
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Hanns Eisler and Theodor W. Adorno (1947/2007)
Composing for the Films
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Sixty-one years after its publication, *Composing for the films*, by Eisler and Adorno, can still teach us much about film music and what usually happens to its production processes. Although it embraces a period now far from our present 'liquid modernity', as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, arguments on the relationship between sound and picture, as well as some of the composer's sociological conditions discussed in the book, are still quite valid or even stronger today, especially when we think about Hollywood or any other large-scale movie production.

Critical Theory and Negative Dialectics have become obsolete in some aspects, but definitively not as a whole. We may even find that the book

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represents a step in Adorno's attempt to gradually loosen his earlier, rather universalistic sort of critique towards a more intricate observation of the subject. It could shed light with not much difficulty on contradictions between theoretical debate and actual practice. Hanns Eisler's contributions to the thought and practice of film music were also done right in the cyclone's eye of the mainstream system, with a research project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. It is hard to know to what degree the book is a real response or reaction to what he must have suffered as a composer in the studio business. On the other hand, the eminent theorist Adorno, from that period onwards, seems not to cut off the possibility of considering a more subtle objectivity, in which some subversion, transgression and deviation from universal manipulation may play a greater role. As his theories advise us, once objects are historical, they always have a potential to change.

Themes such as alienation, fetishisation of material, commodity's generalising power, the spectator seen as mere consumer, are never or should never be forgotten. But subjectivity is, since the period of this book, much less like an addressed entity on which the culture industry simply imposes or imprints its desires. This will become much more noticeable in Adorno's future works, as in *Transparencies on Film* (1966). The subject seems to get a more fluid and complex sense than before, allowing the projection of some advice and a curious sense of the positivity of 'non-autonomous' film composing. The composer should be aware of its contradictions and play with them; hope for transgression and creativity exists at the very heart of the system. One could argue that this affirmative side is Eisler's part of the game, but Adorno, though skeptical as he may have been, would certainly disapprove it if it did not fit somewhat into his growing concerns.

The main example of this greater degree of complexity is observable in the treatment of montage, taken as a powerful expressive and subversive device. After all, doesn't montage and shock (as fresh, creative contrast) provide a sort of negative, dialectical propelling mechanism, in which terms or objects are disharmonised from their fixed origins, where mutually incompatible

vectors of meaning might generate some sorts of expressive, "authentic" artistic material?

The edition has an excellent and generous new introduction written by Graham MacCam. Brightness and simplicity are achieved at the same time in the way he contextualises the life, the social ambience of both authors in exile, important influential figures like Kluge, Kracauer and Brecht, and briefly speaking, how such context permeates their concerns about film music.

The first chapter of the book begins with an intense critique of leitmotif applications. In film music, the authors argue, it does not serve as a device of symbolic evocation, as in Wagner, but purely as a musical lackey. We could certainly say that it is not always the case. But even today, in some "experimental" soundtracks made for silent movies or videos, leitmotif has become a frequent stamping ground to provide clues for the listener among disparate events, without having to develop a composition. In the same context, melody is seen, by the authors, as a preferable self-contained resource, to the detriment of theme or constructed process. Today, we may find the same sort of strategy applied to clear-cut concrete or synthetic objects, which are repeated as distinctive, appealing signs, not part of a compositional process at all. Not so much to composition, the problem here would be the seductive character and a sort of fetishist trap that such device might favor.

The authors go on to discuss a delicate issue in any multi-media production: unobtrusiveness, the idea that music should not be conspicuous or blatant. This supposedly leads to aggression or exaggeration. What Eisler and Adorno wish to show is that this concept veils a common prejudice, one which restrains all valuable attention to the actors and the narrative, while music should be kept subordinate and unconscious, if not 'a plot accessory, a sort of acoustic stage property' (7). Under the same sort of thinking, musical elements follow or illustrate visual and narrative incidents with typical clichés for landscapes, nature, historical and folk contexts, suspense, and so on. It rarely takes a prominent expressive position. This still seems to be the case of what happens in most films, with very rare exceptions.

In chapter two, such secondary function of music is perceived according to its supposedly abstract nature, not absorbed by bourgeois rationale as easily as visual elements. We may argue for or against such assumptions, but what the authors are trying to find out here is the very reason for the subordinate position of music on a more sociological and ontological level. Creative or active listening has always been secondary to objective vision in our culture. But as the composer should assume the inherent contradictions of the job and act affirmatively, the chapter ends with some provisions, positive examples of how music can be used as part of dramatic expression and not just as the usual follow up device.

The names of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Bartok are mentioned in chapter three as examples of new music resources at that time. For the authors, constructive or structural principles govern the real invention of music, and not the use or misuse of dissonance, qualitative resources or unusual *instrumentarium*. The apologetic view of structure and Schoenberg is indeed related to personal acquaintance, as well as to master-pupil mutual admiration.

A discussion on musical form follows to show how the use of short, aphoristic structures of new music, as well as qualitative aspects of profile and dissonance, are all seen as especially suitable to film music. No doubt, the authors hold an ideological belief, but, given the circumstances of film music, new music was seen as the only gateway to break through massive romantic standards. The authors are well aware that total objectivity of technique (even the use of new music techniques) is a great danger and may lead to automatic and imitative practices with no creative interest.

Chapters four and five seem to form the central critical and theoretical core of the book. 'Sociological Aspects' opens with a critique of how the calculus of public reaction was developed to make productions well accepted beforehand. The roots of such response devices are found in the great change of the twenties. Great companies substitute private enterprise. With it, rigid administrative stratification and marketing ostentation are developed (red carpet, star system, great orchestras, movie palaces, specialised workers of all sorts, specific functions in each department and so on). Stagnation of creativity

follows the subjection of music to administrative control. The authors even present some of the contractual rules of that period to prove the absurdity of the composer's situation. In another important argument, they claim that in film, contact with the public is naturally indirect, not alive, so that its reified form becomes the box-office response.

The chapter on the aesthetics of film music is probably the most consistent of them all. It starts criticizing the adjustment of music to technical conditions of the setting, as for example, the microphone. According to the authors, it should run the other way around: technical issues should adjust themselves to the music.

The concept of montage is evoked not only to deal with images among themselves, but with the relationship between images and music. Music is seen as even more necessary to talking pictures, in which the characters do not produce vocal sounds, but images of vocal sounds. They are still felt to be effigies, phantom-like flat creatures, no different than in silent pictures.

The difference between composing based on style and composing based on planning is another crucial issue of the chapter. Planning allows a look ahead, to make montage work out its ways. Style is a stagnant social and historical achievement, which is taken as a formula and repeated over and over. The authors give a sense to *musica ficta* quite far from the use of chromatic material in ancient music practice. Here, it describes the way film music can represent something and not simply be itself, express something and not itself: in short, how it becomes a fake. That is why tempo in music, for example, should not represent the film's images but serve as a more independent stimulus to make it flow.

According to the book, recorded music neutralizes music itself in a sort of flow or thread, which is more easily acceptable, leading to more indifference and less rejection. Even difficult musical passages and new resources are attenuated by it. What we have is an image of music and not music itself. But the authors believe that a genuine montage would be able to break up such neutrality and instigate creative associations.

Chapter six unfolds some issues discussed before, such as social stratification and rigid division of functions in the business, the roll of the producer and his authority, the importance of short musical forms once again, and the experience of time in film music. This last item can be especially related to a music form that would not express itself, as it should never present itself as self-reflective substance: time is felt as 'an all-present dimension, it does not harbor anticipations in itself' (66).

The book's final portions reassess culture industry issues of film music and present a report on music examples written by Eisler for different scenes. Standardisation is observed in orchestration, instrumentation and jobs such as the specialised arranger. But conclusions are made upon the relationship between film music and the audience, and this is where a clearer account of a more flexible, complex and relative objectivity emerges. After all the critical evaluation of the field, resistance and spontaneity may indeed survive and provide creative escapes even inside the very heart of the great capitalist monster. Examples and counter-examples are presented in the practical report of the project, which is curiously considered as an appendix. Even assumptions about film music made by people like Eisenstein are put to the test and criticized, although montage between music and images is certainly seen as the key creative tool.