



Focusing on either one or two films,
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Sound, Culture and Society B

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“Film music is at once a gel, a space, a language, a cradle, a beat, a signifier of internal depth and emotion as well as a provider of emphasis on visual movement and spectacle. It bonds: shot to shot, narrative event to meaning, spectator to narrative, spectator to audience.” (Gorbman 1987)

Film is a form of art that has been around for centuries; with the inclusion of sound and music to film in the later years, film has now become a wholesome experience. Film music has a way of enhancing the experience of the viewer in the most minute ways and the most major ways.

Sound narratives are meant for movie goers to experience and hear the sounds that allow them to transcend from their seat and into the movie itself; it gives a more 3-dimensional aspect to the movie. Bordwell and Thompson (1985) mention many advantages of using sound in film, such as the use of more than one sensorial mode and shaping the images for our own interpretation.

We are a visual culture, but there are different stages of listening that play many different roles in our lives. Certain sounds are also able to mold the way we interpret what we watch on the movie screen. This essay entails a brief summary of sound in film, the importance of film music and explains the different uses of film music. It then continues with an analysis on a few scenes from the movie *'Inception'* (2010) and how the film's soundtrack enhanced the experience for movie goers.

Before sound became popular in film Kracauer (1960) suggests that "the early film exhibitors availed themselves of music to drown the disturbing noises of the projector: but the noisy projector was soon taken out of the theatre and music still stayed" possibly because the "sheer

presence of music increases the impact of silent images”. Provenzano (2008) states that among the many reasons why music stayed in silent film, three of the main reasons would be:

“(1) music’s historical connection to drama, dating back to the ancient Greeks; (2) music’s aesthetic ability to create a multi-dimensional medium out of one that is by nature two-dimensional; and, (3) music’s psychological capabilities, i.e., bringing the images to “life” and covering what would be an uncomfortable amount of silence” (Provenzano 2008, p. 82)

When it came to the end of the silent film era, music still prevailed, showing the sheer importance of music and how it went far beyond distracting the audience from the sound of machinery and gave emphasis to the movie’s plot and characters.

Sound in movies are not merely sounds made appropriately by the actors or the scene setting. “In the process of film production the sound track is created separately from the images and can be manipulated independently and flexibly”. (Bordwell and Thompson 1985) Kracauer fully explains the use of music during films silent era:

“Truth about the use of music in silent images: it is added to draw the spectator into the very center of the silent images and have him experience their photographic life. Its function is to remove the need for sound, not satisfy it. Music affirms and legitimates the silence instead of putting an end to it. And it fulfills itself if it is not heard at all but gears our sense so completely to the film shots that they impress us as self-contained entities in the manner of photographs.” (Kracauer 1960, p. 135)

As propitious as film music might be, it can prove to be disadvantageous as well. As film music helps manipulate the way viewers feel, the viewer is then most likely not left to ones own creative way of thinking. However, sound is an extension of the director’s creativity that he

means for the viewer to feel. Therefore, in that space and time whilst watching the movie, the viewer's mind is meant to be influenced.

"Enumerating the effects of an audiovisual situation shouldn't end up in a list of how sounds mean to serve. the sound does not serve; it is." (Chion, 2008, p. 167) The soundtrack for *Inception* composed by Hans Zimmer was meticulously thought out and not many scenes in the movie did not have a presence of some form of musical score. The movie was well received but so was the soundtrack, proving that the soundtrack was indeed an entity of its own instead of a mere accompaniment for the movie. Considering the movie focused around the concept of a dream within a dream and completing missions within a timeframe before the "kick" woke them up, the soundtrack was filled with a mix of languorous tunes and fast-paced beats. The movie *Inception* is about Dom Cobb, played by Leonardo DiCaprio who is a master at stealing secrets when one's mind is at the most vulnerable – a subconscious dream state. With such a rare set of skills, he is highly sought after and also a wanted fugitive. He is however given an ultimatum that would allow him a shot at redemption. Instead of stealing, he is now tasked with planting an idea into the mind. Along with his team, he tries to carry out his mission despite enemies that seem to anticipate their every move.

There are many uses for soundtrack in film. It creates continuity for a form of art that creates discontinuity, it acts as a glue. For example, the transition from one scene to the next can be done so smoothly by inserting music, making at least one thing constant when scenes are being changed so viewers are not as uneasy or conscious – it allows a flow. For example, in *Inception*, Yusof starts playing 'Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien' as a 'kick' to wake Arthur up from his dream,

Candidate no.: 148601

the scene changes and we hear Arthur hurrying down the stairs but pauses when he finally realises that he hears the tune and knows what it means. Film soundtrack enhances emotions. These are ingrained parts; major chords evoke happy and bright emotions during a scene, minor chords evoke the feel of melancholy and sadness. For example, in *Inception*, as Cobb witnesses Mal commit suicide, the music has minor chords and produces the feeling of grief, we are allowed to feel along with Cobb. Music in film also enhances the meaning of the scene. Whenever a scene of Cobb and Mal is shown, the music that accompanies it is soft and slow, with apparent string instruments. It signifies romance and enhances the beauty of their relationship. With this example, it also shows that film soundtrack helps us understand the character as well as the plot even more – the reason why Cobb is not able to get Mal out of his dreams is because of his love for her is still strong and alive.

“Film, though often thought of as a visual art, actually acts as one of the most important canvases upon which modern composers practice the art of music”. (Provenzano 2008, p. 79) The music in *Inception* is mostly non-diegetic - where music is added into the film, however there was a certain tune that was diegetic in the film. ‘Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien’ (1960), recorded by Edith Piaf, was played through headphones for the dreamer to know their dream was coming to an end, it was used as the ‘kick’, a form of musical countdown. To enhance the ‘dreaminess’ of the films’ soundtrack, Zimmer used many forms of leitmotif’s in his music. He composed a track inspired by Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien’s tune and made it sound more ominous, the track can be heard at the beginning of the film and many parts of the film as well. The two low notes that keep repeating are played in crescendo and soon become a loud and dangerous sound, much more ominous as compared to the original song. Zimmer said in an interview that his piece was

Candidate no.: 148601

not a slowed down version of the original song but is “constructed from a single manipulated beat from it”. (Zimmer, H 2008)

“Soundtracks are able to be an active relation with the image track” (Bordwell and Thompson 1985), also “parallel commentative music restates, in a language of its own, certain moods, tendencies, or meanings of the pictures it accompanies”. (Kracauer 1960, p. 139) The soundtrack for *Inception* was fitting to every scene and even discreetly paved the way for ramifications of certain meanings by the director. Following closely to the storyline, the music undertakes the ‘mickey-mouse’ technique, which is an effect of over-illustrating the actions portrayed by the characters to match the musical score. This technique was made popular by Walt Disney who was a believer in the importance of sound to storytelling.

One example of the ‘mickey-mouse’ effect in the movie is a scene when Cobb is being chased by a group of men wielding guns trying to kill him. Initially, before Cobb tries to escape the men, soft percussion beats start, but slowly build up when the chase is finally in place. This gives time for anticipation to build up in the audience. The volume of the music increases gradually and finally gets extremely fast and urgent; it is meant to put their audience at the edge of their seat. They feel the sense of urgency for Cobb and the imminent danger should he not run fast enough and get caught. The music gradually gets softer when Cobb manages to find a café to hide in, however the beat of the musical piece remains the same – fast and urgent sounding, signifying only temporal safety but still very much at risk. When the men eventually find Cobb in the café, the music resumes its original volume but completely dies down when Cobb gets into the car with Saito, finally safe from his enemies. In a sense, the music mimicked Cobb’s journey, from

Candidate no.: 148601

being chased to finding a brief moment of safety to being found out and finally safety. Also, the piece that was played throughout the scene sounded very Middle-Eastern, which also suit the movie setting since it was filmed in Morocco.

Another example would be the scene about the Penrose stairs. Arthur explains to their new architect, Ariadne, about the paradoxical staircase and shows her the tricks and logic behind it. It is such a new, brilliant and mind-blowing concept to Ariadne and also for the audience.

Interpreting the music during that scene, the pace of the music shadows Arthur's endless pouring of new information, a steady pace, yet the tune matches Ariadne's expressions and probably the audience, a sense of bewilderment and amazement.

Be it soft, loud, harsh or light, background music accompanied most of the scenes. The use of the change in intensity is interesting as it helps to amplify the scene or soften the mood for the audience. The loudness of sounds is purposefully manipulated and so is the pitch of the sound. As Bordwell and Thompson mention that these acoustic properties "define sonic texture of a film" and 2 of the many advantages in sound for a film are that sound "engages another sense mode: visual accompanied by aural attention" and "sound shapes how we interpret the image" (Bordwell and Thompson 1985)

One example of the use of manipulating the volume would be when Ariadne secretly follows Cobb into his dreams. She sees Cobb and Mal talking, loving looks exchanged between each other. String instruments play softly in the background, a very slow tempo, setting the moment to be delicate and intimate. But suddenly, as Mal turns her head to look at Ariadne, a loud, sharp

Candidate no.: 148601

and discordant screech breaks the soft music – giving the audience the exact same feeling Ariadne feels, shock and the feeling of getting caught spying on them. The music then drops to a low and threatening beat of percussions as Cobb walks to Ariadne and tells her she should not be here. The low steady beats give the audience a sense of threat, like a warning for imminent danger.

Inception ends with one of the most significant pieces from Hans Zimmer, ‘Time’. It is a beautifully composed piece with a slow rises and deep falls, it manages to capture the essence of the scene perfectly. At the end, Cobb wakes up and starts looking around the plane, a piano chord plays and steady percussion beats follow after every chord. Soon, a string instrument starts playing along with the piano and drags the note. This shadows Cobb’s disbelief, he is slow to realize that he is finally not in a dream and instead, back to reality, the mission that he was tasked with was a success. Cobb walks through the airport immigration and looks nervous, he is still unsure whether or not he will be allowed through. The music slowly softens, and comes to a lull when he is faced with the immigration officer checking his passport. As much as this is not silence, it is very much similar to the use of silence in films. It provides tension and causes the audience to wait with bated breath as to what will happen next. As the immigration officer stamps Cobb’s passport and says “welcome home, Mr. Cobb”, the electric guitar comes in giving the piece a bit of an edge to it. It is as though the electric guitar was a way of signifying how ‘real’ the situation has become for Cobb and a whole new mix of emotions stirring within him. With every percussion beat and the increase in volume, Cobb is able to comprehend that he finally gets to return home to his children. A trombone (or an instrument from the brass section) starts playing after Cobb picks up his luggage, and instantly it gives a sense of triumphant and

Candidate no.: 148601

grandeur. Cobb has finally made it home. The instruments slowly fade one by one and the piano plays single notes instead of chords as his children embrace him. The score then takes a turn when the camera zooms into the still spinning top, a sharp crescendo is heard, the top wobbles and the movie ends.

In conclusion, Hans Zimmer has created many award winning film scores and is able to perfectly tune his music to capture the essence of the film. *Inception* is one of the many musical soundtracks that leave the viewer both conscious and unconscious to the fact that the music was indeed very much a contributing factor to ones' feelings that were conjured whilst watching the movie. Musical soundtrack in film is important and so is the precise selection to suit the scene. Directors are able to convey messages and evoke emotions through film sound. The achievements of music in film aid in emotional shaping but also adds and destabilises the meaning of the scene. Film sound-design deeply engages and unconsciously enraptures the sensorial powers of the viewer, leaving one to feel present in the movie in some way. Soundtracks in film are therefore highly essential, they “function as a background noise like any “restaurant music,” and they claim our attention for being beautiful in their own right” (Kracauer 1960, p.140)

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