording session.

## 13. Recording Session (A37, A38)

Given that much of the material to be recorded involved extended playing techniques, the recording session was structured to allow instrumentalists to rehearse and record a few bars at a time. The resulting multiple tracks are stored in dedicated folders, each labelled with the M number of the cue, the recorded bars, and the take number.

For instance, the folder *AU 1m1 m17 tk07* (R57) contains rough recordings of select measures (starting from bar 17) of cue 1M01. Each take was captured from different microphones, which were set up by the sound engineers before the recording session began (R58 to R64).

## 14. Cue: Finalisation and Delivery of Stems (A39 to A42)

The finalisation and mixing of the cues were overseen by music programmer Max Blomgren. He assembled a folder for each cue containing the complete mix and the stems. In the synoptic table, we outline the contents of the folder dedicated to cue 1M01 (R65), which, in its final iteration, retains the title *Opening* and encompasses 10 audio resources comprising the cue (full mix, R66) and the stems (R67 to R75).

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we argued in the introduction, considering the methodological limitations highlighted in the opening, it is not possible to propose generalizations about contemporary compositional processes from this certainly intensive yet very limited field of observation. In a production context traversed by continuous technological, creative, and production changes, it is even less possible to consider the processes examined as representative of the current compositional activity of Christopher Young’s studio. However, the impression, resulting from numerous exchanges with both the composer and members of the music team, is that of witnessing the end of an era in the composer’s artistic, professional, and personal journey and the beginning of a new creative phase. This change is intensely symbolised by the final closing of the Culver City studio and the opening of a new workspace at the composer’s home, a direct consequence

of the broad aesthetic and production revolution that the contemporary music industry has gone through. Several times Young has manifested before us and his collaborators the feeling of having seen the definitive disappearance of a production system that had its artistic and emotional zenith in the stages of the *spotting* and *recording session*, during which the maximum crystallization of a project's creative tensions was reached, and which today, we have seen, are drastically downsized by the systematic anticipation of the stages of approval of the general concept of the soundtrack and the thematic-motivic structure through demos, studies and mockups.<sup>14</sup>

In the changed landscape, some nodes seem to gain central relevance, useful to point out especially from the perspective of collating data and evidence from different production contexts.

- *Centrality of the collaborative team.* The importance of collaborators in the management of the composer's daily activity is a central node.<sup>15</sup>The team takes the form of a kind of *sui generis* family, whose various members work harmoniously, often following unwritten rules, providing support to the composer, who is constantly seeking feedback about the smooth running of the production machine and the effectiveness of the composed material.
- *Overabundance of musical material and layering of sources.* We have seen the extent of the preparatory material produced by Young and his team for each project: the music alone that the composer makes in the start-up phase of *The Autopsy* exceeds the length of the film (about eighty minutes between demos, studies, and later discarded alternate versions of the first cues for a film that lasts just over fifty) and almost doubles that of the actual underscore. The more Young has to forgo traditional writing approaches, delegating the *hands-on* work on the music to his collaborators, the more the amount of preparatory musical material increases. This condition also proposes a paradox: on the one hand, the new digital documentality presents an exponential growth of sources which document every step of the process and allow it to be reconstructed with a granularity potentially unknown to previous practices. On the

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**14** This is a shift that now seems generalizable, although not necessarily achieved through the methodology we saw at work in Young's study. On this topic see also Sapiro (2017, 253–59).

**15** Obviously, this phenomenon is not confined to Young's studio, but is part of a broader multivocality within the contemporary compositional process, which has shaped film music since its early days. To our knowledge few studies in the literature analyse these phenomena in contemporary film productions. A good example with regard to the relationship between composer and orchestrator is Sapiro (2017), while numerous anecdotal references can be found in interviews with composers: see for example Sapiro (2013, on Ilan Eshkeri and his relationship with Michael Kamen's production team). The aim of this article is to describe how this multivocality is fostering new creative and collaborative practices, particularly among composers who, after beginning their careers in the analogue era, have transitioned over the past two decades to digital workflows.

other hand, these materials are increasingly ephemeral and difficult to access. This is for reasons of privateness, let us say, and difficulty to access the compositional setting, but also, in perspective, for reasons of rapid obsolescence of formats, media and setups that are difficult to reproduce in an external context.

- *Auralisation and marginalisation of music writing.* This is probably the most striking node. Music writing, which already constituted a medium of service in analog practice, is further marginalised in a context in which the initial stimulus and medium of communication within the music team or between composer and filmmakers is primarily aural. Interestingly, musical information is conveyed between members of the music compartment primarily via aural medium (voice memos, demos, studies, mockups) and, in the later stages of processing, via audiovisual medium (synchronised demos, studies, and mockups). Alphabetic writing in digital media certainly still has a role in conveying and organising enumerative and hierarchical information (pre-spotting notes, spotting notes, cue lists). Only in third place comes music writing produced digitally and printed (scores for the recording session). Increasingly, however, in the context of hybrid scores, music writing is not delegated the representation of a cue, but only the annotation for the recording of cells entrusted to analog instruments, which must then be digitally reprocessed. It seems that music writing has assumed an entirely epiphenomenal statute with respect to the means of conveying musical information in the compositional process. Score processing in all its stages takes the form of a complex operation that combines tactile-visual and aural work on the part of music programmers (composition and digital sound manipulation operations on sequencers and DAWs) with aural feedback (the audits between programmer and composer and between composer and filmmakers). The voice of the composer recorded in the voice memos—the *grammelot* mentioned above—is certainly among the most interesting nodes that emerged from this research.<sup>16</sup> The composer's voice now stably embodies the functions previously assumed

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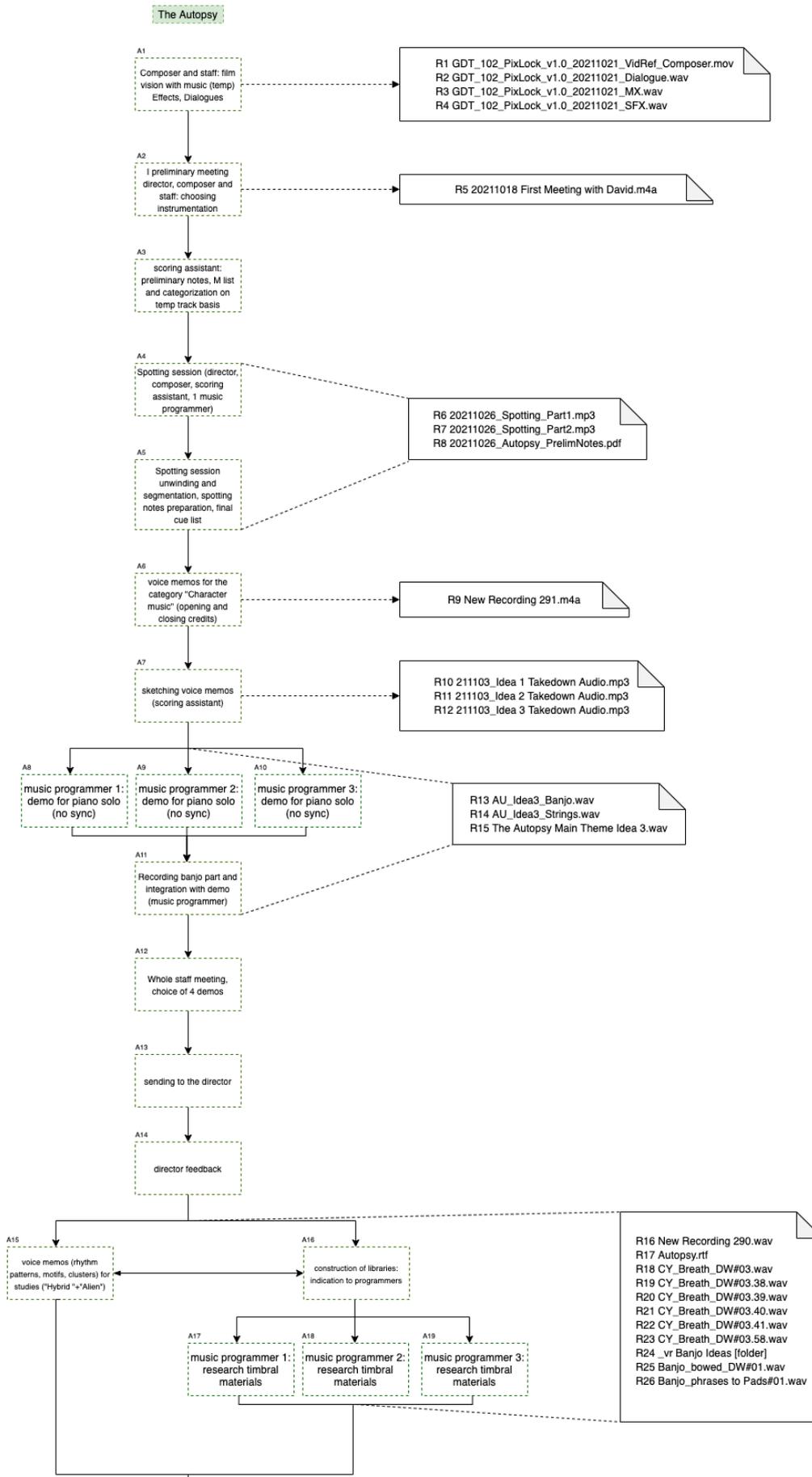
**16** This is certainly not an isolated case, nor is it a phenomenon that can be ascribed to the digital transition alone. However, we can say that the digital transition has made these "exceptions" more frequent and to some extent stable. Sonny Kompanek thus listed, not without irony, the various types of materials he received in his career as an orchestrator: "as an orchestrator, I have been asked to create film cues from the following: 1. Humming, grunting, whistling, and/or the stamping of feet; 2. A single-word description of a scene—'chaos'—for 30 seconds; 3. Four bars of melody and a request to 'fill out' the music for a four-minute, full-orchestra cue; 4. A four-voice hymn texture to be made into a thrashing, swirling, and bombastic Star Wars-type action cue; 5. 'Do something like Bartok's *Music for Strings Percussion & Celeste* for three minutes'; 6. 'Make a new cue from the previous one, but maybe more like ...'; 7. A MIDI file to be 'filled out' (added to) as a sequence, e-mailed back to the composer for additions without it ever being put on paper—'electronic orchestration'; 8. A piano demo, which I first transcribe, then arrange; 9. A two to three-line sketch with dramatic words of instruction" (Kompanek 2004, 4–5).

by the sketch on paper, and that summarises, through the use of different vocal parameters, genre codes and stylistic qualities of the composer or stylistic features born out of the relationship between composer and his programmers, in the collaborative workshop of the music team.

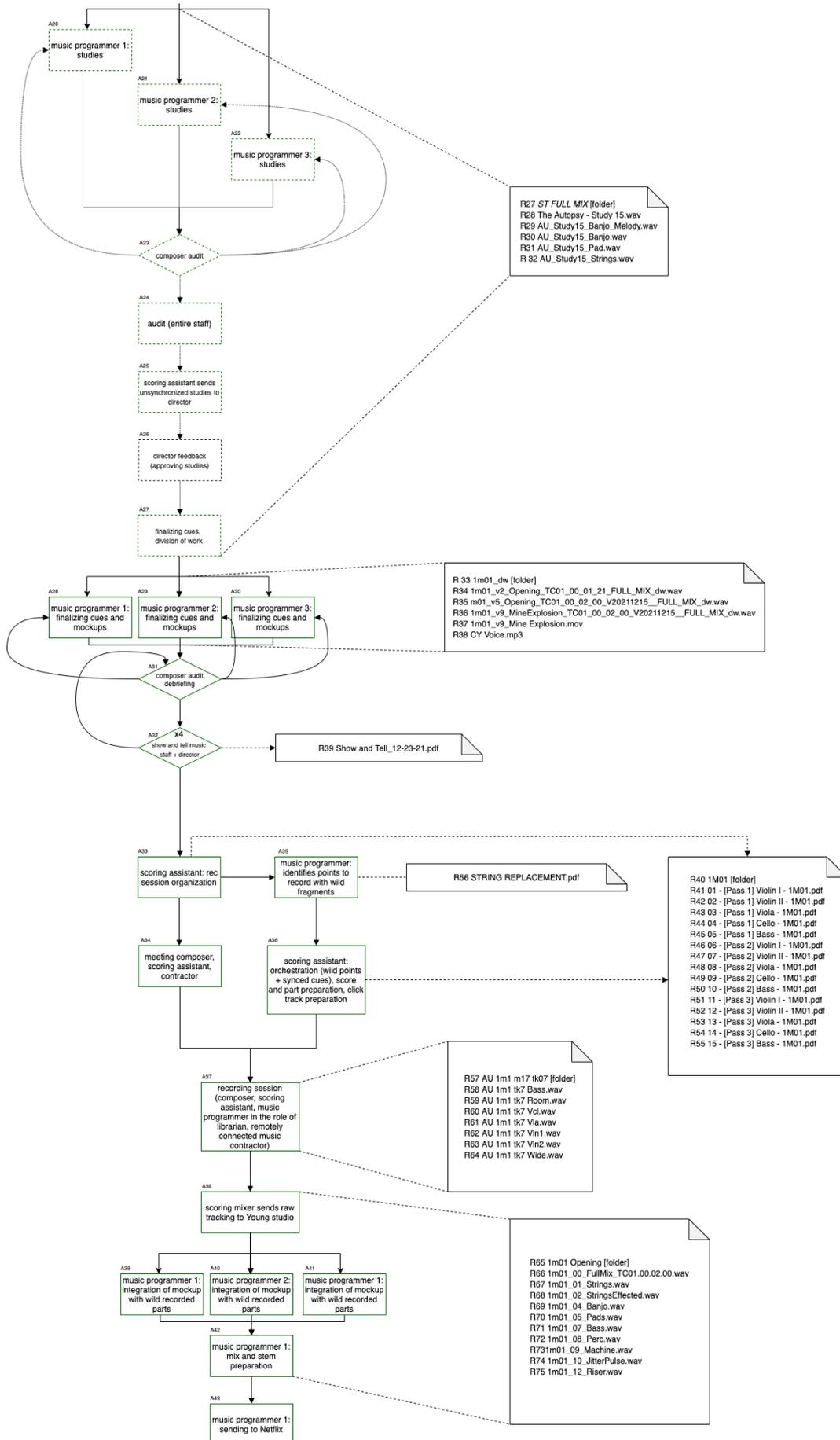
### ***Appendix***

*Flowchart representation of the compositional processes analysed and synoptic representation of the relevant documents for each of the stages. The dashed lines in the boxes indicate the passages we did not witness directly and were reconstructed with the help of oral sources, the composer and his collaborators; the solid lines indicate the episodes we were able to witness during our period of field observation.*

# APPENDIX 1:



# APPENDIX 2:



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# From the Small Screen to the Big Screen: The Super8's Distribution of *Sandokan* TV Series

Nicole Braida (independent scholar)



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'From the small screen to the big screen' proclaims the advertising text of the Super8's of a television series distributed in 1979 by the German company Piccolo Film, emphasizing the novelty and the potential of format. The film is *Sandokan*, an Italian miniseries from 1976 directed by Sergio Sollima and starring the Indian actor Kabir Bedi as the exotic protagonist of Salgari's famous adventure. This contribution maps the European and global success of the series and its media format's history, focusing in particular on Super8's distribution. It retraces Super8 'reduction prints' in different languages by relying on film catalogues from the seventies and on sources gathered from platforms such as Imdb and Ebay (where collectors trade Super8) and interviews to ex-employees and owners of former Super8's distribution companies in Italy and Germany. The paper considers the geographical circulation of *Sandokan*'s Super8 editions to investigate *Sandokan*'s figure beyond its literary origins. Super8's history shows an unexplored relation between media broadcasting and past practices of home viewing beyond the theatrical realm. *Sandokan*'s Super8 circulation can be regarded as part of larger phenomenon of consumer culture, where reduction prints become a synecdoche to a larger cultural myth.

**Keywords**  
Super8,  
*Sandokan*,  
Sergio Sollima,  
Reduction prints,  
Tv series

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## INTRODUCTION

'Super8 makes it possible: from the small TV screen to the big film screen,' proclaims the advertising line for the newest Super8 version of the Italian TV series *Sandokan* (Sergio Sollima, 1976). Co-produced by the Italian television RAI and the production company Titanus, in collaboration with the German Bavaria Film and the French ORTF, the series was released on Super8 in Italy in 1976 and in Germany in 1979 coinciding with its television debut in the country. This short ad epitomizes one of the main features of the Super8 format and for the circulation of 'reduction prints'<sup>1</sup> versions, or 'abridged versions (Ward 2016),

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Schneider describes reduction prints as 'small gauge versions of films marketed over decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for domestic and nontheatrical exhibition. "Reduction" here can refer to both the film's gauge and duration, with reduction prints often shortening full-length feature films to the essential 3 to 20 minutes[...]' (Schneider

thus its ability to overcome the limits of TV by watching a movie directly at home, whenever you want, and on the 'cinema' big screen.

Similar to family films, reduction prints were not a specific innovation of Super8 format, the practice of selling films to be watched at home started already with the first small gauges such as the Pathè Baby and its library in the first half of the twentieth century (Santi and Van der Heijden 2022; Schneider 2007). The ad also points out a movement: from the small screen to the big screen. A new need, different to those of the 1920s and 1930s, directed to TV viewers and the TV screen: a desire for a cinema 'experience' on a big screen at home, an experience which Super8 finally made possible to a larger audience. In this contribution I retrace, from several online and historical material sources, the genesis of this cult TV series and rethink it in terms of a larger film configuration. First, I explore the legacy of the TV series and its significance in relation to other adaptations and its format of distribution, in particular to the Super8 film circulation in Italy and Germany.

The distribution of *Sandokan* on Super8 and its linked success as a media franchising can represent an early example of cinema's transformative essence, of its mobility beyond the movie theatre. Although film theory long based its object of study on the triad 'canon+index+apparatus', as Vinzenz Hediger and Miriam De Rosa have argued: "cinema is an unspecific medium of constantly changing and often transitory configurations" (De Rosa and Hediger 2016, 14). *Sandokan* testifies to the power of the moving image to produce a cultural myth beyond cinema, satisfying shifting spectatorship's needs at the end of the seventies. I explore some digitized Super8 material (two abridged version of *Sandokan* distributed in Germany and Italy) and paratextual media relative to the TV series in order to map the Super8 distribution and reconstruct their reduction. These abridged versions, I argue, functioned as a synecdoche for a broader cultural myth.

## RECONFIGURING THE MYTH: FROM THE BIG SCREEN TO THE SMALL SCREEN

Before Sollima's TV series, there had been several adaptations of Sandokan's story for the big screen. As Anton Giulio Mancino in an article writes, these films were produced in specific timeframes over the course of more than seventy years (Mancino 2011, 188). A story thus, that keeps coming back.

The figure of Sandokan comes from the fantasy of Emilio Salgari, an Italian novelist who worked at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dying a tragic death. The story, which would later become a famous TV series, was inspired by the novel *Le tigri di Mompracem* (The Tigers of Mompracem).<sup>2</sup>

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2019, 129).

<sup>2</sup> The story in *Le Tigri di Mompracem* narrates the story of a pirate prince

Mompracem is a fantasy island in Malaysia and Sandokan is a prince-turned-pirate after the British colonizers took his father's land and throne by force. In the story Sandokan seeks revenge for his freedom but also for love. He falls in love with Marianna, the Italo-British daughter of the representative in Malaysia of East India Company. Only in 1941 two films, *I Pirati della Malesia* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1941) and *Le due Tigri* (Giorgio Simonelli, 1941), were released. Again, in the fifties, further six movies based on Salgari's novels were made. The sixties witnessed the most lasting phase: nine movies were produced, of which the trilogy directed by Umberto Lenzi with *Sandokan, la tigre di Mompracem* (1963), *I Pirati della Malesia* (1964) and *La Montagna di luce* (1965). This latter period coincides with a generalized increasing production of Italian films (Westerns in particular) and a steady decline in movie theater attendance.

The figure of Sandokan in 1963 was associated with the actor Steve Reeves, protagonist of the movie *Sandokan, la tigre di Mompracem* (Umberto Lenzi, 1963). The director casts the American actor, who was a body builder and an actor of *peplum* films (sword and sandals movies). In particular, he became known as the protagonist of the financial success *Le fatiche di Ercole* (Pietro Francisci, 1958). The film by Lenzi, the production of which, following the RPOCA (Registro Pubblico delle Opere Cinematografiche e Audiovisive – "Public Register for Cinematographic and Audiovisual Works"), started in May 1963, adapted Salgari's novel and set the movie in Ceylon, in southern India. The film was announced in August 1963 on *Araldo dello Spettacolo* and was released to theaters at the end of 1963.

In this movie, Reeves, an American ex-Mr. Universe, was not exactly the picture of an Indonesian pirate king, nevertheless, his interpretation became successful enough to justify the production of further films with the same cast. The film, though, did not have a political character if compared to that of Sollima's later adaptation. However, this historical-mythological genre remained profitable for around a decade until Spaghetti Westerns overtook its popularity. As Brunetta (2003) writes, the success of *Per un pugno di dollari* (Sergio Leone, 1964) will have as a consequence the transfer of producers and directors from *peplum* to Western. Between 1962 and 1979, 498 Westerns were released in Italy: the

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who takes revenge against the British to conquer back his land, or better, his island. Mompracem is not a real island but some scholars argue that it must refer to what is today the island of Keraman in Borneo. Some ancient maps, on which probably Salgari relied, did mention this island as Mompracem (see Gerlich 1998; Raiola 1975). Salgari, although he never travelled to Malaysia, based his research upon historical and contemporary sources. One of the sources was for instance the *Giornale Illustrato dei Viaggi*, a periodical which featured illustrated adventures and travel accounts in the nineteenth century. As Francesca Orsini, a literary scholar, notes, those sources were 'predominantly orientalist and racist.' Nevertheless, as also noted by Orsini, although Salgari's major sources were racist and outdated and his Salgari's figure contributed to circulate many of orientalist's bias about India and Southeast Asia, it made them familiar to his readers. In Latin America Sandokan's reception was read primarily as anti-colonial and this helped his anti-imperialist fame to grow. The development of the TV series by Sollima follows this anti-imperialist reputation.

wave started in 1964 (with 32 films) and reached its peak in 1968 with 73 films<sup>3</sup>. Overall, between 1964 and 1976 Italian film production remains high and steady. This same period saw an increase in co-productions for Italian films (Corsi 2001); moreover, television's owners are progressively growing. 1976 will be the year of the Constitutional Court's ruling allowing private TV stations to broadcast, this will determine the end of the monopoly of public broadcast and set a historical turning point for Italian film production.

Before starting the production of *Sandokan* Sergio Sollima was already a successful director. He started directing spy-thrillers in the sixties and achieved success with his Western film *La Resa dei Conti* in 1966, followed by *Faccia a faccia* (1967) and *Corri uomo corri* (1968). Differently from other directors before, Sollima reconfigures the story of Sandokan by thinking about this figure not just as a musculus hero but rather someone like Toshiro Mifune, the hero of Akira Kurosawa's *Yōjinbō* (1961), film which inspired (or better that was copied by) Sergio Leone for *Per un pugno di dollari*<sup>4</sup>.

Sollima, who had joined the partisan resistance during WWII, was very conscious of Sandokan's potential as a figure with political significance. As historian Aliza Wong (2016, 68) highlights: "Sollima chose to adapt Salgari's novels and the character of the pirate Sandokan to bring to the forefront the political themes he had already introduced in his Marxist Spaghetti Westerns." For the production of *Sandokan* Sollima spent months in Borneo and Malaysia looking for a multilingual cast. He collaborated with researchers and travels to find the "actual" Mompracem in Borneo and films there for seven months (Raiola 1975). He works on *Sandokan* in a historical moment of upheaval where preoccupations about capitalism, globalization, and the growing divide between the privileged and the poor are mirrored in the story by the struggle of Sandokan against the imperialist power of the East India Company. For Sollima, Sandokan is the paladin of the fight against injustice and oppression<sup>5</sup>. However, this may not be the reason why this adaptation was so successful, and why its success overcame generations.

Instead, a combination of factors did influence this cultural phenomenon. *Sandokan* by Sollima was broadcast in January 1976, thus between 1975 and

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**3** This is reported in (Fisher 2014, 224). Moreover, Manzoli says that Jean-Francois Giré reports that between 1964 and 1975 around 520 Western films were produced in Europe see (Manzoli 2012a, p. 128).

**4** More interestingly Steve Reeves, as he declared, was originally asked by Leone to be the protagonist of his film but he refused (Lane 2000).

**5** Testifying to Sollima's stance there is a famous dialogue in the TV series between Marianna and his father where she asks him if what he calls a civilizing mission is nothing else than an excuse to colonize, deplete, and exploit at its own benefit. Marianna cannot even dare to an interest into politics (she is a woman and the whole question is who she is getting married to) and accuse the colonizer's 'mission' because this is of course the political rationale of all the imperialistic efforts of the British. Marianna rebels and escapes with Sandokan to Mompracem where they start a new community, being open to everyone who shares their values of plurality and tolerance. The interracial relationship between Marianna and Sandokan is central for the development of Sandokan's own identity.

1977, when the SIAE recorded the highest drop in theatrical attendance in cinemas. This corresponded to a rise of television devices still within a legal monopoly of public broadcast RAI that would show the series. This combination allowed the series to be seen by more than 27 million viewers and thus achieved unprecedented popularity pretty quickly. To this, we may add the choice of Kabir Bedi as the protagonist, compared to Steeve Reeves: not a white and muscular actor of *peplum*, but an authentic non-Western, a very slim and tall Indian, that although not convincing critics at first<sup>6</sup> will quickly conquer an army of fans across all Europe (Manzoli 2012a). The series will be appreciated also for its exotic but authentic authentic character. The famous fight with the tiger is in the version by Lenzi not only unrealistic, but absurd and ridiculous if compared to the later known and spectacular scene between Kabir Bedi and the tiger. The new *Sandokan* series will also benefit from the care that Sollima had taken in the development of the opening credits of the film (as he before did for his Western movies). *Sandokan* starts with an engaging intro sequence with a modern soundtrack played by Oliver Onions, who had before composed music score for Spaghetti Western. Indeed, the soundtrack will be as successful becoming one of the most sold singles in Italy.

The TV series would also take advantage from a wider European distribution. It was produced by Titanus<sup>7</sup> on behalf of RAI, the Italian public broadcaster, as a co-production between RAI, Bavaria Film in Germany and France's ORTF<sup>8</sup>. Although the crew was Italian, the cast was multilingual and Sollima chose to adopt a rather realistic approach by filming on the ground in the location of Pulau Kapas in Malaysia and partly in India. In the introduction of the book by Sergio Raiola (1975), Sollima himself explained some of the details of his previous exploration in Malaysia and how they had selected those locations.

The TV co-production is one of other European broadcast efforts, such as *Odissea* (Franco Rossi, 1968), to create together an internationally successful TV series. The film was announced already in November 1973 (*Araldo Dello Spettacolo* 1973) and its production starts at the end of September 1974<sup>9</sup>. As Giacomo Manzoli writes, in August 1975 Titanus refused to hand over the completed film reels demanding an additional amount from RAI, given the increased production costs (2012a, 221). RAI, as public broadcast, refuses and wins the contention and forces Titanus to deliver the reels by December. *Sandokan* aired in Italy in 1976 on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January on prime time on the second channel in black and white, despite it having been shot in color and planned to be broadcast as such.

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**6** Manzoli remembers how Mario Soldati negatively responded on *Il Mondo* to the film and the choice of Kabir Bedi as protagonist (2012a, 219).

**7** Francesco Di Chiara has written extensively about the history of Titanus as one of the long-lived Italian production companies, in particular about the time period 1949-1954 (Di Chiara 2013).

**8** I could not consult the production documents, but some sources such as IMDb Pro do cite as one of the coproducers also the British broadcast ITC.

**9** As reported in RPOCA (Registro Pubblico delle Opere Cinematografiche e Audiovisive).

For six weeks every Monday a new episode airs. Its success was enormous, it brings instant fame to its protagonist Kabir Bedi. The series will be released the same year in Spain, France, Holland, and other locations within and outside of Europe, its reception was especially great in Latino America, where Salgari's novels were already quite famous.

Due to its unprecedented popularity and to the fact that the series had been broadcast only in black and white, the series was distributed theatrically in two parts. The first release was in May 1976. The film grossed in the first week around 200 million, and other 90 million in the second week (*Cinespettacolo* 1976), not a huge success; as a comparison, *Three Days of the Condor* (Sidney Pollack, 1975), produced by Titanus as well, made almost 2 billion at box office. Just shortly after the broadcasting of the series, a new film based on another Salgari's novel was announced, produced by Cineriz: *Il Corsaro nero* (Sergio Sollima, 1976). Moreover, in the following year, another production about Sandokan, a sequel only for theatrical distribution, would start, produced again by Cineriz. RPOCA documents trace the beginning of the shootings of *La tigre è ancora viva: Sandokan alla Riscossa* on 16 May 1976. The film will be released in cinemas in December 1977. The story recasts Bedi as Sandokan, Philippe Leroy as Yanez and Adolfo Celi as Lord Brooke. It would not be a major success at the box office and would not be distributed as much as the series. This second movie will repeat though the successful myth of *Sandokan* as a paladine against oppression - as Alberto Crespi (2018) writes - "a leader who makes you think about Vietnam, Cuba and to Resistance".

What Sollima succeeds in, is restoring in the most popular adventure character of Sandokan his revolutionary thrusts that brought to his Westerns a critical third-worldism. The success of the series *Sandokan* by Sergio Sollima will let it be distributed globally. with RAI selling it to 85 countries.<sup>10</sup> The last translation was made in 2015 by the titular character actor's company, Bedi Media, for a DVD box in Hindi. It will never air in England though, and the reason is perhaps its strong position against the British. Nevertheless, an English version will circulate on Super8.

## RETRACING *SANDOKAN'S* SUPER8 DISTRIBUTION: SUPER8'S ABRIDGED VERSIONS

The distribution of *Sandokan* on Super8 outlines a different story from the film history on theatrical distribution. It is a part of film history that is still largely untold. Scholars have explored the history of small gauge cinema and home

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<sup>10</sup> IMDB lists a series of translations of the title of Sandokan in almost 20 different languages. See (*Sandokan (Miniserie 1976) - Informationen zur Veröffentlichung - IMDb*, n.d.)

## Distributors of Super8 copies of Sandokan



Fig. 1.  
A map of the Super8 versions found and the distribution companies.  
Graphic by the author.

movies more extensively (Schneider 2004; Santi and Fiorini 2005; Simoni 2005; Cati 2009; Streible, Roepke, and Mebold 2007; Simoni, Edmonds, and Fiorini 2007; Acland and Wasson 2011; Santi and Van der Heijden 2022) but the particular history of Super8 and reduction prints has yet to be fully explored (Goergen 2002; Forster and Goergen 2007; Schneider 2019).

Through a Super8 film collector in Germany, I was personally made aware that a Super8 copy of *Sandokan* had been distributed in 1979 by the company Piccolo Film. Piccolo Film, a company from Munich, was one of the biggest distributors in the seventies and early eighties in Germany. Their catalog distributed many comedies and animations,<sup>11</sup> for instance by Disney, and manufactured copies first on 8mm and later on Super8 for home entertainment. Relying on film catalogs, which I acquired through the collector Andreas Chmielewski in Germany, and researching some online sources on eBay, where Super8 collectors are selling their films, it is possible to retrace some of the Super8 versions circulating in Europe and across the world at the end of the seventies and early eighties. Following two examples, I reconstruct the way the original TV release was 'reduced' for this specific format.

<sup>11</sup> They were holding the rights of Disney and therefore distributing most of their animations and films. Many of this info were collected in our project in an interview of a former employee of Piccolo Film, Michael Teubig in September 2022. We also gathered information from collectors Andreas Chmielewski and Joachim Schmidt who is also curator of the website Off2.de, which collects many information about the history of Super8 reduction prints's culture in Germany.

The rights of the series *Sandokan* were held by SACIS, the company which belonged to RAI and was responsible for the distribution of their rights across the world. In Italy, the company I.E.-international, based in Milan, distributed different Super8 versions not only on a national level but also in other countries. The company was founded by Renato Cepparo and his son Roberto<sup>12</sup>. They distributed and produced different abridged and full versions, mostly in Italian and English. Some of these copies, in English, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian, destined to the Yugoslavian area are still being sold by collectors via Ebay or other platforms.

Another Italian company called Mupi<sup>13</sup> from Florence, was distributing internationally also copies of *Sandokan*. These had been distributed in many different versions, all abridged. The company, which mostly produced toys and some entertainment systems for children was circulating Super8 versions of *Sandokan* which were extremely reduced. As Stefano Bertani explains on a website dedicated to this historical company ("Mupigames.Com | Toys to Games – Un Brand Che Ha Fatto La Storia," n.d.; Bertani 2022) Mupi produced a series of different versions which would fit to one or more of their entertainment systems. They were the first to introduce optical toys. They were selling, for instance, the so-called Cinevisor, which was a small TV device that people operated by a crank which, thanks to an internal light and a system of mirrors, could project the film onto the small screen. They also had different projectors, sometimes in the form of a movie camera, which would project the images directly on the surface. These Super8 versions were extremely short and would last less than a minute and were about 8 meters long. These Super8 films were contained by a cartridge which enabled them to work on the Cinevisor or the other projectors. Mupi distributed for instance *Sandokan* in six different extracts. All without sound, and thus distributed also for a larger international audience as it is clear by the still circulating material [Fig. 2] where titles of each episode are translated also in German, French, Spanish and English.

The titles of the six extracts are: *I tigrotti all'arrembaggio*, *Caccia alla tigre*, *L'agguato di Yanez*, *Sandokan alla riscossa*, *L'assalto a Mompracem*, *Verso nuove battaglie* (see Fig. 2 for the translations). These episodes feature mostly action sequences, sometimes we see muted dialogues, but these are probably chosen to introduce a character or a specific relationship between two characters, like the romance between Sandokan and Marianna. The six copies have a length of ca. 2 minutes and thirty seconds and cover the whole story as seen in the series, showing the major turning points such as battles and duels.

Bertani (2022) argues that the advertising campaign for a new version of Cinevisor which featured *Sandokan* was very successful. The ad's emphasis lay

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**12** I contacted Roberto Cepparo and interviewed him on January 2023, he worked for I.E. International until the beginnings of the 80s and later gave the library to his brother which renamed it Cinehollywood, a company that still sells DVDs.

**13** Mary Comin has written also in her Master Thesis about Mupi and the different Super8 options this company was offering for home entertainment (Comin 2016).

on the specificity of this Super8 version: 'Sandokan now every day on the screen with colors,' it claimed. The possibility of watching it 'every day' would offer a new on demand viewing practice, but also the hint to 'colors' was referring to the TV version, which had aired it in black and white.

A Spanish version was distributed apparently by Gofer Film (lead by producer José Pascual Boluda Geva) thanks to an agreement between SACIS and BRB International, a Spanish company which later produced animated series of which one based on Sandokan's story.

The catalogues of I.E. International are listing both English and Italian versions of *Sandokan* on Super8. Angelo Arpaia on *Stampa Sera* announces in November



Fig. 2. Picture of a Super8 with cartridge of Sandokan distributed by Mupi. Source: <https://obsoletemedia.org/mupi-cinevisor/cinevisor-rear/> (CC License)

# Sandokan

produzione RAI ORTF BAVARIA TITANUS

stampa TECHNOSPES

*Il celebre film che ha battuto tutti i record di gradimento alla televisione italiana.*

- S-1/3 **La tigre della Malasia**  
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy  
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-4/6 **Sandokan alla riscossa**  
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy  
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-7/9 **La Tigre non è morta**  
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy  
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro
- S-10/12 **La caduta di Mompracem**  
avventuroso - con Kabir Bedi, Carole André e Philippe Leroy  
3 bobine 120 mt. colore sonoro

## SANDOKAN edizione corta

- S-14 **Un re per Mompracem**  
il film con la bellissima canzone "Sandokan" degli Oliver Onions (dischi RCA)  
1 bobina 60 mt. colore sonoro
- S-13 **I tigrotti di Mompracem**  
il film con la battaglia di Mompracem  
1 bobina 120 mt. colore sonoro

Fig. 3.  
A digitization of the Italian catalogue of I.E.- International and the different versions of Sandokan on Super8. Source: private archive, courtesy of Andreas Chmielewski.

1976 the incoming arrival of a full-length version of *Sandokan* on Super8 reduced by RoPo (Arpaia 1976). That version, argued the journalist, would be sold in four boxes of three reels each, every box at a price of 75.000 lire or the complete full version for around 300.000 lire. Adjusting those prices for inflation the cost would be today around 1400 Euro for the complete series. In the I.E. International catalog this full version contains all the original six episodes, divided in four boxes of three reels of 120m (ca. 17min) each. They offered both copies with sound or without sound and other abridged versions. For instance, in an Italian catalog, we can find *Sandokan's* 'short edition' with two reels one of 60m (entitled 'the battle of Mompracem') and the other one of 120m with a clear emphasis on the famous soundtrack of *Sandokan* by the Italian duo Oliver Onions. The full versions of the four boxes have explanatory texts in the catalog which point out the presence of actors within the series, like Kabir Bedi, Carole André, and Philippe Leroy.

The German version was distributed by Piccolo Film in four episodes, with each box of one reel of 110m, with color and sound. It was therefore much shorter than the I.E.-International version with a duration of approximately 60 minutes. This version has been digitized and distributed by Alive! AG Vertrieb in the 'Sandokan Komplettbox DVD' version, which features the complete series digitized from a 16mm print and the Super8 one from Piccolo. Piccolo Film, as the former employee Michael Teubig said, had its own editor<sup>14</sup>, who made the version that was later approved by Teubig himself (who supervised ad text and editions) and had the responsibility of creating a coherent narrative despite cutting a big part of the film. This German reduction includes the beginning of the first episodes of the series and the last two episodes, but it has cut most of the romance between Sandokan and Marianna. The story, therefore, focuses on the antagonism between Sandokan and James Brooke. Some important dialogues are not featured in this version, such as the one between Marianna and his uncle, where she accuses Western imperialist colonizer mission.

The film was reduced not only from the original copy (which consisted of a 16mm copy)<sup>15</sup> to a Super8 but was also cut in various places by the editors of the same companies that distributed the film. If the German version changes in part the story, while keeping a continuity in the narration, the Spanish version (as is shown on the cover of its 6 boxes, each supposedly with one reel) featured Marianna. That may suggest that the version was not abridged abruptly like the German by Piccolo Film, in fact it was also longer with reels of 120m each.<sup>16</sup> The short episodes distributed by the Italian company Mupi are faithful to the

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**14** The editor of Piccolo, which cut most reduced versions which were not already bought as reduced copies, was a woman named Karin Fischer who worked also for Bavaria Film (another co-producer of *Sandokan* by Sollima).

**15** Giacomo Manzoli mentions this in an article (2012a), also the digitized version from the German DVD refers to the quality of the original film copy on 16mm.

**16** This information was taken from an announce with description from the Spanish website Todocollection.net, where a user is selling 6 reels of the complete version of *Sandokan* on Super8.

original story, but keep only highlights and the most action-packed parts of the story. What this latter abridged version makes clear (in 15 minutes) are the main characters, Sandokan, and his *tigrotti*, Marianna and Yanez, and finally the villain Brooke. Although strongly shortened, we can still see Sandokan's spectacular fight with the tiger, a very short camera shot where Sandokan and the tiger jump against each other creating an arc.

## REDUCING SANDOKAN – EDITING THE MYTH

These versions, which survive because collectors and sellers are preserving and trading them online (they have several groups, and forums and produce fanzines on Super8), might of course not represent the whole range of Super8 abridged versions of *Sandokan* that circulated, but through them, we are able to retrace in part this specific distribution. What these fragments and the film catalogs make evident is that watching and owning abridged versions was maybe not the norm but a common practice for home movie viewing (for those who could afford it anyway). As Alexandra Schneider remarks, "reduction meant lowering prices and thus also lowering the threshold for prospective buyers". (2019, 138) This operation did not only condense scenes, cutting those parts considered less important to the overall plot, but the shorter the film, the less material costs would be involved, implying thus a sort of democratization. This did not mean that Super8 was affordable for everyone; in fact only a minority would buy complete versions.

As I mentioned before, a copy of a complete series (the actual televisual length of *Sandokan* TV series lasts around 360 minutes) would cost an outrageous amount, this meant that only few had access to complete versions. Generally, a Super8 version of a whole film would cost in Italy around 180.000 lire at the end of the seventies (so about 500 euro) and shorter versions were of course much cheaper, around 25 to 50 euro for a 45m reel.<sup>17</sup> The so-called 'full version' of *Sandokan* marketed and sold by I.E. International makes it hard to believe that it was a full-length version. Since it consisted of a total of 12 reels of not even 20 minutes each, the reels could have lasted ca. 240 minutes and thus there must have been cuts. The German version lasts only around 60 minutes. Anyway, these were the longest versions available, while the others were as short as lasting not even 1 minute, as is the case of Mupi cartridges for their Cinevisor. The high cost can explain why extremely short versions with extracts of only 1 minute were able to circulate.

These films had a novelty to offer: the possibility of a new modality of cinema experience, 'finally at home' and 'whenever you want,'<sup>18</sup> as the ads were marketing

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**17** This information is gathered from different editions of the magazine *Cinema in casa* (from 1978 and 1979), a periodical for film collectors and people interested into Super8 and other small gauges.

**18** A similar pitch was used by the company Circe Film already in '74, which marketed 8mm and Super8 abridged versions on its catalogues with the sentence 'Il

them. And, with *Sandokan*, moving from the small screen to the big screen, with colors instead of black-and-white. Even if the text of the film did not match the original work to which it referred to, these reduction prints could be considered as fragments reminding us about the TV series itself, a sort of analogic equivalent of short clips on YouTube today. Super8 abridged versions were not the only way through which *Sandokan's* story spread. They were just part of a larger film configuration, which entailed different media and participatory practices.

## SANDOKAN'S SUPER8 DISTRIBUTION AS SYNECDOCHE OF A LARGER CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The phenomenon *Sandokan* was, as Giacomo Manzoli argues, one of the first Italian operations of merchandising, and *Sandokan* can be considered as a sort of television Blockbuster (Manzoli 2012b). Super8 was part of a huge merchandise campaign, thus part of a larger media configuration of different products tied to the film and to the copyright owners, thus SACIS and RAI. Since *Sandokan* was later screened in theaters and had a sequel in 1977 it is difficult to say if merchandise worked also as promotional products, so-called tie-ins.<sup>19</sup>

The examples are numerous, starting from Super8 and the shortest abridged versions for children by Mupi. Copyrights were sold to game companies like Editrice Giochi<sup>20</sup>. This Italian company sold a board game inspired in the story of *Sandokan*. Panini, the still reknown publishing company, distributed a sticker album (they sold up to 15 million stickers in Italy) not only about the TV series but also for its sequel that was distributed theatrically (Manzoli 2012b). Mattel issued a Big Jim version of *Sandokan* and a version of his pirate boat as a playing kit.<sup>21</sup> To this children's merchandise, we can add several photoplays, books by Salgari with a cover of Sollima's film, and the soundtrack's album by the Oliver Onions.

The Super8 film of *Sandokan*, either a 'full version,' a shortened extract, or simply a rather unfortunate abridged version, would still 'refer to its original' as a synecdoche, as a part of what the whole collective experience of a cultural myth constitutes. Giacomo Manzoli (2012) remarks that *Sandokan's* success happened along the growth of counter-cultural participative and underground culture in Italy. He notes that Sollima did nothing else "than going back to origins to complete that phase of 'second modernization' that political and cultural

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film che desiderate all'ora che preferite' (the film you wish, at the time you prefer).

**19** Wasko, Phillips, and Purdie (1993) in this seminal article they distinguish between merchandise and tie-ins, the latter ones as being mostly promotional products that would boost and advertise an incoming film.

**20** On the website of BoardGameGeek there is also a French edition of the game.

**21** In Italy it was sold by Mattel at the price of 9.900 Lire (around 30 euros).

institutions in Italy long tried to avoid".(Manzoli 2012b, 78) (My translation) Many of the generation that grew within that media configuration, do remember playing Sandokan as kids. This is still traceable on Social Media accounts dedicated to the TV series and comments on YouTube. *Sandokan*, as Manzoli argues, is much more and much less of what had been seen at the time.

In the last years rumors have been circulating about a next film dedicated to Sandokan, casting a Turkish actor like Can Yaman. The production company Lux Vides in collaboration with RAI Fiction has announced that the series is actually in production and is set to be released in 2025 (luxvide\_WP 2024). The series will be directed by Jan Maria Michellini and Nicola Abbatangelo, and will have an international cast. Although we cannot say much more about this next series, we can today say that the success of Sollima's *Sandokan* did show how Italian public television's rigid structure in the seventies did not stop, but rather profited from its expansion beyond the small screen.

This expansion coincided with the first international efforts of small companies of developing successful distribution networks for home movie entertainment. Not far different from the libraries of 16mm or 9,5 mm, Super8 was at the end of the seventies, the cheapest option for home movie entertainment. To keep the children busy or re-experience *Sandokan's* adventures. *Sandokan's* original TV series and its Super8 reductions and merchandise are therefore together part of what we might call following Vinzenz Hediger's and Miriam de Rosa's term a 'film configuration'(De Rosa and Hediger 2016) that by subverting the primacy of cinema we can still consider as cinema. The success of the series by Sollima expanded a cultural myth, giving a distinct image to the figure of Sandokan. More difficult is to argue if the series has contributed to its anti-colonial legacy. The geographical dimension of its success is testified by the circulation and the variance of *Sandokan's* versions and storylines. Europe's media landscape at the end of the seventies was at least ready to accommodate new audiences' needs, but the series profited as well from a combination of factors that had been well thought out, starting by giving the direction to Sergio Sollima. Thanks to his adaptation 'The tiger is still alive!'

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# The Making-of Documentary: An Approximation to some Discourse Intentions and Contemporary Uses.

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Based on the theoretical studies that have been published to date regarding the Making-of Documentary — concerning intertextuality, film studies, critical theory, mass communication theory and audiovisual didactics — we explore its specificities as a meta-cinematographic practice that manifests itself when a film accounts for the process of creating another film. The article is divided into three sections: *Towards a Definition of the Making-of Documentary*, *Meta-cinematographic Formats and Functions* and *Specificities of the Making-of Documentary*. In the first, its contemporary definition is proposed; In the following, we establish the distinction between the Making-of Documentary and its predecessors or other contemporary practices; Lastly, we approach its discursive intentions — as a promotional object of the film which it alludes to and of its filmmakers as “authors” — and its current uses, which promote an expansion of cinephilia and self-learning in the viewers.

**Keywords**  
Film studies,  
Making-of documentary,  
Intertextuality,  
Meta-referentiality,  
Metacinema  
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## TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE MAKING-OF

Since its beginnings, cinema has thought of itself as going through diverse meta-referential practices. The *Making-of*, is an example of an audiovisual product, as it shows the process of the creation of a movie. Its origin is not fully documented, although some publications indicate it surged in 1908 thanks to J. Stuart Blackton's film explorations for Vitagraph Studios in the United States of America (Arthur 2004,18). In industrial cinema, its equivalent is usually the audiovisual logbook and production notes that producers submit as evidence of the use of human resources and financing to investors (Andrade Zamarripa & Plancarte 2020, 118). However, an archaeological inquiry lets us recognize this form as an intercultural audiovisual object already established in the box of tools for filmmakers as a reflexive and autoreferential everyday device. Hence, boarding the Making-of (Mo) as a subgenre<sup>1</sup> of documentary cinema helps us to

<sup>1</sup> Erik Barnouw defines documentary film as a genre starting from the poetic of a documentalist, which lets them classify them starting from based on the discourse it occupies in the enunciation of the film (as an explorer, reporter, painter, lawyer, fiscal accuser, poet, chronicler, promotor, observer, etc.). See Erik Barnouw(1996). On the

identify its essential elements as well as to analyze the authentic elements of the analyzed cases<sup>2</sup>.

Three theorists stand out whose work allows us to understand aspects of the Making-of (Mo). Paul Arthur describes the Mo as a “cinematic parasite,” a documentary subgenre contaminated by advertising, self-referential, and creative intentions (2004). Robert Gonzalez highlights it as an audiovisual product that reflects the “collaborative creativity” of a production team (2013). Patricia de Oliveira Iuva explains that this format disseminates the meanings of a “memory of (and for) cinema,” surpassing the film to which it alludes (2020). These conceptual delineations lead us to emphasize the concept of the Mo as a meta-representational and meta-discursive practice because it is a film that refers to another.

Regarding the study of referentiality and meta-referentiality in cinema, Fernando Canet defines “metacinema” as a “cinematic exercise that allows the filmmaker to reflect on their means of expression through their practice, in which cinema looks at itself in the mirror with the pretension of getting to know itself better” (2014, 18). Due to the self-reflexive processes and formats of cinema throughout its history, a distinction is made between “cinematic reflexivity” – the referentiality between films – and “cinematic self-reflexivity” (Canet 2014, 18–21), where there is a meta-referentiality of the film medium. Following this definition, the Mo can be situated as a meta-cinematic practice, in which filmmakers, both inside and outside the film industry, reflect on their own artistic practice, the medium, and the cinematic phenomenon.

## CONTEMPORARY META-CINEMATIC FORMATS

A journey through the history of cinema reveals that contemporary making-of productions draw upon various audiovisual resources in diverse ways, thus demanding an unraveling of their formal complexity and distinguishing them from other meta-cinematic formats. In particular, there is an audiovisual material known as *B-Roll*, which originates from a second camera unit during filming and supports the main camera by capturing simultaneous shots in both unreproducible scenes and auxiliary shots<sup>3</sup>. However, as its use was for short footage, during the American studio-system era, leftover footage would be

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contrary, Bill Nichols proposes to revise the definition of a documentary film starting from three base elements: the realizer, the text and the spectator. See Bill Nichols (1997).

**2** In this study, we consider a corpus of analysis comprising thirty representative making-of productions that explore structures, forms, and modalities of documentary filmmaking. These productions have aided us in tracing their discursive intentions and most prevalent contemporary uses.

**3** In the dynamics of industrial production, these are called pick-ups or inserts, and they are shorter shots that capture details of the main action of a sequence.

utilized to document the filming process on-set.

Currently, American production companies edit all B-Roll<sup>4</sup> footage into sequences for each day of filming and distribute them as “newsreels” without narration or musical accompaniment to publicly report on their ongoing productions. Thus, this format, allegorical to the B-side of a shoot, manifests its self-reflexive, demonstrative, and documentary character, both of the set and of the filmmakers in practice.

*Behind-The-Scenes* (BTS) footage consists of audiovisual records that depict what happens “behind the scenes” of a movie. It is similar to the Mo as it explores the filming process and the interaction during set days. Its antecedents are linked to the *Screen Snapshots*, created by the Columbia Pictures Corp. on April 10, 1920. These were short films that captured what was happening around the cast of a movie off-camera, including sketches and film sequences, like a kind of “Mo tidbits as a staple of studio-era [in Hollywood] theatrical fare before changes in theatrical fare before changes in theatrical programming and the rapid growth of television in the Fifties choked off the steady flow of behind-the-scenes shorts” (Arthur 2004, 39). During this stage, the promotional function of the industry itself was established. Subsequently, behind-the-scenes shorts emerged, serving as television-style news reports to present the behind-the-scenes of cinematic artifice and craft.

This historical evolution helps us delineate the specificity of BTS as an audiovisual product that, outside of the set, feeds the star-system, although it goes beyond the world of entertainment by utilizing records of auditions, actor rehearsals, costume and hair tests, acting coaching, and ADR (Additional Dialogue Replacement) to witness their achievements. Thus, BTS stands out for presenting a demonstrative narrative of the act of creation and the social impact of a film «off-set».

Since the 1970s, Mo has capitalized on the use of stills, film diaries, screen tests, news, and interviews. A key work was *Filmmaker* (George Lucas, 1968) — a making-of for the film *The Rain People* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1969) — which revitalized the format by employing formal resources derived from other documentary modalities such as interviews, audio commentary, portrait, and first-person diary entries that documented Coppola's creative process and his collaborators on the set (Gonzalez 2008; Steinhart 2018).

Arthur insists that the organizational trope of Mo has been delimited by products like *The Making of a Legend: Gone with the Wind* (David Hinton, 1989), which tells “the story of creative ontogeny from inspiration to Oscar ceremony, marking separate production stages via the input of key collaborators—producer, writer, designer, director, composer, etc...” (2004, 40). Sometimes the information it presents is very generous, but at other times it becomes programmatic and unattractive to the viewer. Precisely, this division into sequences by stages and

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<sup>4</sup> Some exemplary cases of B-Roll, as well as other promotional and meta-cinematic formats, can be found on YouTube channels such as Rotten Tomatoes, COMING SOON, MakingOF, VUDU Fandango, CloserTV, FilmsNow, and filmSCHOOLarchive.

processes in the different departments of the crew can be found in exemplary Mo such as *The Making of The Lord of The Rings* (Costa Botes, 2002), *Kingdom of Heaven: Making of* (Niko Tavernise, 2006), and *Inside 'The Fountain': Death and Rebirth* (Niko Tavernise, 2007), which demonstrate a purely summative structure, as they comply with a totalizing narrative structure in the form of a report for production companies.

From the 1980s to 2010, thanks to the home video market, Mo production was boosted due to the storage capacity of media such as VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray. This characteristic of videographic media generated a diversity of forms and discourses of Mo, thus it is necessary to distinguish between the *Making-of featurette* and the *Making-of documentary* (MoD). The former is usually of short duration, its purpose is exclusively promotional, and it recounts the behind-the-scenes odyssey with anecdotes and extraordinary situations on and off the set; the latter, on the other hand, constructs a narrative hybrid between documentary and promotional. In addition, MoD also presents an indeterminacy in its form and manifests in its duration, as it can last from a few minutes to several hours.

MoD would establish its artistic intention over its original promotional function, both in the realm of its production and in its distribution and reception (Iuva & Rossini 2018, 81). Because there are MoD that narrate the creative act during the filming of the audiovisual piece and place the viewer as a witness to privileged meta-cinematic events. There are others that are created some time after filming, without evidence on-set, so they resort to testimonials and comments that account for how an iconic film was created and received.

Precisely, part of what defines this MoD is its structure, with segments and sequences strictly delimited by "authorized" voice-overs – directors, producers, technicians, stellar cast, film historians, and critics – enriching its narrative. In this way, "crystallizes a dialectic of seeing, because the Mdocs [Making-of Documentaries] walk in the wake of the preservation/construction of a memory, of a past commented in interviews that seek to (re)constitute ideas and projects"<sup>5</sup> (Iuva & Rossini 2018, 94).

It is noteworthy that, in the current context, the rise of streaming platforms evidences the planned obsolescence of analog and electronic video formats that helped disseminate MoD. In this sense, platforms such as HBO Go, Apple TV's iTunes Extras, Microsoft's movies+bonus, Disney+, Netflix, and Criterion Channel, among others, fortunately continue to offer them in their programming as supplemental material.

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**5** «Tem-se a cristalização de uma dialética do ver, pois os MDocs caminham na esteira da preservação/construção de uma memória, de um passado murmurado em entrevistas que buscam (re)constituir ideias e projetos» (Author's translation).

# FUNCTIONS AND SPECIFICITIES OF THE MAKING-OF DOCUMENTARY

Expanding on the previous discussion, through an epistemic and narratological study of several exemplary cases, we find four uses of the making-of documentary that allow us to recognize the purposes in its enunciation and its form of distribution as a «parafilmic» object. Therefore, we delve into the discursive intentions and the most determining contemporary appropriations of this meta-cinematic product among its current producers and viewers.

## PROMOTIONAL INTENT

Iuva and Rossini expose that in this differentiation between MoD and Making-of featurette "both are immersed in a commercial context. The distinction of [MoD] is due to the documentary approach that responds to a "historical" dimension of cinema, beyond the common sense of the promotional material of the film"<sup>6</sup> (2018, 93). Through the study of intertextuality of DVDs and derived formats, access is gained to understanding these interests and their promotional specificities.

As mentioned earlier, these film distribution platforms, in digital video, allowed for the integration of "supplemental materials" – including the MoD – which, in the past, was done on video tapes and aired on pay-TV programming, making mass dissemination impossible. According to Jonathan Gray, this needs to generate promotional materials, better named "franchised texts" – such as B-roll and trailers – is because they contribute favorable expectations to increase the consumption of a movie because "both industry and audiences habitually count on MoD relative success or failure as an index to the success or failure of movie as a whole" (2010, 39).

Precisely, the evolution of MoD is complex due to the various formal supports and media of each era, which have been part of the EPK (Electronic Press-Kit) of the movie premiere and, simultaneously, have explored the creative process from media aspects<sup>7</sup> such as the cast, the story they tell and their production values. For example, there are cases like Hollywood *'On Parade'* (Louis Lewyn, 1932) screen-snapshots from Criterion Pictures<sup>8</sup> – filmed and exhibited prior to releases –, *Zum Beispiel Bresson* (Theodor Kotulla, 1967), a documentary

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**6** « [...] embora ambos estejam imersos em um contexto comercial. A distinção do MDoc se dá por conta do enfoque documental que se encontra com uma dimensão "histórica" do cinema, ultrapassando o senso comum do promocional do filme» (Author's translation).

**7** Additionally, the MoD expanded to promote filmmakers' activities in other areas outside of cinema, such as in *The Making of 'Thriller'* (Jerry Kramer, 1983) – produced on video with a VHS release – which documented the filming process of the music video *Thriller* directed by Martin Scorsese for pop singer Michael Jackson.

**8** This Hollywood enterprise was not associated with The Criterion Collection.

about the filming of 'Mouchette' (1967) by Robert Bresson with interviews with the French filmmaker and the non-professional actress Nadine Nortier — filmed for TV broadcast —, *The Making of 'Star Wars'* (Robert Guenette, 1977) or *The Making of David Cronenberg's 'Videodrome'* (Mick Garris, 1982) — produced on video for TV airing.

Pat Brereton recounts that thanks to the DVD, the traditional mass culture was able to be exhibited, with which, undoubtedly, the commercial intentions of industrial cinema are exposed. The self-referential formats included in the extra materials of DVDs paradoxically have two priority functions of cultural production: first, you obtain it from "the entertainment experience in a salable consumer product (...) [and, also,] reward the impulse of the consumer with the possibilities of gratification and cultural distinction that are packaged in a DVD" (Brereton 2012b, 12).

Pavel Skopal points out that the American industry employed a strategy of "discrimination" by using supplemental materials because "the digital format allows Hollywood to use a bulk of audiovisual materials, as well as different cuts of a movie, to an unprecedented extent" (2007, 187). In this way, through the consumption of "supplemental materials", consumers of high and low value were already distinguished, and therefore, more income was sought from high-value consumers willing to increase their investment in a quality product with more extra materials to feed their cinephilia.

## EXTENSION OF CINEPHILIA

Malte Hagener considers that cinephilia achieved through attending a film club, reading magazines, and specialized texts was common among members of the Nouvelle Vague. In current times, this practice has expanded to other objects, where DVDs and Blu-rays are a source among many others such as "(blogs, databases, video portals, computer games, festivals, streaming, etc.) characteristic of the new forms of cinephilia and film culture, at once more democratic and open, but also more commercial and diversified" (Hagener 2014, 76). Likewise, DVDs in the industry were framed in various modalities, such as standard releases<sup>9</sup>, simplified versions for retail sale, extended and special editions<sup>10</sup>, and boxsets<sup>11</sup> that compile several films by theme, genre, stellar casts, and filmmakers.

The extra materials of DVDs "cultivate connoisseur spectatorship through their commentary tracks, making-of documentaries, and other informational extras offer the viewer an illusion of privileged access to the film" (Benson-

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**9** It typically includes director's commentary, some extra materials such as making-of or blooper reels in addition to the film.

**10** It is often characterized by unusual packaging, such as steelbooks, which also feature extensive supplementary material.

**11** Generally, it is a way to market films that would not have any chance on their own, not even at bargain prices.

Allot 2011, 10), providing added value that is not obtained in the cinema or on television. Additionally, there are directors who produce and direct their own MoDs and "audio commentaries" as "editorial texts," among which stand out *The Making of Fanny and Alexander* (Ingmar Bergman, 1985), *Los Últimos Zapatistas: la herida sigue abierta* (Francesco Taboada, 2002), and *Coup de Torchon* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1998) – in the version edited by The Criterion Collection – as a possibility to expand on what they want to say and highlight about their films.

Skopal emphasizes that although many of the extra materials such as MoDs are seen before watching the movie, when they do so after having seen it, "bear significance just for the participants and the community members who share the memory of these events – and the viewer is situated in the position of a community member" (2007, 191) as a possibility to create collective immanence, create an atmosphere of intimate communion, and awaken a feeling of participation in events that take place not at the level of fiction but in their production.

Robert Gonzalez explains how the MoD, through a rhetorical analysis based on metaphors in the language of filmmakers, can investigate the "collaborative creativity" during the making of a movie, as he considers that these audiovisual texts are capable of exposing group creativity, in its context and language. Additionally, he asserts that they "are rich, multi-faceted, first-person accounts of creative processes, products, and human collaboration given by a variety of production company members [...] about how a film was made, but about how creativity is narrated as a uniquely human endeavor" (2013, 17) through comments and audiovisual testimonies<sup>12</sup>.

## PROMOTION OF AUTEURISM AND COLLECTING

The promotion of *auteurism* is notable in the MoD, which sacralizes the figure of filmmakers as authors. Specifically, Catherine Grant explains that *auteurism* is a legacy of the art market that was disseminated in cinema by the founders of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* magazine in France during the 1950s and 1960s. The term *auteurism* denotes the way in which different devices of the film market operate to promote and inform about filmmakers as authors. In this sense, the different extra materials (written, audio, visual, and audiovisual)<sup>13</sup> of a film

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**12** Some of the MoDs referenced and analyzed by Robert Gonzalez in his research include: *The Godfather: Behind the Scenes* (Fredric Abeles, 1971), *The Making of 'Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom'* (Frank Marshal, 1984), *The Making of 'Terminator'* (Drew Cummings, 1984), *Luck, Trust & Ketchup: Robert Altman in Carver Country* (John Dorr and Mike Kaplan, 1993), *Raging Bull: Outside the Ring* (Laurent Bouzereau, 2005), *A Tour of the Inferno: Revisiting 'Platoon'* (Charles Kiselyak and Jeff McQueen, 2001), *By Any Means Necessary: The Making of 'Malcolm X'* (Gary Leva, 2005), among others.

**13** These are elements that include the making-of and are distributed through the

deliberately promote the "authorial marks" as the cinematic signature of certain filmmakers.

At the time, Grant considered that the DVD, as a collector and promoter of extra materials from a film, was the example of synergy between the industry and the media, because it brought together what was previously obtained in print media and television.

The filmmakers' vision, expressed in a DVD discourse "often focused much more on other things than the movie they are promoting, and on top of the particular nuances of their narrative meaning" (2008, 105), provides "intratextual information," a factor that becomes an "added value" for the viewer.

Sometimes, this intention undermines the placement of the director figure as the sole author of the film in generic MoDs, which distinguishes those MoDs that seek to record testimonies from all film workers, even those of advanced age, to capture memories that would otherwise be lost. With these ideas, Arthur develops a perspective of collaborative work that reveals the supposed aura of the cinematic author. Therefore, this free and documentary format of the MoD can undertake a mnemonic task of cinematographic work through its own makers, pluralizing its recording and narrative.

Although the existence of MoDs cannot be disregarded or denied, highlighting the author's work that, on many occasions, "receives the lion's share of praise, and judging from a glut of faux-candid appearances and interviews, they are willing co-conspirators in an updated myth of auteurism" (Arthur 2004, 40). This is the case with television series that followed filmmakers considered authors such as in *Cinéastes de notre temps*<sup>14</sup> (ORTF-Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française, 1964-1972), as well as the MoDs made by Yves Montmayeur, Laurent Bouzereau, Gary Leva, Jeffrey Schwarz, or Lance Bangs that go beyond the norm of offering a simple documentation of the craft practice with a maximal adulation towards their admired filmmakers.

Arthur, in his quest to define the authentic MoD, mentions a list of exemplary works such as *Demon Lover Diary* (Joel DeMott, 1980), *Burden of Dreams* (Les Blank, 1982), and *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, and Eleanor Coppola, 1991) to show how through this meta-referential and creative audiovisual "parasite," a detailed approach to the vulnerability almost never revealed and to the degree of humanity of the cinematographic creative process is achieved. In this review, Arthur stands out for his approach to non-canonical MoDs, even those that impose the figure of the author over the rest of the filmmakers who collaborate on a film to generate

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EPK (Electronic Press Kit) during the promotion of a movie.

**14** They addressed the creative and philosophical contributions of Jean Vigo, Luis Buñuel, Erich von Stroheim, Robert Bresson, François Truffaut, Max Ophüls, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Marcel Pagnol, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean Renoir, Josef von Sternberg, Marcel L'Herbier, Jean Mitry, Jean Dréville, Alberto Cavalcanti, Lucien Aguetand, Michel Duran, Henri Diamant-Berger, Ève Francis, Georges Franju, Alexandre Kamenka, Fritz Lang, Jean-Luc Godard, John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke, Jean-Pierre Melville, and Norman McLaren.

a living testimony of the collective process.

*It seems very rare that a behind-the-scenes documentary will earnestly try to show how the movie is made over trying to sensationalize the process. After all, who exactly is the demographic watching these things? Is it people who are genuinely interested in learning the techniques, or is it casual fans of a particular movie peeking behind the curtain? (Bell 2013, par. 1)*

Indeed, David Christopher Bell explores some MoDs where filmmakers question the honesty of how they were made due to the bond they maintain with some crew members and their emotional relationship with the director or producer — thus challenging the discourse —, but at the same time, they generate intimate and surrealistic documentaries such as *Making of 'The Shining'* (1980) directed by Vivian Kubrick — daughter of Stanley, the director of the movie *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) —, *The Last Temptation of Christ: on location in Morocco* (1988) by Martin Scorsese — structured as a diary, taking advantage of the portability of the video camera to reflect on his process as a filmmaker — and *De Ydmyge de* (1998) by Jesper Jargil, who asked Lars von Trier to take notes from an audio-recorded diary while directing his film *Idioterne* (1998). More recently, we find cases like these in *Heli, behind the scenes* (2013) by Martín Escalante, brother of director Amat, who reveals the filming process of *Heli* (Amat Escalante, 2013), and *Notas de Viaje: Post Tenebras Lux* (Nathalia Acevedo, 2011-2012), where Nathalia Acevedo, based on her role as the lead actress in *Post Tenebras Lux* (Carlos Reygadas, 2012), decides to create this shooting diary. This close relationship between documentarians and crew members not only generates intimacy and surreal moments but also the possibility to explore hybrid forms of documentary with other forms of representation.

Authorship has not been the only interest of creators of cinematic extra materials but also "collecting", aimed at diversifying forms of world cinema. In this sense, Dru Jeffries shows that the editions by *The Criterion Collection* no longer tend to construct authorship directly, as the film industry does, but consider that their audience is intelligent enough to recognize that the traditional conception of the director as author, which "represent[ed] a simplification of how films are produced, and that a multiplicity of incomplete and potentially even contradictory views may offer a more nuanced account of how films are produced" (2017, 39) in all international and even independent cinematographies.

Craig Hight comments that in the consumption of MoD, "viewers may use detailed background information on a film's production to educate themselves on the nature of contemporary filmmaking practices and add to their appreciation of the technological and artistic achievement of filmmakers" (2005, 5), culminating in the moment of its commercialization and the mythification of filmmakers.

# SELF-LEARNING IN CINEMA

In a New York Times column, journalist Fabrice Robinet recounts that Matt and Ross Duffer, creators of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016), grew up far from Hollywood studios, and that DVD extra materials “‘were really the only way for us to experience a film set —to see how movie magic was made.’ Behind-the-scenes videos [...] gave them an inside look at the filmmaking process” (Robinet, 2018, par. 3) This case, cinephilia, and meta-cinema allow us to follow the didactic qualities of the discourse and use of MoDs in their narrative form, as well as in their domestic and academic use for film learning.

Authors Deborah Parker and Mark Parker, based on studies of hypertextuality developed by Gérard Genette, consider MoD as a “paratext”<sup>15</sup> of a film work, providing intertextual information on how and why it was filmed. In their investigation, they expose the symbolic construction generated by the texts that made up the extra materials of the DVD, those that talked about the film and the commercial dramatization of the “self” as the motivating agent of textuality (2011, 73). At the same time, they carry out a formal study of how each of these parafilms is produced, both to know the differences in content made by filmmakers and to evaluate their intentionality and the dynamics of knowledge exchange. Thus, they differentiate between the information obtained through an interview where the questions show “the performance of the ‘auteur’, and constantly remind us of the dynamics of the exchange. By contrast, a directorial commentary can be much less structured and somewhat more opaque” (Parker & Parker 2011, 75). Therefore, the evaluation of extra-filmic information is established based on the interests and levels of acquired knowledge.

We have even detected that there is a varied corpus of MoDs whose didactic structure promotes autonomous learning in viewers. *Filmando Batalla en el cielo* (Adrián Arce and Manuel Méndez, 2006) approaches a didactic narrative in itself, as it exposes, develops, and evidences the method of directing non-actors by director Carlos Reygadas in *Batalla en el cielo* (2005). Another case that allows access to the process of the filmmaking craft is found in *Cómo se hizo ‘Tesis’* (Mateo Gil, 1996), which employs aesthetic resources — derived from the film *Tesis* (1996) by Alejandro Amenábar — in favor of an expository and procedural narrative through comments from the director, cast, producer, and director of photography on Amenábar’s “puppet” techniques for directing actors. Its reflective discourse is critical when comparing the perspectives of the actors and the Spanish director and, also, recognizing that perhaps its rigid purpose stemmed from being a thriller genre film with certain archetypal characters and conventions in its language. *A conversation with Jim Carrey and director*

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**15** Cfr: “And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption” (Genette, 1997: 1).

*Michel Gondry* (Universal Pictures, 2004), through a conversation induced by the documentarian generates a reflection between actor and director on the creative bond, shooting techniques, and character construction processes.

Studies by Pat Brereton and Barbara O'Connor on the convergence between the pleasures generated by new media and pedagogy in relation to the consumption of DVD extra materials identified that they generate empathy in the viewer, as their viewing is based on their cinematic tastes and the knowledge needs of students (2007). In their research, applied to high school students in the city of Dublin, they found that DVDs were predominantly used in the domestic context and that, although there was variability in usage among groups, they generally developed critical literacy skills and competencies related to their social life and identity construction projects. They suggested that the so-called "dvd add-ons" could be used as a didactic resource in a more formal educational environment and outlined the potential benefits of their use in teaching.

Pat Brereton would continue, alone, promoting a media literacy intervention with topics and lines of cinematographic studies, but now with university students. He added to his themes the study of the revitalized Auteur Theory, thanks to the consultation of filmmakers' comments provided on DVDs. He would use an analysis corpus with works considered "smart-cinema", as they were films that, at the time, presented intelligence as a theme; that is, they manifested complex structures and combined formal and narrative elements towards a discontinuity and incongruity in the narrative. Therefore, the student "augment an appreciation of the aesthetic mindset of a new generation of auteurs" (Brereton 2012a, *kobo loc.* 364). Thus, the components available on the *DVD* helped them frame how new audiences interact with films and how they can have significant educational uses for students.

Finally, the author, based on a methodological transfer of Pat Brereton's cinema study processes, managed to apply a model of autonomous learning based on the use of MoD as a didactic resource in cinematography subjects with filmmakers in training. These MoDs appealed to the learning objectives of the minimum content of the subjects, as well as the knowledge of other complementary techniques to expand the epistemic and methodological range of the students in favor of the films they wanted to make (Andrade Zamarripa, 2021). Undoubtedly, it was a didactic experience that allowed us to reconsider the making-of as a feasible didactic resource for film schools.

## CONCLUSIONS

This theoretical-documentary research on the conceptualization of MoD helps us to understand that these diverse perspectives and contemporary specificities will continue to evolve due to changes in distribution platforms, such as what is currently happening with the decline of DVDs and Blu-rays in favor of video-on-demand streaming platforms. Even there, the dissolution of various formats of the mentioned "extra materials" – such as audio commentaries and hosted

trailers<sup>16</sup> – which were compiled and distributed on discs, is notable, but fortunately, MoD continues to be produced and distributed.

Secondly, this documentary subgenre manifests self-reflexive intentions that foster self-critical passages of the medium and an ontological view of cinema, that is, a reflection on the cinematographic medium itself as an audiovisual language and as a creative process within and outside the film industry. Additionally, it assumes a “mnemonic” function of filmmaking that promotes being a document and memory of filmmakers as a living testimony of their collaborative work process (Arthur, 2004; Gonzalez, 2013).

At a level of MoD representation, the privacy and intimacy of the technical and creative team during filming are explored because it reveals extra-filmic information<sup>17</sup> about their daily lives and vulnerable moments of their craft. “It’s a way to immerse yourself in the process of the film and in the mind and memories of the filmmaker” (Mercier, 2012, 31). Therefore, this privacy and intimacy that the viewer experiences on screen are touching, emotive, and pleasurable, and it is privileged information from the characters of the MoD. Also, some of the technical processes of films become evident, and even technological advances in cinema applied to filmmaking that remain invisible in the final film are revealed.

Lastly, undoubtedly, contemporary MoD clearly aims at a reflection on cinema as a means of expression, often accompanied by the exploration of its possibilities, especially those most suppressed by commercial cinema, such as the revelation of the craft and context of productions. Thus, due to the constant renewal of the audiovisual market, it remains to follow the mutations of MoD in its new distribution channels, establishing other durations and variations of consumption. Thus, contemporary meta-cinematic practice is closely related to questioning the machinery of industrial cinema, and, in parallel, it allows us to explore the contemporary ontology of cinema thanks to its effort to narrate/ show us how filmmakers execute their craft in other models of production and artistic intentions.

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**16** It is a subtype of promotional trailer presented through comments from the artistic and technical cast of the movie production.

**17** We experienced this with the making-of of the movie *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón titled *Camino a Roma* (Andrés Clariond and Gabriel Nuncio, 2020), in which the director becomes the guiding thread of all scenes and themes through an interview-testimony and provides information revealed to the viewer in other interviews aired during the promotion of his film.

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**Edited by Tomáš Jirsa  
and Mathias Bonde Korsgaard**

# **Traveling Music Video**

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*Video Killed the Radio Star* by The Buggles (1979) is often regarded as the beginning of the music video era, particularly in its televised form, as it was the first music video broadcast by MTV in 1981. Not by chance, in their latest curated book, *Traveling Music Video*, Tomáš Jirsa and Mathias Bonde Korsgaard start from this episode to reflect on the non-linear history and development of music video in its countless mutations and variants. They trace its transition from being primarily a promotional and commercial tool to becoming a meaningful *cultural artifact* and *transmedia event*. Not a *genre*, then, but a *cultural form* capable of addressing a vast and global audience; “an intertextual space of perpetual remediations where one medium transforms the other” (6), while “traversing various platforms, engaging with new technologies, interacting with other media, interrogating cultural identities, and exploring audiovisual aesthetics” (15).

With an approach that draws upon an interdisciplinary perspective, the book offers an exhaustive account of the many changes of this protean and slippery object, defined by its inherent mobility and by its affordances and discursive systems of relations; in short, it encapsulates its “traffic”, as declared by the curators themselves. Expanding on a precedent line of research (Jirsa 2019; Korsgaard 2017, 2019), they offer a deep understanding of the pervasiveness of music

video within the current media environment, illustrating its ubiquity as rooted in its dual role—both practical and theoretical. Indeed, it serves as a “laboratory” for audiovisual and post-digital experimentation, as well as a “conceptual site to rethink the relationship between sound, music, and moving image” (7). Music video exhibits a remarkable capacity and speed for adaptation to the constantly shifting media landscape, existing at the interplay between broadcast and communicative media—from television (especially during the MTV era of the 1980s and 1990s) to online platforms like YouTube, VEVO, and TikTok, as well as live streaming technologies and VR hardware and software (see Eugy Han and Saul Quintero’s essay), all of which challenge traditional formats. Such hybridization and remediation are essential to the evolution of music video content across various media formats, epitomising, one could argue, the general *frankensteinzation* of convergence culture.

Furthermore, although it has been recognized as a “vernacular” media form (6), music video not only serves as an experimental ground for innovations in emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and digital tools like spatial media and locative devices (see Tania Rossetto’s account of the relationship between music video and the evolving practice of mapping), but it has

also given rise to various subgenres, including the porn music video, and intertwined with commercial narratives— as in the case of Katy Perry's advertisement for Just Eat (dir. Dave Meyers, 2022)— intersectional activism —see Hanna-Mari Riihimäki's contribution—, and queer aesthetics—emplified by Lil Nas X's *Montero: Call Me by Your Name* (dir. Tanu Muino and Lil Nas X, 2020), examined by Zack Bresler, Stan Hawkins, and Lisa Karolyn Holte.

However, what appears to be more meaningful in this process is the fact that, by doing so, music video reshapes audience responses and engagement. In this regard, consider how tracks like Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams* (1977) and Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill* (1985) regained popularity through digital platforms decades after their initial release—thanks, respectively, to the viral video of Nathan Apodaca (an until-then anonymous user) skateboarding while lip-syncing, and to Bush's song being featured in an episode of *Stranger Things* (Netflix, S4E9, 2016).

These are the premises of a journey across three coterminous territories with shifting boundaries, namely “media, discourse, and sociocultural sites” (8). In particular, one of the most compelling aspects of the first section—*Topographies and Interventions*—is how music video functions as a tool for *political agency*. Lisa Perrott, for instance, focuses on *Poi E* (dir. Tearepa Kahi, 1984), which gained significant popularity upon its release, becoming the unofficial national anthem for New Zealand. Incorporating documentary audiovisual conventions as well as ideas from the animistic conception of time-travel, the music video merges Māori language and the gestural repertoire of the traditional indigenous *haka* dance, with elements of breakdancing and intertextual nods to Michael Jackson's iconic *Thriller* (dir. John Landis, 1983).

How music videos become sites for transcultural negotiation is also the focus of Tomáš Jirsa's contribution, which, however, concentrates more on how it travels “into the political space and tangibly interfere with it”

(73). By employing affect theory, Jirsa delves into music videos released in Central and Eastern Europe—the Czech *Bulhář* by J.A.R. (dir. F. A. Brabec, 1999) and *Fuck Off* by PSH (dir. Vít Hradil, 2015), as well as the Polish *Patointeligencja* by Mata (dir. Mariusz Sztykała 2019)—which are fully involved in the public debate on pressing issues such as xenophobia and racism, privilege, and the sense of rage and hopelessness spreading among younger generations. Accordingly, Emily Caston tackles the role of the music video as a proper vehicle for protest, tracing its first appearance well before the current wave that began in the US in 2015, back to the anti-gay HIV media panic of the 1980s in Britain, exemplified by Coil's video for *Tainted Love* (dir. Peter Christopherson 1984).

As for the theoretical use of music video, of particular interest is the “cross-pollination of music videos and documentary” discussed by Laurel Westrup, who points out a convergence enhanced by their inherent openness and resistance to strict definitions. Focusing on Young Thug's *Wyclef Jean* (dir. Staake, 2017) and Flying Lotus's *Wildcat* (dir. Kahlil Joseph, 2013), the author highlights and overturns the expectations surrounding both forms of representation in terms of intimacy, performance, and authenticity, affirming their nature as relative, changing, and “socially constructed” (23).

It should also be noted that Kahlil Joseph's *Wildcat*—which pictures an all-black rodeo subculture in Oklahoma—has undergone a three-dimensional translation as a video installation within contemporary art exhibition spaces. After all, the hybridity of music videos is such that the same product not only changes media and platforms but can also have many lives, as highlighted by the second section—*Extensions and Intersections*—which presents a collection of in-depth case studies on the presence of music videos within the art system and their relationship with historical narratives and cultural identities. Therefore, concentrating

on the art practices of Soda Jerk, Pipilotti Rist, Ragnar Kjartansson, and Angelica Mesiti, who utilise music video as a medium or artistically display large-scale video elements, Caleb Kelly consider its interplay with the visual and sonic arts. Historically, he claims, media artists have radically repurposed its formats by intersecting electronic media, performance, and sound art, thereby stretching the potential of music videos as video art and beyond, and exerting substantial influence on gallery practices. “Well before music video was enshrined as a critical element of the music industry, artists experimented with video recording technologies in a manner reminiscent of much later music videos as seen on MTV and social media” (118). Accordingly, Jamie Sexton also accounts for this music video attitude of pushing its own boundaries beyond the screen. Delving into issues such as media ageing, nostalgia, hauntology, and “occult psychedelia” (129), he grounds his analysis in Julian House’s transmedia work, which includes collage techniques and found footage that merge lo-fi commercial and avant-garde, “dispersing his aesthetic vision across different media forms” (135).

The final section—*Platforms and Interfaces*—delves into the diverse migrations of music video “across social media platforms, video games, and site-specific performances” (13), showing how it shapes not only institutional frameworks but also industrial practices. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, for instance, examines Radiohead’s *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* (2021)—“part virtual exhibition, part video game, part interactive music video collection” (186)—and its innovations in distribution strategies, as it was released on a gaming platform such as the PS5. With its pioneering *ludomusicological* approach, *Kid A Mnesia Exhibition* definitely represents a significant encounter between music videos and video games, incorporating their features and navigational interactivity.

Of course, this type of intersection that

redefines artist-audience relationships in terms of *gamification* is becoming more and more common. Another case in point is the innovative intersection of music videos and virtual concert experiences within online gaming platforms such as Fortnite—like those of Norwegian pop artist Aurora (2022), discussed by Anna-Elena Pääkkölä, and those of Ariana Grande and Travis Scott, discussed by Carol Vernallis. Vernallis, in particular, illustrates how the interactive and immersive musical experiences blend live (virtual) performance with gameplay elements and visual artistry, namely entertainment and new artistic expression. At stake, it goes without saying, is also the negotiation between authenticity and performance in online contexts, analysed in Berenike Jung’s contribution, which investigates how TikTok fosters embodied listening experiences and playful interactions with music through memes and gestures like lip-syncing and kinesonic movements.

As the exploration of the many occurrences of music videos continues to evolve, it is essential to recognise their multifarious presence in contemporary culture, both online and in real life. A new publication on the topic, for example, should now include a focus on AI-generated music videos, which introduce new possibilities but also raise new questions about how they shape cultural narratives and identities. Consider, for instance, *The Hardest Part*, the first AI-generated music video realised by Paul Trillo for Washed Out; the highly criticised competition launched by Pink Floyd to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *The Dark Side of the Moon*; the video *Turnà* by the anonymous beatmaker Liberato, which epitomises the commercial postcard imagery and stereotypes associated with the city of Naples, to name just a few. This dynamic interplay between music videos and cultural contexts makes it a compelling issue for ongoing study within contemporary audiovisual culture, as they serve as sites of negotiation for personal and collective representations and experiences. In conclusion,

*Travelling Music Video* usefully expands the list of recent publications on music videos (Arnold 2017; Di Marino 2018; Vernallis 2019; Shaviro 2022), offering a distinctive contribution regarding their significance in contemporary digital media culture. More importantly, it demonstrates not only how *video didn't kill the radio star* but also how it gave birth to new *constellations* of expressive forms and cultural meanings.

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Francesco Spampinato

## Art vs. TV

### A Brief History of Contemporary Artists'

### Responses to Television

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, pp. 368<sup>1</sup>

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Nowadays, it might seem that television has not merely been remediated but replaced by digital media, in particular smart devices. At the same time, after the Covid-19 pandemic, forms of telepresence as in video conferencing and streaming which have been inherited from TV technologies have come to dominate our daily lives and environments, raising concerns about issues such as surveillance and control (Galimi and Grespi 2024). An equally important issue is the creative use of these technologies, conducted in personal and collective ways. This question is precisely, and fundamentally, addressed in *Art vs. TV*. The book is a comprehensive history of the relationships between artists and television, especially from the 1950s to the present, when the medium has progressively occupied private and public spaces and become dominant on a mass scale. What a book like this brilliantly shows is the key role of television as "a creative medium", to quote one of the first exhibitions on television art organized at Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1969.

Thus, *Art vs. TV* presents the multiple ways in which TV has been used mainly by (independent)

artists to decontextualize the apparatus and operate a bottom-up appropriation, calling for democratic uses and collective engagements since the early days of video art. At the heart of the book, we can find a complete phenomenology of the experiences of female, male and queer artists with television at different levels: from TV shows and broadcasting actions aimed to live appearances and documentaries, from artworks centred on TV to music videos made to be on rotation. The book's reasoning is articulated through an apparent paradox, addressed by Spampinato in the introduction: "words, every artistic commentary on television configures itself as an act of challenge to television itself" (4). This relies on the Foucauldian principle that, within dominant discourse, the seed of potentially subversive, alternative discourses can be found (Foucault 1978: 92-96). By offering this, television can become both a device and a discourse (and thus, a *dispositif*) on a mass scale, which has been constantly engaged in criticism by challenging the nature of the technology and the palimpsest. Spampinato constantly motivates and reinforces his reasoning by drawing on related theories



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that have been produced progressively over the decades by prominent intellectuals such as Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard.

The book is structured in six chapters. After an initial contextualization of the topic in historical and theoretical terms, the author analyses the physical and psychological relationships that artists have established with the device which is considered here as a mirror. The next chapter investigates one key form of TV, the news format. Specifically, the analysis concentrates on the ways it was appropriated and addressed by activists, most notably guerrilla television collectives, hence becoming a tool of counter-information and thus revealing its nature as anti-television ("VT is not TV"), as Sandra Lischi outlined (2005). The fourth chapter is devoted to the role of artists as "media stars", showcasing their presence in the palimpsest as a kind of "interference" in the apparatus. The last two chapters cover more recent TV formats (music videos, soap operas, reality TV), focusing on the concept of "dis-entertainment" and the advent of the Internet.

*Art vs. TV* highlights a set of key issues that have been widely neglected in academic literature. For instance, Spampinato underlines the pioneering role of Lucio Fontana in assessing TV as a "creative medium", far before most recognized figures such as John Cage and Nam June Paik, and recontextualizes it within an international framework ("Fontana's television event was not only the first television program ever realized by an artist but also functioned as a visual essay illustrating the materialization of a theory", 27). Furthermore, he emphasizes the role of non-American artists in experimenting with the medium. Another significant feature of the book is how it investigates the experiences of art collectives, especially those connected to guerrilla television and underground cultures on the U.S.'s East and West coasts, by reviewing also the theoretical writings originated within these practices. One example of the phenomena

analysed by the author includes how public-access TV channels enabled broadcasts of independent projects by Colab, Glenn O'Brien, and Andy Warhol, which flourished in the context of New York's Downtown Scene, which was centred on clubs as places of production (Lawrance 2016; McLeod 2018). Even when *Art vs. TV* deals with the music video, which has already been studied in the literature, it offers a clear and fresh perspective on the topic by focusing on the relations entailed by the concept of "pop", as well as on the aesthetical and cultural approaches to that specific form of video. Finally, the book offers thorough appendices that complete the picture – the most original among them being "Chronology of Exhibitions on Art and Television".

*Art vs. TV* captures the state of the art of the book's subject and fills what was a significant gap, inscribing this "brief history" in the realm of visual arts and culture as well as of media studies. It reconnects the history of television, art and media theory, therefore providing a valuable tool for research in media arts as much as for teaching on this topic. More than anything else, *Art vs. TV* makes visible television's key role as an instrument of the postmodern critique of modernist culture and any sorts of establishments, be they political or cultural.

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PROJECTS  
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# GEMINI

## Gender Equality through Media Investigations and New training Insights

Marica Spalletta/Principal Investigator GEMINI Research Project (CERV-2022-GE)<sup>1</sup>

Link Campus University – Rome

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The research-action project GEMINI — *Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New training Insights* has been funded by the European Commission within the framework of the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) Programme. In line with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and from an intersectional perspective, GEMINI aims to tackle gender-based stereotypes that create gender inequalities and empower young adults to convey positive messages of gender equality and become ambassadors of inclusive society.

The project was launched on January 9, 2023 and will come to a close on June 8, 2025. It is coordinated by Link Campus University of Rome (principal investigator: professor Marica Spalletta), in collaboration with 8 other Institutions, both public and private, based in 6 European Countries. The academic partners also include the Universities of Aalborg from Denmark, Maynooth University of Ireland, the University of Bucharest from Romania, and the University of Algarve from Portugal. The non-academic partners are the Italian Fondazione Centro Studi Villa Montesca, the training provider Capacity Ireland, the Bulgarian Center for Educational Initiatives (CEI), and the Maltese

Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills.

GEMINI responded to a specific call for proposals to promote gender equality (CERV-2022-GE), which looked for innovative research-actions activities aimed at raising awareness —at local, national or EU level — to tackle gender stereotypes in all spheres of life, with a particular focus on youth, as well as other gender equality measures that address stereotypes through an intersectional approach.

Focusing on the representation of gender-related issues in serial dramas and how they can contribute to gender equality, GEMINI addresses European high school students and trainers/teachers in four European Countries (Denmark, Ireland, Italy and Romania) characterized by different socio-cultural contexts and varying levels of gender equality, as measured by the Gender Equality Index (GEI). Its main goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of narrative strategies and audience perceptions, both through qualitative and quantitative research activities, highlighting the media's potential to challenge gender stereotypes and societal norms, and advance gender-sensitive awareness. Beyond empirical research, the

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project also focuses on practical action insights, through the development of an educational toolkit to help integrate serial dramas into school curricula, fostering media literacy and encouraging a deeper understanding of gender issues within educational settings.

The choice to focus on screen serialities is due to the acknowledgement that serial dramas are significant cultural texts that not only reflect but actively shape societal norms and values. As such, they are powerful instruments for raising awareness of critical relevant social issues, including gender-related ones, employing narratives centered both on the storytelling of traditional gender stereotypes and the representation of more gender-inclusive models.

The approach is interdisciplinary, integrating insights from Social Sciences and Humanities. The theoretical framework originates from the GEMINI project's analysis of state of art about gender equality in a comparative perspective, providing an in-depth overview of the existing scholarship concerning the relationship between gender-related issues, youth and adolescents, and serial drama within the media landscape and sociological gender context of the four above-mentioned European countries.

This preliminary background analysis laid the foundations of the project's main research activities, which were carried out through a mixed method approach and were structured in two phases. The first qualitative phase aimed at mapping European young adults' consumption of serial dramas and their interest in gender-related issues (through 15 focus groups involving 190 students aged between 15 and 21 years old) and at detecting teachers and trainers' awareness of European young adults' perception of gender-related issues (through 42 in-depth interviews). The following quantitative phase aimed at measuring the influence of serial dramas on European young adults' perception of gender-related issues, through a structured multilingual transnational survey with more than 1,100 respondents from the four involved Countries.

On the one hand, based on the results from focus groups with European young adults, some exemplary serial dramas from each Country have been chosen and analyzed highlighting 'textual' representations of gender issues that may be singled out as teaching topics in classroom situations. These multi-country analysis merged into the first project research report (Hansen 2024) which blends the study of the creative intentions behind the chosen examples, by approaching serial dramas from desktop production studies, with the development of easy-to-use learning opportunities to teach the textuality/stylistics of gender representations in serial dramas.

On the other hand, the overall results of the quali-quantitative audience research have been widely presented in the second project research report (Spalletta 2024), which provides valuable data and analysis to understand and measure *whether* and *how* European young adults perceive, interpret, and engage with the gender representations offered by serial dramas, as well as teachers' attitudes towards teaching gender issues through the lens of screen seriality. This report offers meaningful insights for integrating serial dramas and gender issues into high school teaching, while considering the similarities and differences observed across the four countries.

Beyond the official project reporting, the research findings have been presented in several conference papers and panels (among which: the 10<sup>th</sup> European Communication Conference ECREA 2024; the International Conference on Media Industries; the 4<sup>th</sup> Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies International Conference) and are being published through a series of publications in peer-review journals (*Celebrity Studies*, *Italian Sociological Review*, etc.), including a special issue of *Academic Quarter* (eds. Hansen et al. 2024).

An edited collection entitled *Young Adults, Gender Issues and Serial Dramas. Research-Action Approaches to Consumptions, Patterns and Teaching in the European Mediascape* (eds.

Spalletta, Re, Hansen) will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2025.

The GEMINI project is just entering its action phase, through the implementation of innovative teaching and learning-by-doing activities. The joint work of academics and professionals from the four involved countries has resulted into the development of an Educational Toolkit, hosted by the GEMINI e-Platform, which will be tested in the upcoming months through three transnational piloting sessions, to be carried out in Italy, Ireland and Bulgaria. During the piloting phase, teachers will receive support in using serial dramas as tools for media literacy and education, through in-depth analysis of gender-related topics depicted in serial narratives. At the same time, students will have access to video lessons and training sessions to learn the fundamentals of serial

drama languages and formats, as well as the techniques of serial storytelling. This will equip them to compete in the GEMINI screenwriting contest, with the winner to be announced at the project's final conference.

The conference, which will be hosted by Link Campus University of Rome on 10-11 April 2025, will bring together scholars from diverse disciplines to explore the complex interactions between serial drama, gender issues, and young audiences. It will also provide an opportunity to consolidate the research and actions developed over the two-year lifespan of the project, while setting the stage for future research that expands and deepens the understanding of these complex issues.



# Queering Italy: A Queer Vision of Today's Italy in the Streaming Platforms' Serial Landscape

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This research project aims to investigate the most recent Italian TV series available on streaming platforms that discuss gender identity and the exploration of sexuality by today's youth. Conducted as part of a joint Ph.D. programme between the University of Bologna and the University of Montréal, the research explores the intersection of queer representation and Italian TV series on streaming platforms, examining how these themes are addressed within the Italian context in relation to international serial productions.

The theoretical framework of this research lies at the convergence of television studies, queer theories, and production studies, with the goal of exploring LGBTQ+ representation in Italian TV series, particularly within the context of streaming platforms. The project takes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cinema and television, feminist and queer studies, and cultural analysis, to understand how streaming platforms, with their global reach and ability to personalize user experiences, can contribute to the proliferation of LGBTQ+ content, and how TV series can contribute to the debate on new possibilities of inclusion.

The corpus of selected TV series, including

Netflix, Prime Video, and Rai Play, was chosen to investigate queer representations within an Italian context, comparing them with other international productions that address these themes, such as *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018), *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019–), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–), and *Heartbreak High* (Netflix, 2022–). In particular, the series *Prisma* (Prime Video, 2022–) serves as the primary case study for its ability to address gender fluidity and sexuality without labels, in a setting that oscillates between modernity and the past. Set in Latina, a city with a historical legacy tied to fascism, *Prisma* explores the collision between the freedom of expression of young protagonists and a socio-cultural context still marked by traditional dynamics.

Other Italian series that will contribute to understanding the national television landscape include, but are not limited to: *Baby* (Netflix, 2018-2020), *La vita che volevi* (RaiPlay, 2022), *Mental* (RaiPlay, 2020), *Mare Fuori* (Rai 2, RaiPlay, 2020–), *Nudes* (RaiPlay, 2021), *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision, 2018–), *Summertime* (Netflix, 2020-2022) and *Un professore* (Rai 1, 2021–).

The focus of the first research axis explores the production and marketing dynamics of digital platforms, highlighting how the algorithm



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plays a crucial role in fostering audience loyalty through content personalization and how this personalization can lead to the creation of "filter bubbles" (Kustritz 2015). Such bubbles can isolate users in media environments that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, thus reducing exposure to different perspectives and limiting the possibility of broader cultural dialogue. However, the wide variety of content offered by platforms like Netflix makes it possible to cater to both a broad audience and niche groups, ensuring greater visibility for otherwise marginalized queer productions (Anderson 2006).

The "paradox of queer television" also needs to be discussed, which highlights the difficulties and contradictions in the representation of queer identities in mainstream media. Richard Dyer (2002) argues that queer characters are often portrayed through limiting stereotypes that serve the narrative and reduce the complexity of queer experiences. Judith Butler (1990) describes this phenomenon as a "heterosexualization of desire," in which queer identities are conformed to heteronormative models, thus limiting their subversive potential. This approach risks diminishing the potential of LGBTQ+ representations as tools for challenging established social norms. Television, in this sense, functions both as a mirror of society and as an active agent in shaping cultural norms, according to John Fiske's "television as culture" theory (1987) and Stuart Hall's communication model (1980), which view media as playing a crucial role in either perpetuating or contesting dominant ideologies.

Another key concept is the "creation of a queer imaginary" through digital platforms. Streaming platforms, such as Netflix, have helped spread a global queer language, where the term "queer" is used both as an identity and as a tool for challenging existing norms. The concept of "queer potentiality" introduced by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), is central to this research. Muñoz describes queer as a future possibility, an ideal not yet realized but representing a way of seeing

and feeling beyond the limits imposed by the current reality. This is particularly relevant in the context of adolescent TV series, where coming out is often depicted as a rite of passage and as a process of identity formation typical of "coming of age" (Monaghan 2016; Tremblay 2017).

At the center of this research is also the representation of Italy itself, questioning whether we can speak of a "queer Italy". On one hand, these productions feature recurring patterns, themes, and stereotypes about the country, its culture, and its territory, which make Italy more recognizable and exportable abroad, especially for productions intended for streaming platforms and thus with a global reach. On the other hand, there are also more suspended representations, dreamlike, idyllic places, immersed in nature, as seen in some scenes of *Prisma* and in some film productions such as *Le fate ignoranti* (Ferzan Özpetek, 2001) and *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017). These have helped to present an image of a more open and inclusive Italy, even though these representations often remain isolated and surrounded by a political and social context that limits their impact (Rigoletto 2014).

The research explores how digital platforms can create new spaces for LGBTQ+ visibility, while also examining how these representations are sometimes limited by commercial logic. Indeed, platforms tend to favor easily consumable content, sacrificing the complexity of represented identities in favor of mainstream visibility that can reach a broader audience (Martin 2014). In this context, "queer television" (Rouleau 2022) is not merely a platform for inclusivity but becomes a battleground where the tension between visibility and normalization is at play.

The project's methodology involves a mixed approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis and the study of production practices. Qualitative analysis will focus on observing television texts, emphasizing key scenes and dialogues to decode how queerness is represented through images, sound, themes, editing, etc. As for quantitative analysis, specific

on-screen and off-screen data will be collected, such as the time devoted to heteronormative and queer representations, to track differences and similarities. The analysis of production practices will be enriched by interviews with production members, aimed at better understanding the motivations behind the choice to address these themes.

By combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, supported by interdisciplinary reflection, the project aims to explore how streaming platforms have created new spaces for LGBTQ+ visibility and the tensions that emerge from this process.

In conclusion, this research explores how representations in Italian TV series can contribute to the construction of a queer imaginary. The theoretical framework adopted aims to understand if and how Italian TV series can contribute to building a queer imaginary in a socio-cultural context marked by strong tensions between conservatism and pushes toward inclusion. Television and streaming platforms are configured as essential spaces for the development of non-conforming identities, offering both opportunities for resistance and challenges related to the normalization of LGBTQ+ representations.

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# The Comedic Compromise.

## Politics and Comedy in the History of Italian Television (1969-1982)

Matteo Marinello / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract<sup>1</sup>  
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This doctoral thesis explores the relationship between comedy and politics in the history of Italian television from 1969 to 1982, focusing on television entertainment and the ways in which comedians, professionals, and variety shows engaged with politics in a context deeply intertwined with the party system (Ortoleva 1995, Menduni 2018, Grasso 2019). Comedy reflected and reinterpreted the crises, impulses and transformations that affected Italy at a time when television itself was undergoing changes with the introduction of colour and the end of the public broadcasting monopoly. Television institutions, political fragmentation, censorship, changes in political communication and the new public role of comedians all influenced television comedy, which at the same time was immersed in a constant process of comedic self-reflection. Politics, on the other hand, sought to overcome its crisis of legitimacy by progressively aligning itself with the medium and adapting to its dynamics: its relationship with mass culture, its spectacular horizon and its deeply playful – and therefore comedic – dimension. Against this background, three case studies are presented: the political impersonations of Alighiero Noschese; the history of the Second Channel under Massimo Fichera and the comic programmes it promoted, such as

*Onda libera* (1976-1977) by Roberto Benigni, the theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame (1978) and *L'altra domenica* (1976-1980) by Renzo Arbore; and finally, the widely popular variety shows of Sandra Mondaini and Raimondo Vianello.

The first part of the thesis is dedicated to the methodological and historiographical debate. The comedy programmes retrieved from Rai Teche's digital archive were analysed through a multifocal approach that brings to the cultural history horizon (Sorba and Mazzini 2020) insights from cultural studies of the media industry (Caldwell 2008; Barra, Bonini, and Splendore 2016), comedy studies (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009; Marx 2019), and political communication studies (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Tryon 2016). In order to connect the programmes to the broader industrial and political context, a central focus has been placed on backstage processes, where a constant negotiation takes place between "production cultures" that find mediation in the broadcasted television programme. Television comedy itself invites us to recognise "the intrinsic symmetries between the cultures of production and the production of culture" (Mann 2008, 24) in shows that are rich in insider references and industrially reflexive, asking the audience to recognise comedy in both



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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Thesis supervisor Professor Luca Barra (University of Bologna). Date of dissertation: 25/03/2024.

its texts and its production conditions.

However, the backstage presented by (and on) the media is always a metaphor for the complexity of the production process, whose historical reconstruction requires the triangulation of different sources. Newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera* and *L'Unità*, and trade magazines such as *Radiocorriere*, *Altrimedia* or *Variety*, contain reports and interviews with comedians, professionals and executives, offering self-interpretations and explanations of decision-making processes. These are complemented by company histories, autobiographies and memoirs — sources that, although partial, illustrate the opacity and non-linearity of production processes. Rai's paper documentation is often unavailable, and some key documents were found in political archives, while consulting the Dario Fo and Franca Rame archives was also central. In addition, parliamentary acts can be valuable: when the spectre of censorship arises in public broadcasting, as in the case of Dario Fo and Roberto Benigni, parliamentary questions and debates can be read as re-mediations of production and distribution routines.

The amount of material collected for the period 1969-1982, as well as the need to maintain a coherent media and political context as a backdrop, obliged the research to focus within the framework of public broadcasting, stopping at the threshold of a phase strongly influenced by the Rai-Fininvest competition and the renewal of television languages. Although the broader landscape was considered, certain comedic experiences carried more weight in shaping the tension between comedy, politics and television. As such, the analysis prioritised exemplary cases of general trends. The study questioned whether the relationship between television, politics and comedy existed only in the mind of the researcher or was also present in the thoughts, intentions and practices of the era's protagonists. Three thematic cores emerged from this investigation, which are interlinked yet coherent enough to be analysed in separate chapters.

The reconstruction of the pre-reform Rai period follows Alighiero Noschese, the first to impersonate politicians on television: his experience reflects a challenging pursuit of proximity between comedian and institutions, through shows on the Programma nazionale like *Doppia coppia* (1969), *Formula due* (1973), and *Canzonissima* (1970-1972). Noschese inaugurated a central paradigm for the television relationship between politics and comedy: an ostentatious closeness and permeability with the political class, originating from the television visibility of the politicians themselves and the illusion of physical, character and verbal overlap between the imitator and the imitated. The analysis of the second channel under Massimo Fichera, on the other hand, follows a plurality of micro-cases, including the programmes of Fo, Benigni and Arbore. By juxtaposing the construction of the network and the launch of experimental programmes, the study explores the bilateral relations between these processes, how the project of a socialist network manifested itself in the comedic contents, and how the dynamics of the programmes influenced the evolution of the project, which, unlike Noschese's experience, was configured in terms of a television, comic and political 'disruption' closely linked to the implementation of the Rai reform. The third case focuses instead on the programmes of Sandra Mondaini and Raimondo Vianello, starting with *Tante scuse* (Programma Nazionale, 1974). With the help of writers Italo Terzoli and Enrico Vaime, the pair carried out a meta-TV operation, dismantling the rigid logic of variety shows and the selection process that takes place behind the scenes. They emphasised the difficulty of doing political satire on public television, the folly of any attempt to do so and, finally, the renunciation of political commitment. They maintained a relationship with politics characterised by distance and disengagement, but politics inevitably came into play, especially when it was stubbornly denied — a symmetry between their story and that of commercial

television, which they joined in 1982, never to leave again.

The research results illustrate, in the end, that the 1970s were crucial for the emergence of a highly diverse comedy, spanning styles, genres and objectives: classic variety shows gave way to programmes that mixed information and entertainment, while humour became increasingly pervasive in a mature medium that constantly interprets itself and the reality surrounding it, reducing everything to a banal, domestic dimension. Television comedy did indeed emerge as a key player in the collision between politics and spectacle, but the relationship between laughter and power

remained precarious, oscillating between self-ironic participation and coercive intervention by politicians. This dynamic also highlighted comedians' relationship with their context and audience, sparking debates about who their interlocutors should be — whether a mass audience or a passionate niche — and reflecting different views about the social role of comedy. As comedians became prominent figures, their humour was labelled as 'satire' or subject to 'censorship', two catchwords that underlined the new public significance of comedy, which entered the national debate, reflecting and channelling wider political tensions.

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Nicole Braida was a post-doctoral fellow at the Film and Media Dramaturgy department at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in the project Dici-Hub (A Research Hub for Cinema Studies) until 2024. She completed her PhD in 2021 and published her dissertation for *Transcript Migrating through the Web. Interactive Practices about Migration, Flight and Exile* (2022). She has taught courses on Data Visualization and Digital Methods and worked on Super8 reduction prints. Currently, she works as an independent scholar and as a content specialist for the Italian software company IKON Digital Farm.

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Andrea Bruno studies film music at the University of Turin, where he conducts seminars on contemporary film music composition practices. His passion has led him to research the work of Hollywood composer Christopher Young and collaborate with him on some of Young's projects, including the release of two box sets that collect most of the composer's works, restructured in suite format. He has also formed an artistic partnership with Italian cellist and composer Marco Robino. Their latest major collaboration was for the score of *La Memoria del Mondo*, the fourth feature-length film of Italian director Mirko Locatelli, where he served as score coordinator and music editor. Additionally, he supervises and curates the publication of Robino's catalogue, collaborating with prominent film music labels.

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Formerly a lecturer in History of Music in Italian Academies of Music, Roberto Calabretto is currently Full professor of Music in Audio-visuals and History of Music at the University of Udine. His research activity initially focused on Italian twentieth century music. Since the Nineties, his academic interest has been centred almost exclusively on music for films, starting from a study of major film music composers and directors. His textbook *Lo schermo sonoro. La musica per film (The Sound Screen. Music for Films)* (Marsilio 2010) received widespread critical acclaim and has been used in many university courses; it has reached the seventh edition. Calabretto is a member of the following scientific boards: Archivio Nino Rota (since 2016) and Luigi Nono Archive (since 2019); he has chaired the scientific committee of the Foundation Ugo e Olga Levi in Venice since 2019.

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Donald Greig is a versatile professional singer and currently a Lay Clerk at Canterbury Cathedral. He was a co-founder of The Orlando Consort with whom he sang for 35 years, a member of The Tallis Scholars for over 25 years, and is an active session singer. He is a former lecturer in film studies and semiology, and received his doctorate in music from the University of Nottingham. He is currently writing a book on the production, reception, and musical remediations of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928).

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