

A book of wondrous musical deformities

di **Ilario Meandri**

english translation by Brent Waterhouse

Monsters, aliens, paranormal and supernatural phenomena, psychic deviances: all of these are given a certain number of recurring musical stereotypes by contemporary film composers. The musical expression of horror and the awful is constructed through *tòpoi* which at one and the same time act as recognisable clichés and areas in which composers are free to experiment. While speaking of these musical formulas, composer Elliot Goldenthal has stated: «So I think almost like taking my pencil as a musical Trojan horse into certain areas».¹³⁹ An expression of the awful and of horror is like a “Trojan horse” that gives a composer the courage to push his pencil “a bit further”. Put briefly, this high reliance on stereotypes is a necessary compromise, required to experiment with contemporary art-music languages while continuing to work in a context that draws most of its narrative effectiveness from adhering to a harmonic-tonal language that, not without exceptions and idiosyncrasies, is still largely based on the expressive reservoir of late-eighteenth century symphonic music. The awful and horror, moreover, are not to be understood as references to a specific film genre, but as an array of recurring expressions that cut across genres and apply, for example, to horror films as much as they do to science fiction, thrillers, action-adventure films, animated films or any form of hybridisation between genres. Used as a wilfully paroxysmal and ironic citations, it is even

¹³⁹ Goldenthal in MORGAN 2000:201.

possible for a sub-category of horror clichés to make their way into comedies.

I have dedicated a series of studies to this phenomenon, which those who are interested can consult for more details on film music compositional techniques.¹⁴⁰ Here, I will take up a narrow range of topics and examples from these studies in order to set out, in my conclusion, a reflection on the presence of these horror formulas in the system of the media, as aural imprints typical of contemporary narration.

North American cinema was seduced quite early by the expressive latency of post-serialism, showing a certain predilection for the work of Krzysztof Penderecki. The reception and use of certain techniques for writing sound masses traceable to Penderecki was in fact precocious and persistent. *The Exorcist* (1973) – which, in addition to other fragments taken from the works of this Polish composer, uses *Polymorphia* and the *Kanon for orchestra and tape* – was, along with *The Shining*, one of the most important models for composers working in the Eighties and the Nineties. *The Shining* (1980) represents the definitive consecration of a cinematographic Penderecki who had already enjoyed wide success and was to continue to exert a strong influence on the generation of film composers soon to create their first important projects in the

Eighties. These composers (one figure who comes to mind is James Horner) drew their dramaturgical models directly from cinema's collective musical imagination, rather than from forms of art music, and went far beyond the limits of horror films while experimenting with techniques coming from contemporary art music (only to mention three: Paul Chihara in *Prince of the City*, 1981; Bruce Broughton in *Young Sherlock Holmes*, 1985; James Newton Howard in *Flatliners*, 1990).

In the next few pages we will concentrate in particular on *The Shining*. For reasons of space, we will not discuss the fragments from Bartok and Ligeti, which are equally important in the overall balance of this film's soundtrack.

The images in *Fig. 1* have been taken from the well-known sequence in which Danny rides his tricycle – followed by the camera with a semi-point-of-view shot – down the corridors of the hotel and suddenly runs into the ghosts of the twin sisters: the entire sequence is built around, even carefully tailored to, the sound events of a portion of Penderecki's *De Natura Sonoris*. Music and narration collaborate in this fragment with a surprising synergy. Kubrick reinterprets the latent dramaturgy of this piece as though it were a "program", or the outline of a ritual: the music gives the scene a *choreutic dimension that organises the imaginary space of the narration, giving it a*



Fig. 1: *The Shining*, series of frames: 0:35:15, 0:35:42, 0:35:47.

¹⁴⁰ MEANDRI 2012, MEANDRI and VALLE 2011, and in particular MEANDRI 2013, from which I have taken most of the reasonings and examples that appear in this study (in particular pp. 368-78 for the parts on *Anti-music*, and pp. 363-4 and pp. 401-3 for the part on trailer music).

form. These events are not situated in a *here and now*, but within the field of a suddenly malevolent omniscience, an

of veridictivity and omniscience and foregone its status as a positive *logos* or the expression of an ethics. This posit-

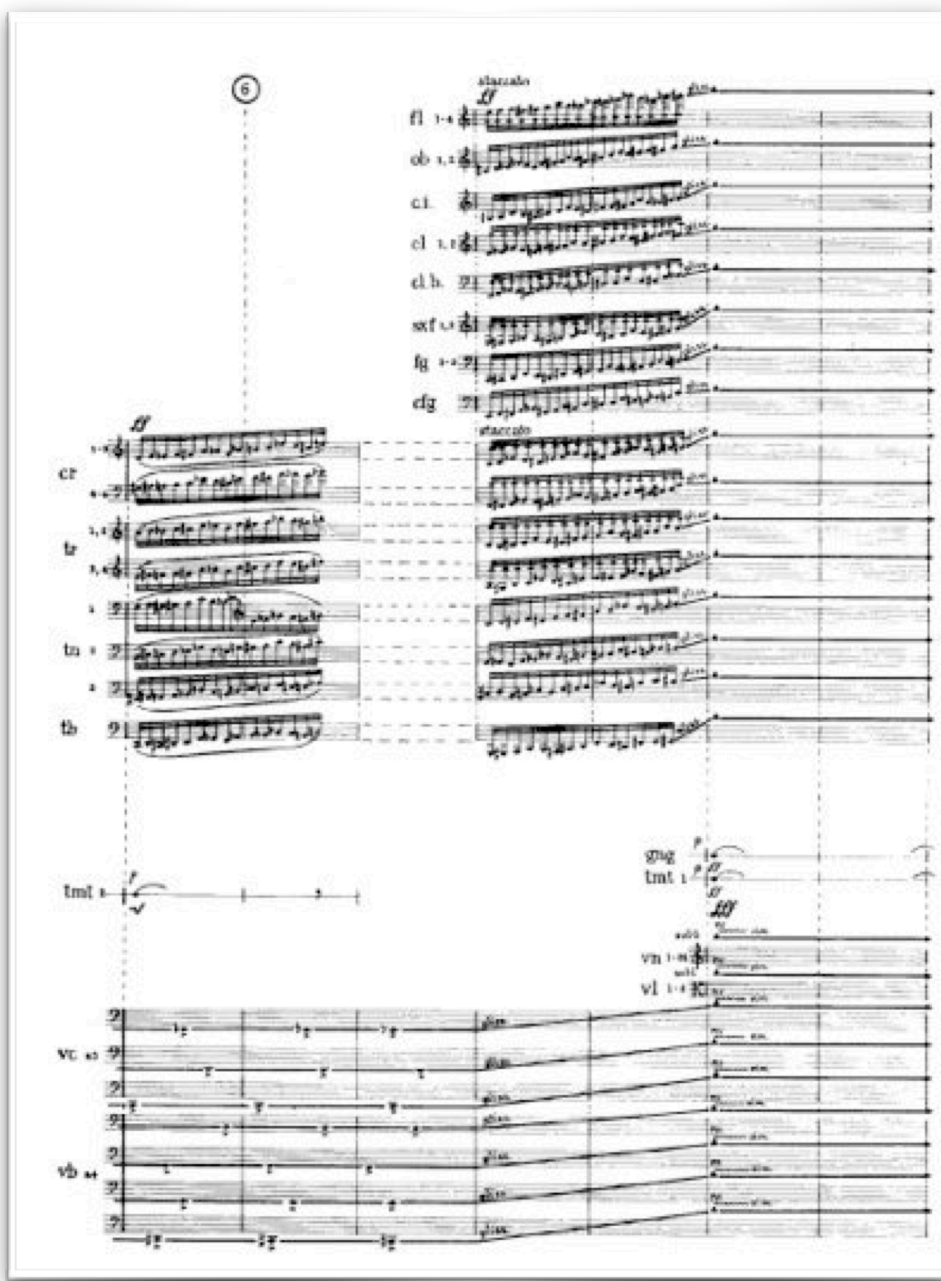


Fig. 2: A fragment from *De Natura Sonoris* (© Krzysztof Penderecki, *De natura sonoris no. 1*, Mainz, Schott Music, 1999 [Studienpartitur/Study Score], p. 11).

acousmatic¹⁴¹ that does not for an instant lose its veridictive status. On the contrary, it reaches its utmost consequences, having abandoned its superficial qualities

ivity pertains first and foremost to language and, in music, to a rationality in line with the rules of euphony, of *orchestrated* sound, of the orchestra as the *art* and the *medium* of a concordant distribution, hierarchically organised, harmonic and *ordered according to language*, the projection of a sociability expressed by this language and – precisely by way of this projection – an actantial phantasm governing the development of the narration. In the narrative conversion proposed here of the already “primitive” *De Natura Sonoris* – and in a *mise-en-scène* that by converting it into narration makes its primitive nature all the more radical – euphony represents positive order, *Kultur*, ethics, everything to which, in all its horrific virulence, Penderecki’s *De Natura* is opposed. In particular, the paroxystic scales in the brass, which end with a full-orchestra glissando (cf. the fragment reproduced in Fig. 2) seem to have become a widespread pan-genre formula in mainstream Hollywood cinema. In *Brainstorm* (1983) and, years later, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) – with music respectively by James Horner and Howard Shore – we find the same figure virtually unchanged, used for a

¹⁴¹ A well-known term in cinema music and sound studies introduced by Michel Chion, *acousmatic* refers to a sound (or a voice) whose source is concealed: «A sound or a voice, if maintained acousmatic, creates [...] a mystery as to the appearance and the nature of its source, including its properties and powers» (CHION 2001: 75). For a more detailed definition of this analytic category, see *ibid.* pp. 74-75 *et passim*.



Fig. 3: The “Pendereckian” patterns in *Brainstorm* (series of frames: 1:04:25, 1:04:30) and in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (1:42:31).

hallucination sequence in *Brainstorm* (first two frames in Fig. 3) and as the *underscore*¹⁴² for an action scene in *The Lord of the Rings* (third frame), while a tentacled monster attacks the Fellowship of the Ring just outside the gate of the Mines of Moria.

The sequence from which the images in Fig. 4 have been taken narrates the moment in which Wendy (Shelley Duvall) realises the full extent of Jack’s madness. The pages that Wendy flips through with terror are obsessively covered by an infinite repetition of the proverb “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”. The piece used for the

scene’s underscore is *Polymorphia*. We hear glissandos and aleatory pizzicatos, with phrases played by solo violins that for a moment even seem lyrical, but as part of a disjointed and estranged lyricism – an entropic form of creativity? A non-organised impulse? – that results from this chaotic throng of unrelated motifs. Not long after, over Jack’s point-of-view shot, the pattern changes and makes way for the “rain of pizzicatos” taken from *Polymorphia*. The same fragment appears again later, clearly associated with Jack and his illness, to construct the tension underlying the action’s “space of latency” that the music is called

¹⁴² *Underscore* and *source* are pragmatic distinctions widely used in the technical documents drafted during the process of producing a soundtrack. In general practice, *underscore* substitutes, while not entirely coinciding with, the term “extra-diegetic”, while *source* indicates “diegetic”. Cf. HAGEN 1971, KASSABIAN 2001. [*Underscore* is the classic musical comment in which the music is given a narrative function that remains external to the action, while *source music* generally indicates a music whose source is found within the scene being shot (for example, some music playing on the radio) N.d.R.].

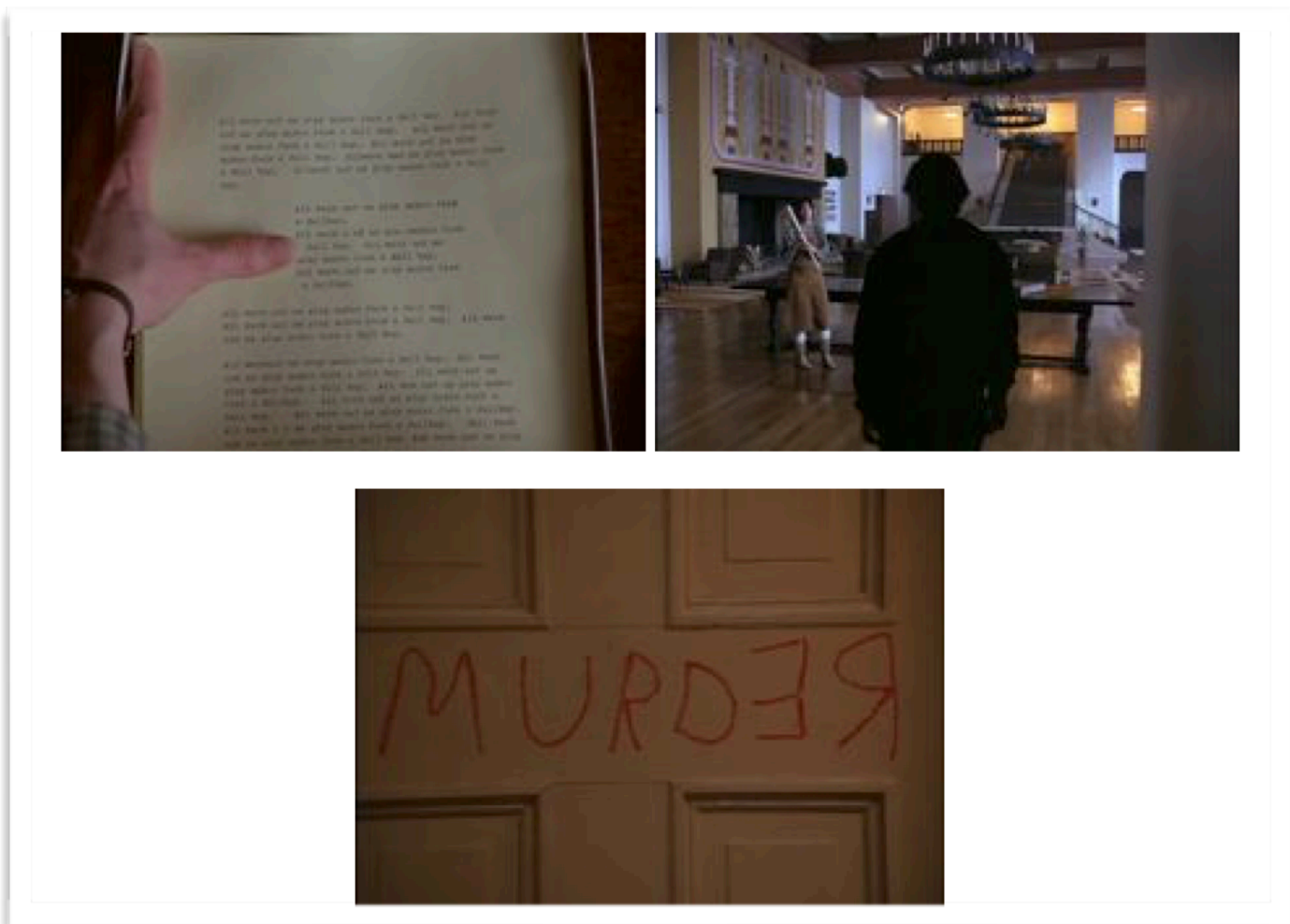


Fig. 4: *The Shining*, series of frames: 1:16:29, 1:17:29 e 1:33:29.

on to interpret. We might describe what we hear – anticipating by a few pages an analysis of the repetitions of the same pattern that will bear out our interpretation – as the metaphorical representation of a spasmodic motility, an organic and psychological dystopia made audible by music, which indicates a steadily growing tension. For the moment, let us settle for a surface interpretation: the “being” that announces itself through the sound, and at which the dystopic representation is aimed, indicates a *limit* and a danger. Consistently associated with Jack’s state of madness, the musical pattern is first and foremost a kinetic metaphor of a scattered, inorganic and neurotic motility, produced by a heterophonic jumble of tensions at

their limit: the representation of the limit (or of *neurosis* as a limit) seems to be the specific aim of *The Shining’s* musical dramaturgy.

In the following pages I would like to explore a few significant occurrences in films belonging to various genres,¹⁴³ pursuing the tensions that have already been amply suggested by the fragments considered in *The Shining*. I will thus attempt to offer further examples of the type and the modality of designation implied by the use of these horror formulas.

Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan (Fig. 5). The crew of the Enterprise, exploring a remote outpost of the galaxy, has detected the invisible presence of “indeterminate forms of life”

¹⁴³ The reader should be aware that many important works have been omitted from this reconstruction, such as *Alien* (1979, by Ridley Scott, music by Jerry Goldsmith), which was a fundamental model for the musical figurations discussed here (further examined in MEANDRI 2013), or again experimentation done in popular music (as one example, the Sgt. Pepper glissando, discussed in MEANDRI AND GUIZZI 2015).

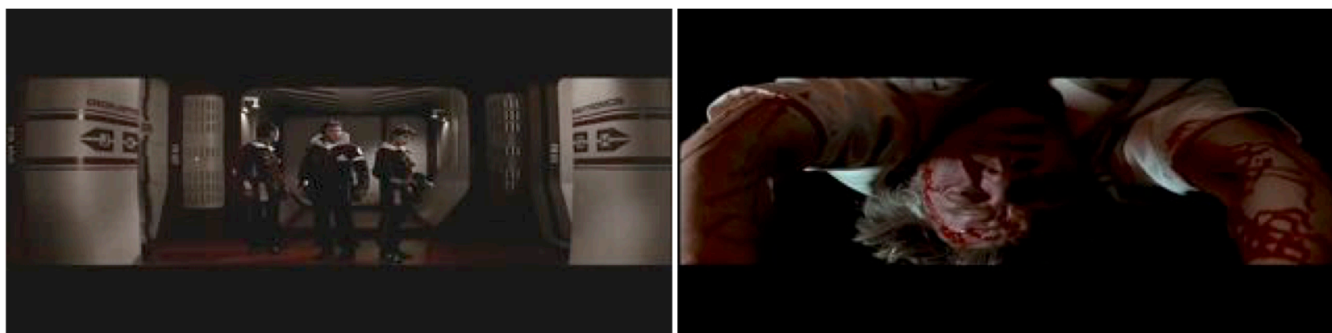


Fig. 5: *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, series of frames: 0:59:33, 1:00:51.

with a portable device. This is a recurrent type of storyline, and the tension-creating role with which the underscore accompanies the exploration of the space station is also habitual: the music is charged with interpreting the potentially hostile space explored by the characters. The long sequence is produced by way of a number of formulas coming from the universe of horror: falling glissandos in the strings and brass, or “sick violins” and “sick horns” as Philip Tagg defined them when describing the beginning of *The Mission*¹⁴⁴. “Indeterminate forms of life”. It may be possible to grasp a germinating sense (or at least one of its primary interpretants) through the determinations of being expressed by the sound, according

to the recurrences that mainstream cinema proposes in a remarkably redundant way. Forms of life, we had said. An so, an initial possibility of semiosis: an *organic metaphor*. In *Outbreak* (1995), with music by James Newton Howard, a team of military scientists (including Dustin Hoffman as a physician and colonel of the American army) succeeds in isolating the virus of a disease named *motaba*, which risks setting off a planetary epidemic (Fig. 6). Blow-ups of the virus are visualised on the electron microscope’s monitor, while the characters comment on the terrible sequence of the infection. As the virus is seen multiplying on the monitor (first frame in Fig. 6), Howard gradually increases the amount of movement, a Brownian motion if this chemic-



Fig. 6: *Outbreak*, 0:25:06, 0:34:30.

¹⁴⁴ Philip Tagg, ““It was a problem to treat them as a whole”. Musical communication of ideology in cinema. The case of *The Mission*”, a contribution to research project organised by Franco Fabbri: “Genre, format, stereotype: cinema, radio-television and popular music as factories of meanings”, 31 May 2007, University of Turin. On this point, see also CLARIDA and TAGG 2003.

al/physical metaphor can be accepted, or again a stochastic movement, like a cloud of fine dust. The kinetic metaphors that we could associate with this pattern are numerous – a swarming, prickling, teeming, flickering, seething, crawling mass – and refer to a kaleidoscopic movement within a constant and intelligible field but that is also the heterophonic and entropic product of an indistinct myriad of events. This is perhaps the key to interpreting the formula and its many variants: an indistinct being, whose single entities are not quantifiable, with a uniform behaviour and a stubbornness in composing a unity, determined in affirming a *desire* that comes across, albeit distributed over the consciousness of the being that expresses it, as the unitary product of *a* will (and this, primarily, is the “ontic fright” explored by this musical pattern). Further on in the film, similar variations on the formula give the destructive effect of the virus’ propagation in the characters’ bodies a visibility, rendering the contagion perceptible and seen. The second frame is taken from one of the sequences that put the contagion’s first carrier on scene: Jimbo (Patrick Dempsey) shows the first symptoms of the infection. In this case as well, it is the music that makes visible that which by its very nature is invisible.

In previous works¹⁴⁵ we have proposed an ethnomusicological interpretation for mainstream musical Hollywood’s inclination to narrativise a few highly particular expressions of non-tonal twentieth century music as markers of the *tremendum* and the Panic representation of a crisis. The interpretative category to which we turned, and that I will briefly take up here, is that of *Anti-music*. This term was coined by Febo Guizzi¹⁴⁶, who proposed adopting it in

ethnomusicology to describe the sonorous world of a few peculiar and extraordinary ritual expressions of popular culture: uproars, *charivari*, rituals involving a derision of Christ and the morning of darkness, the sonorous acts that in our folk tradition are carried out simultaneously with the liturgy commemorating the death of God on earth. Hence the links with shadows, demons and the world of the dead (and, one might say, with a cinematographic metaphor that already proposes a relation between what we have mentioned and the mainstream collective imagination: the *dark side of the force*). The ethnomusicological literature contains examples of Anti-music in Italy and Europe, but cases are found across the world in which this connection appears in a non-superficial way, such as the itinerant Bon monks’ rituals involving a veneration of the dead, or the Amazon rituals for exorcising the eclipse discussed by Levi-Strauss.¹⁴⁷ What is Anti-music? What are, put as shortly as possible, the reasons for this name? Febo Guizzi has written, while attempting to interpret the acoustic features of the sound rituals in question, that:

The result completely detaches the world of sound from that of noise, understood naturalistically and as a mere objective occurrence, and transfers noises and uproars, now understood as phonemic or linguistic elements, within the realm of music. The field of noise, considered objectively as by Nattiez, i.e. in a search for parameters which no longer rely on regular and periodic recursion, has been left behind us. This is because, above and beyond its possibility of being conceived or categorised as such, it has now

¹⁴⁵ MEANDRI 2013, MEANDRI and GUIZZI 2015.

¹⁴⁶ GUIZZI 2002 and GUIZZI 2004.

¹⁴⁷ LEVI-STRAUSS 1966.

in any case been reconverted, with the specific intention of a reversal, by the collective dynamics of an organised group in perfect agreement on how to reach its own performative goals. It is not by chance that the various forms of popular tradition which include both local variants of charivari and the derisory, satirical or “spiteful” manifestations transmitted through sound which must be distinguished from charivari strictly speaking (such as a few forms of gobbula in Sassari, documented by Pietro Sassu), appear in a range of cases. One passes from uproars that account for the entire sound event to situations in which the uproar is accompanied by, or overlaps with, or again surrenders to, manifestations with a more variegated phonic-musical consistency. The same goes for other ritual occasions in which the production of uproars is associated with different kinds of behaviour, such as in the “tratto marzo” seasonal celebrations, a few phases of Carnivals or New Years’ celebrations, etc. Two opposite and complementary paths can in any case be recognised, which according to the differing amount of sound organisation mark the degree to which they can be assimilated to one or the other of the two extremes in which uproarious phenomena can be collocated. On the one hand, we have raw noise, and on the other music in the strict or orthodox sense, hedonistic in the experience of listening. One of the directions leads from noise towards music, and the other goes from music towards its noisy deconstruction and decomposition. The first case includes uproars that are organised and formalised in the ways mentioned above. The second consists in the performance of a “normal” musical repertory, distorted and disrupted by an intentional destabilising parody, expressed

first and foremost by the systematic and untiring use of false notes.¹⁴⁸

While it is important to reflect on the differences existing between Anti-music in film and the sound rituals documented by ethnomusicology, we are deeply convinced of the term’s interpretational pertinence when applied to our field of studies. Let us review the main points of our reasoning. It is *anti*-music first and foremost because:

1) it is opposed to the aesthetic universe of *Music*. This is because it constructs its forms by using criteria in the production and organisation of sound that are opposed to the rules of sound produced according to the category of the beautiful, or according to the principles of euphony that belong to every musical culture;

2) because it levels the expressiveness and the power that emerge from this procedure against something (*against* the “deviant” within the community that becomes the object of a fierce form of phonic social censure).

Music – i.e. the positive status of the “ordinary” sound comment to a film – is opposed by anti-musical moments, acting as chaos or disorder. To represent this *locus horridus*, this musical hell, and bring it to visibility, Anti-music acts against the very foundations of language; or, one could say, the language of an absence of language is staged.

A large number of additional examples taken from contemporary cinema could be mentioned. But I believe it is more important to consider, as a conclusion, another sector. This involves the field of the para-textual expressions of a film, i.e. the trailers and the sonorous comment on the trailers, whose weight in terms of visibility and audibility is if possible even more significant in the context of today’s audiovisual media.

It is in trailers, indeed, that many of the formulas analysed

¹⁴⁸ GUIZZI 2004.

here are encountered with a surprising redundancy, at times, such as in the examples we are about to propose, acting as no less than the basis of their dramaturgy. In Video 1¹⁴⁹ I have strung together a sequence of a few scenes taken from recent trailers. In order: *Star Trek* (2009, by J.J. Abrams); *Anacondas – The Hunt of the Blood Orchid* (2004, by Dwight Little); *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005, by Scott Derrickson), *The Rite* (2011, by Mikael Håfström); *Black Death* (2010, by Christopher Smith); *Heartless* (2009, Philip Ridley); *Habeas Corpus* (a 2012 short by Jesse James Rice); *Primal* (2010, by Josh Reed); *Scream 3* (2000, by Wes Craven); *Avatar* (2009, by James Cameron); *Lights Out* (2016, by David F. Sandberg); *Clash of the Titans* (2010, by Louis Leterrier), *Tomb Raider* (2018, by Roar Uthaug); *Geostorm* (2017, by Dean Devlin); *San Andreas* (2015, by Brad Peyton); *Jupiter Ascending* (2015, by Lana and Lilly Wachowski). In the selected examples, taken from trailers in both their original language and in Italian, the heterophonic rising glissando, which we have already seen in action in *The Shining* and many other examples, acts as a true cliché: a stigma of disorder, a sign of the vast array of dystopias to which it is associated, this formula works here as an aural memory of consolidated narratives that are a constant of the mainstream spectacular canon. By way of its constant reference to pre-existing formulas, trailer music¹⁵⁰ assimilates the most blatant mainstream formulas within its own rhetoric, turning to them as “indices” of the spectacular *loci* through which a film negotiates the genre to which it itself belongs.

Conclusions

We are aware that sensorial experience of the world we live in is forged by the media and that the acoustic media play, in our contemporary sense-sphere, a primary role. Beginning with Schaffer’s pioneering works, a vast and specialised literature – within a growing number of disciplines, above and beyond ethnomusicology – has analysed the phenomena through which the public and private sonosphere that marks today’s world has been aurally constructed: from studies on the soundscape and ubiquitous listening,¹⁵¹ to ethnomusicological and popular music studies on the interactions between oral tradition musics and the system of the media; from currents in ethnography dedicated to the use of the media in different cultural systems to the works done, mainly with a technical or engineering basis, on the parasitic role of music as a component of acoustic pollution.

These are potentially interesting issues for music education: music is taught within a pervasive media context, which moreover is constantly changing. Is our knowledge of the aural imprinting undergone by new generations sufficient? How does “exposure” to media change in different periods and socio-cultural contexts? Should we speak of exposures, or interactions already marked by a relational and social competence? Do different “exposures” influence our musical experiences and abilities? Should music education take this into account? Or would it rather be more desirable for it to build an alternative – and thus a new sonosphere, characterised by a different relational and affective ethics – to the context of the media? Should one engage with this context? Or instead

¹⁴⁹ Consultable at the address: <https://youtu.be/ceS1INy9npM>. The source has been taken from Meandri 2013. Examples of trailers dating to after 2011 have been added to the clip published there, in order to provide evidence of the formula’s resilience in the context of current trailer music.

¹⁵⁰ Here, I will omit details as to the relation between the repetitiveness of the musical stereotypes used when adding sound to trailers and the serial production of trailer music libraries, whose production context is completely different from the one involved in film music.

¹⁵¹ For a definition of this term and a more extended bibliography, see KASSABIAN 2013.

“react” to how listening is “deteriorating” or becoming “passive”, attempting to counter the marginalisation of the cultural role of musical forms in the “modern” world? Should we not seek a new way of looking with curiosity at the ways in which the context of the media shapes new musical subcultures and productive listening habits?

Naturally, these are questions that cannot be given a unilateral and simplistic answer.

In my own personal experience, when dialoguing with music teachers and educators I have often noticed an open intolerance for the progressive restriction of spaces for listening to European art music, with occasions for coming into contact with the expressive forms of modern and contemporary music being even more dramatically scarce. The general idea, no doubt regressive in itself, is that the system of the media proposes an experience that has been “flattened out” to conform with popular music (as though the Babel of popular languages and idiolects were, for its part, equally monolithic and bereft of cultural, relational and political interest).

In this paper, taking up a series of published studies, I have tried to demonstrate that fragments of the expressive reservoir of modern and contemporary music survive, like so many Trojan horses, to recall Goldenthal’s words, in the contemporary system of genres, even while being semantically reshaped, and deeply so, by mainstream Hollywood’s schemes of narration.

How the cinematographic collective imagination of evil has influenced the reception of twentieth century music, and to what extent this reception has radically changed the possible expectations and interpretants tied to this music, is from a historical-musicological point of view the true question. Nevertheless, the problem also has profound ethnomusicological (and sociological-musical) implications, given that, in remediating twentieth-century non-tonal music, cinema does not only reinterpret, reread and convert to narration repertoires that had little to do

with this penchant towards program music. It also proposes a mass reception for these sound materials, which in our opinion may have highly relevant long-term historical and cultural repercussions. Fragments of twentieth century music survive in contemporary soundtracks, intermittently surfacing while rarely becoming objects of critical awareness, and yet constructing a field of aural competency that has great potential for experimentation in music education. Again, they unquestionably offer a terrain for observation that is important in understanding how contemporary film gives a structure, anything but sporadically, to the narrative, aural and musical competence of new generations of musicians and listeners.

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