

Between the Poles of Mickey Mousing and Counterpoint

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There is little doubt that pleasure in viewing advanced the development of cinematography and that pleasure in hearing led from the very outset to a desire for sounds to accompany filmed images. It is thus no surprise that the relationships between filmed images and their worlds of sound often tend to be passionate. After all, the word “listen” has the same linguistic root as the word “lust.” Consequently, filmed images strive both to merge with and to flee from their sounds, as do the parties in every passionate relationship.

This essay explores the relationship between filmed images and their accompanying sounds by means of the two poles of Mickey Mousing and counterpoint, taking as examples actual film scenes and a collection of citations. This means translating the written word into imagined and remembered images on film and at the same time imagining and remembering the associated listening experience. Writing about the fundamental link between the visible and the audible and the association of visual with auditory events thus has its peculiarities: “Those who write about film scores,” musicologist and music critic Hansjörg Pauli warns us, “are frankly fishing in muddy waters. The pickings are known to be promising, but the practice is considered disreputable.”¹ Wordsmith Martin Walser also balks at the task: “Music is the most intimate thing we have, and it is difficult to find language to match it—as difficult as finding words for dreams.”²

In the beginning was the separation of image and sound. Phonography and cinematography had to wait over two decades before being united in the darkness of the movie theater. Yet from the moment he invented the phonograph as a means to conserve sounds, Thomas Alva Edison had always intended to combine recorded sounds with recorded images. The Kinetophone he created for the synchronous reproduction of sounds and images can be considered a precursor to the variety of sound-film techniques that were subsequently developed. In the latest step, today’s digital technology reduces audio and video to the technically identical level of bits and bytes.

The production processes and subsequent manipulation in post-production treated images and sounds as entirely autonomous phenomena. The postulation of their technological autonomy as a paradigm also for the aesthetic autonomy of image and sound led to a dispute over the issues of creation and composition, a dispute critical of ideology whose consequences still linger today in the bipolar model of film music. The development of the field of sound design through the digital diffusion of the auditory led to both a dissolution of and innovation in the montage options for music and sounds on film soundtracks. Not only has it become easier in technical terms to combine sounds with images in montage by dint of editing computers and appropriate software applications, but these tools also enable more complex sound compositions. The aim of this essay is to elucidate the two poles of this relationship and to illustrate how film production has oscillated between the two up to the present day.

Norbert Jürgen Schneider divided the territory on the basis of ideal types into two contrasting poles that represent different modes of operation. At the one

1 Hansjörg Pauli, *Filmmusik: Stummfilm* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 13 and 37.

2 Martin Walser, “Joachim Kaiser als Sternbild,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 18, 2008.

extreme of this model, music is entirely oriented to image and action: the film score illustrates and accentuates and in its expression is closely related to the images and the plot; the overall aim is thus unity of expression and/or content between image and music. At the other extreme, the film score is entirely independent of the image and the action. Its role is as a commentary on and counterpoint to the image and it strives by means of dissonance for independence of expression and/or content with respect to image and music.³

These two approaches can be allocated to two historical (and ideological) factions. The counterpoint faction, characterized by a revolutionary stance (if not one fully informed by critical theory), counts Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor W. Adorno, and Hanns Eisler among its guiding lights. The other, affirmative, and illusionistic faction is traditionally seen as belonging to the consumption-oriented mainstream of the “made in Hollywood” studio system. In short, alienation and counterpoint versus the customized melodious sound of commercial cinema.⁴ Whereas the revolutionary Russians’ concept of montage in silent film demanded conflict and collision through the clashing of different frames, the illusionists of Hollywood cinema sought the smooth, unobtrusive cut. Sound could also be used to the benefit of the latter psycho-technique: You are not supposed to notice that you are watching a film; rather, you are to immerse yourself in the living film image, at the side of or even in the place of the star. The self-referential nature of montage thus remained concealed for a long time in Hollywood films, whereas the viewer was meant to notice the thought-provoking montage of Russian cinema. The growing controversy between these two different schools of thought intensified with the arrival of sound films.

The Russian “Statement on Sound” of 1928 begins longingly with the following words: “The cherished dream of a talking film is realized.”⁵ But the primacy of montage is then claimed, naturally with the montagist Eisenstein leading the charge: “Contemporary cinematography, operating as it does by means of visual images, produces a powerful impression on the spectator, and has earned for itself a place in the front rank of the arts. As we know, the fundamental (and only) means, by which cinematography has been able to attain such a high degree of effectiveness, is the *mounting* (or cutting).”⁶ Reservations about sound films are expressed a few sentences later:

The sound film is a two-edged invention, and it is most probable that it will be utilised along the line of least resistance, that is to say, the line of satisfying *simple curiosity*. In the first place, there will be the commercial exploitation of the most saleable goods, i.e. of *speaking films* . . . Utilised in this way, sound will destroy the meaning of mounting. For every addition of sound to portions of the mounting will intensify the portions as such and exaggerate

³ Cf. Norbert Jürgen Schneider, *Handbuch der Filmmusik: Musikdramaturgie im Neuen Deutschen Film* (Munich: Ölschläger, 1986), 79–80 and 89.

⁴ The term “counterpoint” is used here in the scholarly sense of “opposite,” “antithesis,” “reverse,”—as used by Adorno and Eisler, for example—and not in the specifically musical sense of corresponding to the “rules of counterpoint.” Because the issue here is the relationship between image and sound, counterpoint also refers in this case to a dissonance in this relationship, to a conflict between the figural natures of the image and the sound. As Michel Chion writes, “many cases [of film segments] being offered up as models of counterpoint were actually splendid examples of *dissonant harmony*, since they point to a momentary discord between the image’s and sound’s figural natures.” From Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 36–37.

⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, “The Sound Film: A Statement from U.S.S.R.” (1928), in *Close Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*

their independent significance, and this will unquestionably be to the detriment of the mounting, which produces its effects not by pieces, but, above all, by the *conjunction* of pieces.⁷

This train of thought in the “Statement on Sound” leads, finally, to the normative aesthetic of the contrapuntal:

Only utilisation of sound in counterpoint relation to the piece of visual mounting affords new possibilities of developing and perfecting the mounting. *The first experiments with sound must be directed towards its pronounced non-coincidence with the visual images.* This method of attack only will produce the requisite sensation, which will lead in course of time to the creation of a new *orchestral counterpoint* of sight-images and sound-images.⁸

The “Statement on Sound” concludes with an explicit final plea: “The *contrapuntal method* of constructing the talking film not only will not detract from the *international* character of cinematography, but will enhance its significance and its cultural power to a degree unexperienced hitherto.”⁹

From the outset, the endeavor to push through the juxtaposition of image and sound, as opposed to their amalgamation, succeeded only temporarily and partially. The use of counterpoint between the acoustic and the visual as a potential new element of montage was not even attempted “by the Eisenstein of the sound-film period, nor did he seek to justify it theoretically. The sound-film director of 1938 [in the film *Alexander Nevsky*] seems to have forgotten his own advice in the 1928 ‘Statement on Sound.’”¹⁰

This was not true of Bertolt Brecht as scriptwriter and codirector of the film *Kuhle Wampe* (Empty Belly; GER, 1931/1932), which was principally directed by Slatan Dudow, with a score composed by Hanns Eisler. This work is mentioned here as an example of a “politically correct” contrapuntal film. In accordance with the concept of composition later formulated by Eisler as to “how music, instead of limiting itself to conventional reinforcement of the action or mood, can throw its meaning into relief by setting itself in opposition to what is being shown on the screen,”¹¹ the musical opening of the film is carried out contrapuntally in the very exposition of the setting. Eisler and Adorno, writing in 1944, describe this scene as follows: “Movement as a contrast to rest. *Kuhle Wampe*, by Brecht and Dudow, 1931: A slum district of drab, dilapidated suburban houses is shown in all its misery and filth. The atmosphere is passive, hopeless, depressing. The accompanying music is brisk, sharp, a polyphonic prelude of a *marcato* character, and its strict form and stern tone, contrasted with the loose structure of the scenes, acts as a shock deliberately aimed at arousing resistance rather than sentimental sympathy.”¹² For Wolfgang Thiel, the score represented “a successful bridge from functional film music to autonomous concert music” and “a classic example of contrasting, activating music.”¹³ Kurt London wrote in his review of the film’s premiere (in the Bremen newspaper *Weser-*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Helga de la Motte-Haber and Hans Emons, *Filmmusik: Eine systematische Beschreibung* (Munich: Hanser, 1980), 22.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (first English translation, 1947; London: Athlone, 2005), 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26–27.

¹³ Wolfgang Thiel, *Filmmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Henschel, 1981), 63 and 67.

Zeitung, 1932): “His music does not seek to ‘accentuate’ particular events or motifs impressionistically, as film illustration has basically always done. His music is active and demands a certain degree of mental collaboration from the audience, for it not only sounds, but also quite deliberately takes a stand. For example, the film shows unkempt back courtyards in proletarian slums. The music does not limit itself here in traditional fashion to gloomy and melancholic harmonies; rather, it goes into a vigorous rhythm, which is intended to provocatively illustrate that people have to spend their days in this kind of surroundings.”¹⁴

Brecht, Dudow, and Eisler undoubtedly had a different cinemagoer in mind than the Berliners who frequented the early “Kintopp” cinemas. These spectators were summed up at the time by the following saying: “If I’m paying fifty pfennigs to get in, it had better appeal to my base instincts.” The proletarian cinemagoer of the 1930s was to be made familiar with Brechtian alienation in musical form too. Brecht fought against what the cinemagoers of that era both expected and demanded in terms of sound: that is, popular melodies and harmonious sounds that “transported” the viewers into the world of the film, “inebriating and kidnapping [them] through illusion,” as though such films were the same “opium for the people” criticized by Marx with respect to religion. Instead, according to Brecht, films should arouse the “pleasure of thought,” the “delight in knowledge,” and the “passion in producing.”¹⁵ The alienating counterpoint takes the polarization between empathy and identification, and understanding and reflection, to the auditory level. In short, sympathy should be replaced by contemplation. However, as in the case of Eisenstein’s concept of intellectual montage, where the clash between take A and take B is intended to create take C in the mind of the viewer (as the dialectic of thesis and antithesis results in synthesis), other influences also play a part in audiovisual film reception. But let us first look at the opposite pole to the concept of counterpoint, which takes its clearest form in the practice of Mickey Mousing.

Mickey Mousing is an extreme use of film music for accentuation (known as underscoring) which takes the form of musically replicating visual events as accurately as possible. This concept of composition, which is obviously associated with Disney productions, originally reflected a functional purpose of film music. Animated films cannot in themselves reproduce an existing sound (the physical reality of the genre precludes it), whether made in the Disney studios of the past or produced digitally as three-dimensional animations. They have no auditory references through the reproduction of the primary and original sounds encountered during shooting, as in the case of staged or even documentary films. Thus, the genuinely silent animation film required the composition of associated musical sounds. It certainly would have been possible to later add background and synchronous sounds, as far as this was permitted by the available technology. However, the illustration of the sound level by means of music was better suited to the artificiality of animated films, which is why noises were at most used to further accentuate the musical action.

But accentuating underscoring is predominant even in Mickey Mouse films, whereas, strictly speaking, Mickey Mousing refers only to a tautological form of composition that imitates to the extreme every action in order to prompt laughter in the audience. When Sean Connery as James Bond in *Dr. No* (UK 1962, dir. Terence Young) uses his shoe to beat a poisonous spider to death and the orchestra plays accents in perfect synchrony with the beating, these three bars represent flawless Mickey Mousing, whereas the music played prior to and after

¹⁴ Cited in Thiel, *Filmmusik*, 67.

¹⁵ Dagmar Benke, *Freistil: Dramaturgie für Fortgeschrittene und Experimentierfreudige* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 2002), 37–40.

the beating is an example of simple underscoring. Outside the genre of animated film, precise and synchronous Mickey Mousing thus tends to be the exception. It can be utilized, for example, to create an ironic break, but persistent use tends to be considered unpleasant. The term is therefore a sobriquet. In this essay, however, the expression Mickey Mousing is used polemically as an umbrella term for any kind of labored underscoring, given that the boundaries between the latter and Mickey Mousing are fluent.

To these considerations must be added the illusionistic aspect already mentioned in relation to montage, which demands a “subservient” attitude from film music: as a sound backdrop, the music should not be too conspicuous. If the montage was to be “invisible,” now the music, too, should remain “inaudible”—both sides held this conviction. Adorno and Eisler describe the approach as follows: “Music becomes a plot accessory, a sort of acoustical stage property. There is a favorite Hollywood gibe: ‘Birdie sings, music sings.’ Music must follow visual incidents and illustrate them either by directly imitating them or by using clichés that are associated with the mood and content of the picture.”¹⁶

In Mickey Mousing—the perfectionistic synchronization of image and sound—a distinction is made between two different production techniques. According to Wolfgang Thiel,

[I]n the first case, the animator works on the basis of prerecorded music. The bars of the music are translated into footage or frames [today this is known as “time coding”]. Using this method, the allocation of optical gags to synchronous points in the music leads to the perfection that so astounded and enthralled the viewers of the first Disney sound cartoons. The prescoring technique was especially common during the early days of sound cartoons, when in-betweeners and musicians often worked in the same office, which was equipped with both drawing tables and a piano.¹⁷

Walt Disney did, however, later also use preexisting music as the basis for his visual work, particularly in episodes produced for *Fantasia* (USA, 1940), such as *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* (Johann Sebastian Bach), *The Nutcracker Suite* (Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky), *The Rite of Spring* (Igor Stravinsky), and *The Pastoral Symphony* (Ludwig van Beethoven).

The second technique, according to film composer Andreas Köbner, consists of “precise by-the-scene composition of musical references that are synchronized with particular moments of the action. The music responds to the image and the editing; that is, the editing does not follow the music.”¹⁸ In the case of film music, the chicken-and-egg problem—Which came first, the image or the music?—can sometimes only be resolved on the basis of information not contained in the film, for not all image/sound relationships reveal either audibly or visibly which of the two components existed first. Nonetheless, specialization in this field is certainly compatible with serious compositional endeavor. For example, Benjamin Britten wrote the music for Lotte Reiniger’s film *Tochter* (Daughter) in 1937, and Hanns Eisler composed the score for the puppet film *Pete Roleum and his Cousins* (USA, dir. Joseph Losey) in 1939.¹⁹

¹⁶ Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 12.

¹⁷ Thiel, *Filmmusik*, 388–389.

¹⁸ Andreas Köbner, “Musik im Schneiderraum,” in *Handbuch der Filmmontage*, 5th ed., ed. Hans Beller (Munich: TR Verlagsunion, 2005), 145. I would like to express my thanks to Andreas Köbner and Dr. Martin Emele for their comments on this essay.

¹⁹ Thiel, *Filmmusik*, 405.

The apparent paradox of this schematic polarization of counterpoint and Mickey Mousing is its suspension by means of crossover, that is, the combination of the two concepts, even by juxtaposing them in a single scene. Before I discuss how these two opposing concepts can be made to coincide, let us first examine the phenomenology of this audiovisual oxymoron by turning to concrete examples of scenes from Stanley Kubrick's work.²⁰

As the grandson of Austrian immigrants, Kubrick was familiar with the music of the Austrian imperial and royal era, well known to all who have seen *2001: A Space Odyssey* (UK/USA, 1965–1968). Richard Strauss (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*), accompanying the slow-motion scene when the main prehuman hominid discovers the thigh bone as a tool for slaughtering, is followed by Johann Strauss (*The Blue Danube*), when the thigh bone is transformed—by means of the much-discussed match cut—into a similarly shaped spaceship. This transition represents the longest leap in time in film—over a million years. The bone, further developed as a weapon for killing one's own species, makes an evolutionary leap from prehistory to science-fiction star wars, in that already in 1968 (when color photographs of Earth did not yet exist), atomic weapons were deployed in space in the form of spaceships. Yet the melodious waltz music euphoniously belies the reality and lightly, effortlessly denies the lethal danger posed by the nuclear military station as it gently floats through pitch-black outer space. The contrapuntal connotation only becomes evident later, however, for the viewer is not yet aware of the link at this point in the narration.

Kubrick had already employed a dramatically dancelike counterpoint in an earlier film, when at the end of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (USA, 1963/1964) the atomic bombs explode in time with the song "We'll Meet Again" (with words and music by Ross Parker and Hughie Charles [1939], it was sung by Vera Lynn when touring to boost the morale of British troops during World War II).²¹ The ballet of mushroom clouds, compiled from archival documentary footage, defers to the song's final chorus, swinging along in almost fiendish synchrony and engendering in the viewer precisely the intended effect of counterpoint. There is a bizarrely comic discrepancy between the apocalyptic significance of the images and the optimistic dance music. The pictorial grandeur of atomic pollution together with editing that precisely matches the bombs with the melodious choral singing creates an aesthetic alchemy whose effect is both provocative and repellent. At the same time, the viewer's critical gray matter must remind the brain stem not to take to the dance floor in view of the politically devastating dimension of the scene. It is a case of the principle of reality versus the principle of pleasure. The montage relationship creates an effect that neither music nor image alone could have achieved.

But does counterpoint not slide quite vigorously in this example toward the pole of Mickey Mousing? The end of *Full Metal Jacket* (UK/USA, 1987) even features a marching song with a Mickey Mouse refrain, sung a cappella by the group of marines that just shot a female North Vietnamese sniper. However, Kubrick's use of counterpoint as a "sardonic commentary" asserts itself most compellingly in *A Clockwork Orange* (UK/USA, 1970/1971).²²

²⁰ One could write an entire essay dealing only with Kubrick's use of counterpoint, but I am more interested in the practical complexity of existing music becoming a counterpoint only as a result of the montage.

²¹ Cf. Bernd Schultheis, "Möglichkeitsträume: Notizen zur musikalischen Rede bei Stanley Kubrick," in *Stanley Kubrick, Kinematograph* 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 2004), 279.

²² Georg Seeßlen, "Der große Verräter: Musik als ZeitRaum; Anmerkungen zum Gebrauch von 'vorhandener' Musik bei Martin Scorsese und Stanley Kubrick," *epd Film* 18 (March 2001), 23.

To conclude this part of the discussion, I shall examine the polarization of counterpoint and Mickey Mousing on the basis of an actual scene from *A Clockwork Orange*. Generally, Kubrick's films make eclectic use of existing music. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, the inclusion of works by Aram Khachaturian and György Ligeti illustrates the heterogeneity in Kubrick's choice of music. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the soundtrack comprises music by 13 composers, some of it electronically adapted, including pieces that range from Beethoven's *Symphony no. 9* to "Singin' in the Rain," again with a dance being performed to existing music in a violent scene in which the montage is timed to the music. The manner in which Gioachino Rossini's overture to *The Thieving Magpie* is edited *into or in correspondence with* a violent brawl is of particular interest here; the scene in question is the film's third, at 3:52 minutes.

Kubrick, for whom "the best film scenes mainly consist of images and music," had the following to say about his conceptual use of counterpoint: "I'd say that my intention with *A Clockwork Orange* was . . . to try and see the violence from Alex's point of view, to show that it was great fun for him, the happiest part of his life, and that it was like some great action ballet. It was necessary to find a way of stylising the violence, just as Burgess does by his writing style. The ironic counterpoint of the music was certainly one of the ways of achieving this."²³

The scene once again brings together camera movements and movements in front of the camera in a ballet of evil, a choreography of violence set to the music of Rossini's overture. This cheerful piece from *The Thieving Magpie* twice contrasts with the plot, which first shows an attempted gang rape by the Billyboy gang and then a brutal and gory brawl in which the film's protagonist Alex and his droogs take on the Billyboys. All of this takes place within three minutes and a total of 30 takes in the setting of an abandoned casino. At the beginning of the scene's opening take, viewers imagine themselves to be in some kind of opera house (the first thing they see is a proscenium), even though the music is accompanied by the irksome screams of a woman, who only a few seconds later turns out to be the victim of an attempted gang rape. Then the musical counterpoint slips straight into the irritating functionality of a choreographic representation of the criminal act. The objectively aggressive action is rhythmically edited so as to create a cheerful emotionality. The back and forth on the stage follows the lead of the recurring melody. The cut-ins and cut-backs into the events are edited with a parodic bent to the beat, so that the rhetoric of the scene assumes a sarcastic or even cynical tenor. The effect of the brawl is therefore humorous, similar to the battles between the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry, which represent a dramaturgical escalation of Mickey Mousing to the level of the grotesque.

Kay Kirchmann describes the scene as follows: "The accents on individual bars are synchronized with the physical blows and the objects being smashed on human bodies. The cuts are rapid and always aligned with the momentum and the tempo of the music. Individual movement sequences are interrupted by edit cuts, while the viewpoint and camera angle change with every shot. This type of editing, which can be found in modern music videos, lends the brawl scene added momentum and humor, while the continuity of its composition gives it aesthetic form. This is another example of the stylization of evil."²⁴

²³ Andrew Bailey, "A Clockwork Utopia: Semi-scrutable Stanley Kubrick Discusses his New Film," *Rolling Stone* 20 (January 1972), 22.

²⁴ Kay Kirchmann, *Stanley Kubrick: Das Schweigen der Bilder*, 3rd, expanded ed. (Bochum: Schnitt, 2001), 214–215.

And once again, because of the musical regression, politically correct rationality struggles to counter the immediate impression of frivolity with morality. The viewer finds it difficult to remain cool and detached, for he also is subjected to the forceful effect of *synchresis*. This term, forged by Michel Chion in 1990 from the words “synthesis” and “synchronism,” refers to the process of “mental fusion . . . that happens between a sound and a visual when these occur at exactly the same time.”²⁵ For in the real world, it is a both a physical fact and only natural that the sounds perceived by the ear derive from actual events and, as a consequence, are consistent with what the eyes see in relation to them. This is why the mottos that governed the early days of sound film were “see a dog, hear a dog” and “eye follows ear.” In Mickey Mousing, and also in this scene from Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, it is thus often sufficient if there are enough moments of synchrony between the flow of the music and the movement shown and if the edit cuts take account of the musical rhythm. It is then inevitable that an emotional correspondence will be created, notwithstanding the counterpoint. In other words: Mickey Mouse goes contrapuntal. Georg Seeßlen even sees the music here as the “great traitor” that “helps us to understand that cinema is more than a narrative in pictures.”²⁶ For Kay Kirchmann, Kubrick is thus a master of the “aestheticization of evil.”²⁷

If one were to write the history of film music from the point of view of Mickey Mousing and counterpoint, it would be possible to find periods when one predominates (as with any artistic form in modernism): sometimes there would be more counterpoint, other times less; sometimes there would be greater use of Mickey Mousing, other times not as much. The oscillation between the two poles is currently less in accordance with ideological positions and more a consequence of marketing considerations. The trend today is toward minimalism, following a period of the oversaturation and extension of film music as a means to illustrate the action and accentuate movement.

Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (USA, 2003) can be seen and heard as both symptomatic and innovative for today’s minimalism. This film of 81 minutes, which deals with the 1999 bloodbath at Columbine High School, calmly restages the cold-blooded massacre in which two students killed 14 people and injured 23. By today’s standards, the film’s 101 cuts (Gus Van Sant edited it himself) amount in statistical terms to only one-tenth of the average cutting rate. It is shot in fluent sequences reminiscent of the aesthetics of first-person shooter video games. The rigorous camera work and the configuration of the school halls as a kind of “shock corridor” bring Kubrick and *The Shining* (UK/USA, 1980) to mind. The latter’s approach to music in his films surely inspired the musical impulses behind *Elephant*. Its sound design, by Leslie Shatz, avails of the compositional methods of *musique concrète*, in which the musical material consists of sound recordings that are elaborated and rhythmically organized. However, hardly anyone remembers this “inaudible music,” given that it accompanies the relentless slaughter by the two students of their classmates and teachers. In addition, this is not film music in the classic sense, for it consists of the sound of gently burbling water and discreet birdsong taken from composed soundscapes by Hildegard Westerkamp.²⁸

The alienation would appeal to Brecht. And Eisler would consider the composition contrapuntal. Yet the composition is hardly heard the first time the film is

²⁵ Chion, *Audio-Vision*, xviii.

²⁶ Seeßlen, “Der große Verräter,” 23.

²⁷ Kirchmann, *Stanley Kubrick*, 214.

²⁸ The pieces used are *Türen der Wahrnehmung* (Doors of Perception, 1996) and *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992), which are based mainly on field recordings.

seen, as the viewer's ears are paralyzed by what is visible on the screen. The autonomy of the composition thus does not encroach on the horror of the viewers in their identification with the victims (and the perpetrators), but rather admits the illusion of participating in the events.

What other developments are underway between the two poles elaborated here? Nowadays, accentuating underscoring is usually prepared in the form of "temp tracks" (preliminary soundtracks used during the editing phase), which the composer follows as an aid to synchronous composition. In the action films of the future, the visual shock effect will mostly remain integrated with the auditory shock effect in order to strengthen the overall result. Today's monumental productions, such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (NZ, 2001–2003), also have less artificial distance between the music and the image, opting for more "affirmation," or, in other words, more underscoring and more Mickey Mousing segments. Comic motifs and computer games will influence both the work of creative filmmakers and the expectations of the public. Moreover, the aesthetically overpowering strategy of surround sound is more and more amplifying the full-immersion effect of the film experience. In the cinema and, increasingly, at home (thanks to 5.1 home-theater systems, for example), images and sounds are physically coming ever closer to each other as a result of the enforced auditory immersion of the viewers into the sounds playing around them. Consequently, counterpoint will be experienced ever more physically and will be used only specifically to create a temporary dissonance.

The passionate unification and retraction of film images with and from their sounds will become even more playful over time. This development will emancipate the montage relationship between images and sounds and will thus be good for filmmakers, film editors, soundtrack composers, and film musicians, and thus also for the viewing and hearing pleasure of the public. Exciting days are still ahead for the montage relationship between image and sound.



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- Stills from *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932), directed by Slatan Dudow.
 © Suhrkamp 2008 (DVD).

Slatan Dudow

Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?
 (“Empty Belly, or: Who Owns the World?”; GER, 1931/1932,
 music: Hanns Eisler, screenplay: Bertolt Brecht)

The themes dealt with in *Kuhle Wampe* (Empty Belly) are Germany’s precarious social conditions during the Weimar Republic, mass unemployment and poverty. The investigative approach and the communication of socialist ideals—sometimes elevated to the level of agitprop—as an apparent path out of misery also are brought into play at the acoustic level of this early sound film. The *Solidaritätslied* (Solidarity Song) is played five times: first, non-diegetically in a version rhythmically distorted by Hanns Eisler to accompany the montage sequence of the constructivist shots of the industrial and factory scenes; then it is intoned diegetically; subsequently, the melody is whistled by the Communist Youth; then even more force is added over the course of the film when it is sung by an enormous proletarian choir at a workers’ sports festival; and, finally, it is heard non-diegetically in the background in the closing scene. Singing plays an important role in general in this film, especially when Eisler’s ballads are delivered in Helene Weigel and Ernst Busch’s characteristic style. Noises and diegetic music (i.e., street musicians, gramophone, and radio music) are used only sparingly, which only strengthens the effect of Eisler’s music.¹

The film’s anti-illusionistic attitude is expressed musically particularly through the use of the principle of counterpoint, for which *Kuhle Wampe* has become a historical paragon. In accordance with the concept of composition later formulated by Eisler as to “how music, instead of limiting itself to conventional reinforcement of the action or mood, can throw its meaning into relief by setting itself in opposition to what is being shown on the screen,”² the contrapuntal musical opening of the film is conveyed in the very exposition of the setting. Eisler and Theodor W. Adorno, writing in 1944, describe the scene as follows: “Movement as a contrast to rest. *Kuhle Wampe*, by Brecht and Dudow, 1931: A slum district of drab, dilapidated suburban houses is shown in all its misery and filth. The atmosphere is passive, hopeless, depressing. The accompanying music is brisk, sharp, a polyphonic prelude of a marcato character, and its strict form and stern tone, contrasted with the loose structure of the scenes, acts as a shock deliberately aimed at arousing resistance rather than sentimental sympathy.”³ Kurt London wrote in his review of the film’s premiere: “His music does not seek to ‘accentuate’ particular events or motifs impressionistically, as film illustration has basically always done. His music is active and demands a certain degree of mental collaboration from the audience, for it not only sounds, but also quite deliberately takes a stand. For example, the film shows unkempt inner courtyards in proletarian slums. The music does not limit itself here in traditional fashion to gloomy and melancholic harmonies; rather, it goes

¹ In 1969, the film enjoyed a comeback among movie buffs of the “68 generation” when Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler’s book *Composing for the Films* (originally published in German as *Komposition für den Film* in 1944) was reprinted by Rogner & Bernhard publishers in Munich and when, likewise in 1969, Suhrkamp publishers released the first edition of the volume *Bertolt Brecht. Kuhle Wampe. Protokoll des Films und Materialien*, edited by Wolfgang Gersch and Werner Hecht. The latter was followed by a second edition in 1973, which had a sensational print run of between 11,000 and 16,000 copies. (A normal edition of the yellow and blue Hanser film booklets for movie buffs usually amounted to around 1,700 copies.)

² Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (first English translation 1947; London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 26–27.



- Stills from *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932), directed by Slatan Dudow.
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– Stills from *Kuhle Wampe* (1931/1932), directed by Slatan Dudow.
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into a vigorous rhythm, which is intended to provocatively illustrate that people have to spend their days in this kind of surroundings.”⁴

Experience shows, however, that the originally intended effect of the contrapuntal opening scene is not achieved with present-day recipients. At least some of the scene is experienced as downright enervating, due in part to the very distinct musical motif—reminiscent of a hyena’s laughter—in which a rapidly descending sequence of five notes with brief grace notes played by wind instruments is heard. As a result, today this use of counterpoint is dismissed critically as a “cerebral concept.” The other musical passages in the film seem less radical. For instance, there is another dissonant montage sequence in which smiling children’s faces are contrasted with shrill musical motifs and somewhat distorted children’s songs, but in this case the viewers accept the contrapuntal disparity. It comes in the context of a scene involving the pregnant main character—who is evidently considering an abortion at this point—a scene that features contrast montages and double exposures at the visual level as well, in that signs for gynecologists, advertisements for funeral homes, and identity cards for the unemployed are edited into the frames showing the faces of a group of children. With this type of counterpoint, present-day recipients have no difficulty grasping the original intention, which stems from a period when sound film was still in its infancy and film scoring was still in its earliest exploratory phase.

⁴ Wolfgang Thiel, *Filmmusik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Henschel, 1981), 67.

Stanley Kubrick
A Clockwork Orange (UK/USA, 1970/1971)

Stanley Kubrick is notorious for his incisive and unusual use of existing classical and modern music. The film *A Clockwork Orange* alone features musical works by Henry Purcell, Gioachino Antonio Rossini, Ludwig van Beethoven, and many other composers. In particular, Kubrick frequently creates an irritatingly sensual clash between the visual world and the accompanying soundtrack in his films. He carries this principle of contrast to the extreme in *A Clockwork Orange*, where he choreographs visually brutal scenes of evil that contrast sharply with the melodic, cheery musical accompaniment. This film, as others before it, features intentionally ironic or sardonic passages that deliberately trigger paradoxical emotions in the viewer.

Kubrick had already used a radical, dancelike counterpoint in an earlier film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (USA, 1963/1964), whose closing scene shows a ballet of mushroom clouds emanating from atomic bombs that are exploding in time to the song “We’ll Meet Again.” But Kubrick’s most brutal counterpoint can be heard in *A Clockwork Orange*, when two successive scenes of violence are played out to Rossini’s overture to *The Thieving Magpie* and the montage edits the images in perfect time to the opera music. Kubrick had final cut rights with Warner Brothers and thus was unconcerned about potential objections from the studio with respect to either editing or montage, even when his final cut resulted in the film receiving clearance for release only for viewers aged over 18 (X rating). The film was nominated for an Academy Award in Best Film Editing in 1972, but did not win the award.

The scene is “ultra brutal,” to borrow a favorite expression from the main character, Alex, because Rossini’s cheerful music twice contrasts the course of action—first during an attempted gang rape by the Billyboy gang, and subsequently during the gory brawl between the Billyboys and Alex and his droogs. The objectively aggressive action is edited rhythmically so as to create a cheerful emotionality. The musical counterpoint thus slips into the irritating function of a choreographic representation of a criminal act. The back and forth on the stage follows the lead of the recurring melody. The cut-ins and cut-backs into the events are edited in parody to the beat, so that the rhetoric of the scene assumes a sarcastic or even cynical tone.

This intentionally sordid use of counterpoint is repeated again shortly afterward when what amounts to a horror show within the bungalow of a sensitive writer is choreographed to the sound of the cheerful classic “Singin’ in the Rain.” The writer’s wife is raped by Alex and the gang as the former sings. In rhythm with the music, Alex kicks, beats, clubs, and abuses the husband, and then cuts holes in the housewife’s blood-red dress before carrying out the foul deed. Photographs from the set show Kubrick operating the camera himself in this scene.

These two musical motifs are repeated over the course of the film when the plot changes track. Now the overture to *The Thieving Magpie* is played to accompany Alex’s malice when he pushes his pals into an artificial lake and then slashes their hands with a knife as they reach out to him from the water. And in a kind of repetition compulsion, Alex once again intones “Singin’ in the



- Stills from *Clockwork Orange* (1970/1971) by Stanley Kubrick.
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Rain” in the bathtub, no less, of the raped and beaten victims from the bungalow scene when they provide shelter to the now outcast protagonist. By singing this melody, now distorted by echo, he reveals himself to be the perpetrator of the violence. The wheelchair-bound writer, lamed by Alex, now takes his revenge with the help of friends by forcing Alex to listen to Beethoven’s *Symphony no. 9* ad nauseam. “Singin’ in the Rain” sounds once again to the final credits after Alex has relapsed in his fantasy and sees himself wearing a Biedermeier costume and copulating with a naked woman in front of an audience.

In the director’s words, *A Clockwork Orange* is “a satirical, spicy, sardonic, ironic, political, dangerous, comic, frightening, brutal, metaphorical, and musical film.”¹ Its moments of counterpoint are unsettling and repellent, and therefore provoke associations and ruminations. Counterpoint creates paradoxes and reminds us of our own ambivalence. It is thus realistic and anti-illusionistic, but also alluring—as direct experience of the film reveals.

¹ See Georg Seeßlen and Fernand Jung, *Stanley Kubrick und seine Filme* (Marburg: Schüren, 1999), 187.

Gus Van Sant
Elephant (USA, 2003, sound design: Leslie Shatz)

In order to comprehend the minimalism in the use of music and sound in Gus van Sant's film *Elephant*, the entire 81 minutes of the work must be taken into consideration. At the very beginning, the opening credits are accompanied by background sounds of obscure origin. Then a quick-motion sequence shot lasting over one minute shows a telegraph pole and a streetlamp reaching up into the blue sky as clouds race past. Broad daylight turns into dusk and then night, until only the arc lamp emits an isolated point of light. The sounds heard at the beginning, if remembered, can later be allocated at 7:45 minutes into the film. They belong to the playing fields of the high school that by now has been introduced to the viewer. In a long shot, we see boys playing football in the foreground, while a group of girls practices gymnastics in the background.

This frame's diegetic original soundtrack (which had been used for the sound underlying the opening sequence) now remains in the background and is drowned out non-diegetically by Beethoven's piano piece "Für Elise." This piece is heard on another two occasions: first as apparent piano practice sounding from a music room somewhere off a school corridor (at around 10:00), and then again when it is played on the piano diegetically (from 44:00 to about 49:00) by one of the future gunmen. Prior to this domestic scene, we already hear the counterpoint of a bulimic girl vomiting in the school bathroom; at the end of it, the second killer—in a verbal counterpoint to the melodic music—dismisses the piece, comparing it to "shit." Within the scene itself, the piano is mainly heard as an incidental counterpoint from off-scene (though still as source sound): the piano music continues in the background as a pan shot first shows the friend playing a first-person shooter game and then his own point of view on the computer screen as he plays the violent action game.

Overall, the sounds in *Elephant* are used naturally, like the original sounds of documentary films, while subliminally one perceives repeated insertions of *musique concrète*. Leslie Shatz's sound design employs this method of composition (the term was coined by Pierre Schaeffer in 1948) in which the musical material consists of sound recordings that are elaborated and rhythmically organized.

In the long shots of the school corridors, scraps of sound reminiscent of shunting trains, buzz saws, and birdsong can repeatedly be heard as though coming from far away outside. This is not film music in the classic sense, as the noises have their origins in soundscapes composed by Hildegard Westerkamp.¹ These sounds become more clearly audible only from 67:00 onward, when the Rasta-locked student Benny follows the noise of shooting in order to see what is happening. But one can hardly remember this "inaudible music," given that it accompanies the relentless slaughter by the two students of their classmates and teachers. One earlier passage, however, sensitizes the viewer to such use of sounds when, from 23:45 onward, the boy who later will be seen as piano

¹ The pieces used are *Türen der Wahrnehmung* (Doors of Perception, 1996) and *Beneath the Forest Floor* (1992), which are based mainly on field recordings. The closing credits also list pieces such as *Supernal Infinite Space* (*Kawabat*) and *Waikiki Easy Meat* (*Mano*) by Acid Mothers Temple & The Melting Paraiso U.F.O.



Stills from *Elephant* (2003) by Gus Van Sant.
© Kinowelt 2004 (DVD).

player and killer experiences a kind of auditory idiosyncrasy, perceiving the noise level in the school cafeteria as being too loud and holding his besieged head between his hands.

Piano music, original soundtracks, atmospheric noises, musique concrète: all of this is concentrated—like auditory intarsia—into a sound tapestry in the sound design. And yet this is not an auditory backdrop, but an independent sound-track design with the quality of film music.