

Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style

Affects, Effects, and Contexts of Two Recent Trends in Screen Scoring

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Situating the aesthetic practices of recent narrative film scoring within debates on ‘intensified’ or ‘post-continuity’ style, as well as accounts of reception in terms of post-cinematic affect or distributed subjectivity, this paper identifies two significant stylistic tendencies in film scoring: ‘corporate classicism’ and ‘the metaphysical style’. Examples are drawn from film and a wider range of musical media, with an analytical focus on representative cues from Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard’s score to *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Thomas Newman’s score to *American Beauty* (1999). The two styles of screen music scoring, orchestration, production, and post-production beg reminders not only of the problematic ‘utopian’ call of classical Hollywood film scoring (Flinn 1992), but also suggest that the powerful affective work performed by these scores raises the question of ‘unheard melodies’ (Gorbman 1987) anew.

In *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), the great detective goes to the opera. *Don Giovanni* is playing – but not as we know it. Moriarty has deceived Holmes into deducing that his nemesis has placed a bomb inside the base of the Commendatore’s statue. When Holmes breaks into the prop from beneath the stage, he discovers that he has been misdirected: the explosion will happen elsewhere. To suggest that the scene lacks detonations, however, would be to ignore Hans Zimmer’s contribution, composed in collaboration with his Remote Control colleagues Lorne Balfé, Matthew Margeson, and Dominic Lewis. As Holmes experiences his moment of recognition, Mozart is exploding all around him.

To say ‘explodes’ in this context might suggest a terrorist act, or a musical murder, and lead one into a recitation of tired tropes concerning the co-option of high art by mass culture. Of greater interest in the

context of the present essay are the affective intensities generated by this sequence. The Commendatore scene in *Don Giovanni* (1787) already delivers one of the more sublime shocks in opera, but to compete with the battery of audiovisual effects and punch its weight in the context of the hyperbolic Holmes universe created by director Guy Ritchie and co-workers for this Warner Brothers franchise, merely dropping Mozart into the mix would have led to a problematic dip in intensity. Mozart, as such, needs to gain some extra musical muscle.

As Holmes, Watson, and Sim race to the opera, a portentous minor mode horn call, scored low for heavy brass, sounds against a string and drum ostinato. Briefly – giddily, delightfully – the key shifts down a major third and into a passage from Mozart's scoring of the build-up to the Commendatore's manifestation, replete with shots from within the opera house of the onstage action, before cutting back behind the scenes and to *Remote Control's* cue. This switchback is not the only way in which the fabric of the narrative discourse intensifies or warps. Meta-diegetic imagery interrupts the action, evoking Holmes's problem-solving genius, with the cuts into and out of these 'visions' marked by non-diegetic accentuations from the sound designer. Temporality becomes even more fluid when a sinister smoking character – one of Moriarty's gang – observes Holmes and team heading backstage. The villain's drag on his cigarette is sonically sweetened by a sizzling effect and underscored with a dissonant cluster and glissando; the glissando's stretching of pitch exaggerates the impression of time drifting, while cueing unease. When Holmes realises that he has been deceived, the shot of his face (glimpsed through the 'O' of 'Imperatore' on the statue base) actually *flexes*, as if filmic representation itself is buckling in response to Moriarty's manipulations.

In this context, then, it comes as no surprise, as the Commendatore begins to sing, to hear that Mozart has been manipulated too. Scoring and mixing retool the original opera music, rendering it fitter for contemporary cinematic purposes in both subtle and more obvious ways. These add undeniable dramatic heft to the sequence – not least by inducing the contrast between this 'Mozart' and the earlier snippet of opera. One can also note the following features: the music's bass end feels immense; voice and accompaniment are close-miked and punchy; reverberation unrelated to the opera house's architecture inflates one's impression of the music's acousmatic and symbolic might; hammer blows of percussion help marshal the dramatic and musical rhythms into an appropriately epic expressive register. Mozart's music, pumped up to deliver scene-specific jolts of affect, thus becomes an unlikely contributor to one of the dominant modes of mainstream screen scoring in the early twenty-first century: corporate classicism.

Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style

How does contemporary, mainstream, entertainment cinema feel? What effects and affects are generated by sequences like this one from *Sherlock Holmes*? And what might those sensations represent about their historical moment, both in terms of recent screen practices and their relationship to broader societal trajectories? This essay outlines some thoughts about two stylistic trends in screen composition and their cultural connotations. I call these stylistic trends corporate classicism and the metaphysical style. While strongly contrasted, both are linked by their connection to broader developments in screen aesthetics. These developments include the emergence of an audiovisual style, key aspects of which have been variously identified by film scholars as the impact aesthetic, intensified continuity or chaos cinema (King 2000, Bordwell 2006, Stork 2011). Intensified continuity texts, in which music often plays a prominent role, have in turn been argued to bear traces of an emergent structure of feeling relating to qualities of social experience specific to the early 21st century (Shaviro 2010). This essay will begin by outlining these two styles, comparing and contrasting them. It will then consider possible connections between the styles and their socio-historical contexts.

Analytical sketches of two sequences must here serve as representative of corporate classicism and the metaphysical style. First, Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard's collaborative score for 2008's *The Dark Knight* – and, more specifically, the opening scene of that film – offers a distillation of the scoring aesthetic now dominant in mainstream film composing, particularly in the domain of action cinema (see Table 1). The cue is also more representative than the idiosyncratic Mozart-based sequence discussed above. The analysis begins immediately after the opening credits, which are accompanied by a build up of sounds resembling the shuffling of amplified batwings.

Unless one is counting overtones or microtones, one immediately arresting feature of this opening – and, in fact, of the movie's entire heist sequence – is that, while the music never lacks subtlety or variety, only two pitch classes appear. This indicates a key trait of corporate classicism: its stark rationalisation of traits of the classical Hollywood scoring style which dominated the cinematic mainstream between the 1930s and 1980s, or from the Golden Age of Max Steiner, Erich Korngold, Alfred Newman et al., say, to the era of Jerry Goldsmith, Alan Silvestri, John Williams et al. Melody, most strikingly, is entirely absent: the heroes and villains of modern blockbusters get few big themes, as Janet Halfyard has recently documented (Halfyard 2013).¹

¹ My thanks to Janet Halfyard for providing me with an early glimpse of this (now published) essay.

Audio	Visuals
<p>The opening minute of action begins with a discomfiting metallic string pedal (Joker’s leitmotif) accompanied by a ticking time-bomb beat layer for high pitched but untuned percussion; a low thrum of tension is thereby induced in the audio-viewer through culturally conditioned and mandatory embodied responses.</p>	<p>A maelstrom of blue flames with a Gothic silhouette (Batman’s visual leitmotif) emerging from the uncanny inferno.</p>
<p>A bass boom effect occurs on the cut to live action; tension mounts via the music’s slowly intensifying dynamics and the camera’s expressive zoom.</p>	<p>The long zoom effect is achieved by flying a helicopter-mounted camera towards an office building, suggesting an imminent collision. The audio-viewer braces for impact.</p>
<p>A smashing window shatters the tension, or rather relocates it to a new, slightly higher plateau of intensity. It also further fuses sound design and music by pointing, in the manner of a good orchestration, the shift to <i>pizzicato</i> strings developing the time-bomb layer. The syncopated pattern has the same moderate tempo and four square beat, and consists of 3+5+4+4 semiquaver patterns, the groove of which makes the action feel more corporeally involving; it dances, and so (in a sense) does the audio-viewer.</p>	<p>The startle effect of a second percussive blow – a gunshot (two goons are preparing to high-wire across to a bank building’s roof) – then cuts across the beat pattern, the metrical interruption intensifying the startle by fracturing the groove.</p>
<p>Joker’s leitmotif returns, its grainy tone increasing in volume until car brakes cut across it, cueing the next rhythmic cell in the musical mosaic. Bass guitar brings the ostinato back with aggressive urgency...</p>	<p>Joker, waiting on a sidewalk, is shot low from behind with a slow zoom into his as yet unworn rubber mask; a car pulls up suddenly, interrupting the calm of this image; he slips on the mask.</p>
<p>...before the cue crossfades into another patch (<i>arco</i> strings) at the visual cut, creating timbral contrast and sustaining the urgency of the ostinato through the weight of a new pitch-class – only the second of the cue – which shadows the pedal point a major second lower.</p>	<p>The goons head off on their high wire, and a lurching camera move, leering down at the street below, cues a development of the previous startle effects with reverberant and loud bass drum patterns.</p>
<p>Another change in ostinato timbre to more muted, phasing, trance music-like strings, emphasising the cut to a smaller interior location; the constant tick of pulse maintains momentum and provides continuity across the rapid cuts inside the car; portentous low piano notes mark the first mention of Joker.</p>	<p>Cut back into the car; the goons in the front are preoccupied with their discussion of Joker’s identity; in the back, Joker loads the guns he will shortly use to kill them both.</p>

Table 1: Audiovisual analysis of the opening of *The Dark Knight*¹

¹ The rows of the analytical tables in this essay represent individual shots/shot sequences.

² See the perspectives on film and leitmotif provided by the chapters from James Buhler, Scott D. Paulin and Justin London in *Music and Cinema* (Buhler, Flinn and Neumeyer 2000).

³ As Vasco Hexel has noted (Hexel 2014), Harry Gregson-Williams's score to *Unstoppable* (2010) includes a homage to this cue from *The Dark Knight*. Hexel's point indicates an important aspect of corporate classicism to be discussed below – its homogeneity of style and (often) ideas. Regarding Reich, one might add that *Unstoppable* is all about a train.

⁴ Similar compositional efficiencies yielded Batman's theme in *The Dark Knight*'s predecessor, *Batman Begins*. That score's insistent two-note ostinato seeds the eventual thematic unpacking of Batman's rising minor third leitmotif.

⁵ Strictly speaking, the metaphysical style is actually an amalgam of preexisting style topics, and so might more properly be termed the metaphysical meta-style topic. My thanks to Frank Lehman for helping me identify this point.

Instead, 'secondary' compositional parameters, such as timbre, texture and rhythm, do the heavy dramatic lifting, with manipulations thereof providing musical nuance and variety. So despite the cue's fragmentary, cellular structure, thematicism – in the guise of that creative misunderstanding of Wagnerian leitmotif on which key aspects of the classical Hollywood style rested² – is still present, but reduced to the barest of essentials. Joker's thematic leitmotif in *The Dark Knight* is a *timbre*: the sound of a razor blade playing a cello string. More subtly, but even more tellingly, there *is* thematic development in the opening heist sequence, and not only in terms of the variations it produces on its motoric ostinato cells (which may owe a debt to Steve Reich's *Different Trains*),³ or to the play of ideas between sound design and scoring. The interplay between the cue's two pitches evokes the dynamics of tonal harmony (filtered through modal rock changes), but pared back to the musical bone: a tonic pedal is haunted by its flattened seventh, signifying directionality through the semblance of tensions induced and then resolved as this shadow appears and disappears. That tension is then composed-out, aptly, at the sequence's big reveal, when the major second dip becomes a plunging major ninth accentuating the unmasking of the final bank robber's identity. A tiny amount of material has thus been made to go a very long way.⁴ However, before further exploring the ramifications of corporate classicism, it is necessary to introduce what is ostensibly its dialectical contrast – the metaphysical style⁵ – and a cue by Thomas Newman, from 1999's *American Beauty*, by now so widely imitated that it can be claimed as the archetypal instance of this approach (see Table 2 for analysis).

The metaphysical style, like corporate classicism, also remixes and rationalises preexisting scoring practices, albeit not quite to the degree of *reductio ad absurdum* of *The Dark Knight* cue's take on thematic organicism. Other similarities include the prominence of digitally manipulated timbres and textures, as heard, for instance, in the slowly pulsating seconds and fifths of the cue's background string pad, or in the 'electricity' timbre introduced just as Ricky helpfully cues the audio-viewer to listen out for it. One big difference, though, is that there *is* melody here. The scene's delicate interplay of mysticism and romance is evoked by the shifts in Newman's piano theme, the structure of which – in its own way every bit as fragmentary as *The Dark Knight*'s more extravagantly cellular structure – juxtaposes evocations of plainchant and the waltz (albeit the waltz of a damaged musical box). On the surface, this encourages an engagement with Ricky's filmmaker's dance with the carrier bag *and* with his stoner Zen reflections on that experience. More subtly, Newman underscores the scene's representation of Ricky's relationship to his physically abused childhood self, while reimagining a romantic cliché (i.e. the redemptive power of love). The sequence culminates,

Audio	Visual
<p>The pulsating open 5ths of a string pad – soon to be followed by an evocation of plainsong and a kind of electronic panpipe – conjures a mixture of New Age/ancient as alienated from the suburban milieu of the film as its characters have been from one another (until now). A delicate acoustic-sounding piano layer (likely played by Newman himself) then enters, proceeding like the Preces and Responses of an Anglican evensong; bars of 3/4, hemiola patterns and 5/4 create an aura of intelligence (signifying a Renaissance, or even an Enlightenment?), the suspension of meter allowing the layer to ‘float’, as if levitating. ‘You can almost hear it, right?’, Ricky asks of the ‘electricity’ he describes having felt in the air as he shot the home movie; an ‘electricity’, panpipe-like synth timbre is cued on the tonic pitch and, at this mark, the piano shifts from chant to waltz, as Ricky (his narration explains) ‘dances’ with the bag, which reminds him of a little kid begging to play; Newman’s piano part gently accentuates this association, invoking the musical box style topic.</p>	<p>Ricky and Jane, shot from behind, are watching a video of a white plastic carrier bag being blown around a suburban driveway on a windy day. The camera zooms in slowly.</p>
<p>The intensity of the close-up and of the grain of Ricky’s urgent voice (as he explains his moment of anagnorisis) is boosted by the mild dissonance of string suspensions...</p>	<p>Cut to Ricky in an intense close-up (framed to the left of the widescreen image), the dancing bag reflected in his eyes...</p>
<p>...and the returning ‘electricity’ tone, an entry of lower strings thickening the i-IV harmony, and a subtly powerful bass pedal create a swell of sound, affecting the listener like Ricky’s ‘benevolent force’.</p>	<p>...and then to the carrier bag itself, also in close-up (and framed to the right of the image), in a kind of shot reverse shot emphasising Ricky’s identification with the bag (or what the bag represents to him).</p>

Table 2: Audiovisual analysis of the *American Beauty* carrier bag scene

touchingly, in his first chaste kiss with Jane, just as the waltz’s metrical flow begins to heal the scene’s hitherto fragmentary music with the (ultimately interrupted) promise of teleology.

Such narrative thematics indicate an obvious difference between corporate classicism and the metaphysical style: the shift from (as Philip Tagg has famously demonstrated) robustly physical, less melodic and, in terms of screen scoring semiotic cliché, overwhelmingly masculine climates

of action to more melodic, feminine or childlike realms evoking shimmers of spirituality and an engagement with ‘deeper’ issues relating to this life or the next (Tagg & Clarida 2003). One might even be tempted to speak of a musical staging of the difference between Deleuze’s notion of classical narrative cinema’s action-image and modernist film’s time-image, given the dominance of corporate classicism in multiplex action movies targeted at male teenagers, and the role of metaphysical scoring in carving out spaces for otherness in HBO serials, art and prestige cinema, documentaries, and other ‘alternatives’.⁶

⁶ The notion of the metaphysical style distills ideas first presented in my book on Zbigniew Preisner’s music for the *Three Colours* Trilogy (Reyland 2012: 47–57), in which Newman is discussed alongside scores by Gustavo Santaolalla, Clint Eastwood and Andrew Dickson which help their respective films (such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Naked* (1993)) ‘subvert stereotypical musical signifiers to assert a universality of concern with “othered” realms of experience... in the service of non-mainstream visions’ (56–57).

The connections between the two styles, however, are just as intriguing. Here are three. First, corporate classicism and metaphysical scoring may be representative of the triumph, within screen scoring practices, of what Jeff Smith defined as pop scoring: screen music ‘composed or compiled in one or more popular musical styles’ (Smith 1998: 4). Any hints of the western art music tradition therein are usually stylistic tics inherited from earlier film scoring traditions. More important to Zimmer, Newman and most other screen composers working in the mainstream today is the influence of rock and pop songwriting, recording and production techniques. Zimmer’s famous appearance as a keyboardist in the music video to ‘Video Killed the Radio Star’ by The Buggles becomes, in this regard, unexpectedly suggestive. The number of prominent film composers with a rock and pop background is shaping contemporary scoring practices in the way that the Classical-Romantic tradition influenced so many of the European émigrés who helped to define the sound of classical Hollywood cinema. In Allan Moore’s theorising of popular song’s functional layers (2012), rock keyboardists are primarily the providers of harmonic and textural filler, deftly accentuating what is already there, rather than leading the way with a tune.

Second, many screen composers now work within a new model of screen scoring practice. The in-house factory assembly line model – composer passes short score or midi file to orchestrator, and then on down the line to the copyists, orchestra and conductor, sound recordists, etc. – was long ago replaced by alternative collaborative strategies including the outsourcing of music production duties to companies like Zimmer’s aptly named Remote Control. Kindly, one might liken Remote Control to an artist’s studio: a creative auteur handing over the realisation of her or his vision to a company of talented close associates. Zimmer often works on a score with many other composers; sometimes, his colleagues seem to do the majority of the composing, with Zimmer acting as a producer – practices the nuances of which are not always captured in crediting hierarchies. Remote Control and Zimmer’s previous company (Media Ventures) are commendable for having provided many screen composers

with their break in the industry, via a chance to work alongside a contemporary master of the craft. Nonetheless, the rapid spread of corporate classicism's sound, emerging from Zimmer's particular style and aesthetics, might also remind one of a McDonalds or a Starbucks colonising the world's high streets and displacing local variety with generic conformity and a profitably limited product range developed, through hyper-efficient processes, from a few highly standardised ingredients.

As Adam Dutch has observed, this model of creative practice invites an Adornian critique of the pseudo-individualisation of the degree of musical standardisation just beneath the surface of many scores composed within the corporate classicist style (2009: 4). Dutch quotes Alex Ross on the 'practice of musical inbreeding' that was particularly 'endemic to action movies' cast within the pop cultural forge from which many traits of corporate classicism emerged: 1990s Jerry Bruckheimer productions scored (as Dutch goes on to note) by Zimmer or members of his team at Media Ventures (Remote Control's precursor).

Composers for the likes of "The Rock," "Con Air," and "Face/Off" draw on an increasingly limited set of devices – static minor-key sequences, monotonous electronic beats, pompous male choruses, and pseudo-baroque patterns that heavy-metal guitarists would find tedious. (Ross 1998)⁷

Dutch traces the journey of the score to *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) from being work slated for Alan Silvestri to a (in Silvestri's words) 'Jerry Bruckheimer film, which has a certain sound that has to be kept in the mix' (cited in Dutch 2009). Silvestri was replaced, not by Zimmer, but by one of Zimmer's Remote Control acolytes, Klaus Badelt. Zimmer was working on *The Last Samurai* and unable to dedicate much time to *Pirates*. As Zimmer himself described events, 'Klaus is a wonderful composer, but I couldn't help myself from writing many of the tunes, and then I sort of orchestrated the way those tunes would sound as well. Klaus wrote some more tunes and with our tunes wrote the score, and Blake Neely, Geoff Zanelli, and everyone else went at it' (cited in Dutch 2009). Dutch argues that Zimmer's role here – overseeing a project and having at least some creative input – 'can be seen to represent the zenith of creative co-production, which Zimmer says he is striving for. On the other hand, it could be seen as the high of neutered creativity, a score which is at best utilitarian and at worst herald[s] a new age of homogenous film music' (ibid: 7–8). Newman, albeit on a smaller scale, has also worked often with a close-knit team of collaborators, and he too has his acolytes.⁸

A genius for reductive repetition masked by digitally manipulated nuance, privileging affect and style topical connotation over musical

⁷ I supervised Adam Dutch's Masters dissertation 'Beyond Remote Control: The Scoring Style of Hans Zimmer' (Keele University, 2009). As well as learning many things from Adam's research into Zimmer's style and practices, and his analyses of specific cues and films, the spark for the present essay was struck during our discussions.

⁸ Session musician, synth player and Newman collaborator Richard Marvin, for instance, spent part of the 2000s carving a TV scoring niche for himself out of the composition of variations on *American Beauty*'s plastic bag scene for HBO dramas. The PAL region DVD menus for season two of *Six Feet Under* and season one of *In Treatment*, for example, featured Marvin cues from these shows with a clear debt to Newman's cue.

structures developing thematic or harmonic symbolism, is a hallmark of both of these styles. Music from these scoring trends could therefore be argued to participate in contemporary screen culture's privileging of affective short hands over longer-form expositions of narrative or other forms of information. Was it not ever thus? Perhaps. Yet the layer of explicitly representational screen scoring discourse, typical of composers from Steiner to Silvestri, and shaped by parameters encouraging a more elective engagement with audiovisual interpretation, seems to have been stripped away – or, better, vigorously rationalised – alongside a shift from relatively continuous, score-wide (and often thematic) strategies to more cellular, aphoristic constructions rendered both necessary and possible, in part, by digital editing and post-production practices.⁹ The third connection between corporate classicism and metaphysical scoring, which picks up on all of these matters, is therefore, in some respects, the most intriguing.

⁹ A topic addressed by Hexel (2014), who is presently writing a monograph for Scarecrow Press's Film Score Guide series on *The Dark Knight*.

Affects, Effects, and Contexts

Screen style, from blockbusters like the Batman trilogy to quirky prestige pictures like *American Beauty*, is now dominated by what David Bordwell has identified as 'intensified continuity'. The calling card for this style is average shot length, which has reduced, since 1930–60, from 8–11 seconds to 3–6 seconds. As Bordwell noted, and Jeff Smith (2013)¹⁰ and Amanda McQueen (2013) have explored in fascinating detail and depth, music cues and sound designs often provide threads of narrative continuity to replace those that the visuals fray or snap – while contributing, overall, to intensified continuity's induction of intensely affective experiences. Film theorists have even begun speaking about *post*-continuity: those passages when, in the words of Steven Shaviro, 'a jagged collage of fragments of explosions, crashes, physical lunges, and violently accelerated motions' yields 'no sense of spatio-temporal continuity; all that matters is delivering a continual series of shocks to the audience' (Shaviro 2012).¹¹ However, a 'preoccupation with immediate effects trump[ing] any concern for broader continuity' (ibid: 2012) is not merely witnessed in examples such as *The Dark Knight's* heists or fights. As Shaviro notes, cinematographer John Bailey has explained how films that embrace the long take – including those that, as in the *American Beauty* sequence examined above, foreground the very act of having made a long take – can also accomplish forms of narrative, spatial and temporal confusion.

In search of the formal traces of a contemporaneous structure of feeling both represented and produced by these audiovisual styles, Shaviro has suggested that such texts may be 'expressive of, as well as... embedded within, the delirium of globalised financial capitalism, with its relentless

¹⁰ My thanks to Jeff Smith for providing me with an early glimpse of this paper (now published).

¹¹ While this talk provides a pithy introduction to Shaviro's key ideas, a fuller and richer exposition of Shaviro's theories of post-continuity, affect and subjectivity can be found in his book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (2010).

processes of accumulation, its fragmentation of older forms of subjectivity, its multiplication of technologies for controlling perception and feeling on the most intimate level, and its play of both embodiment and disembodiment' (ibid: 2012). Anahid Kassabian's *Ubiquitous Listening* (2013) proposes the network narratives of distributed subjectivity as an alternative explanation for parallel trends in musical consumption; she also explores some of the links to be made between networks financial and personal. On another tack, documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis has recently suggested that contemporary networks of information (e.g. news media sources) deliver texts generating affective stimulation (e.g. terrifying headlines) but lacking coherence or predictability (e.g. different experts in the same bulletin presenting contradictory interpretations of an event), and that such strategies have become a favoured (or at least convenient) method of discourse for governments and corporations (segment in *Charlie Brooker's 2014 Wipe*). Citing Russia's 'non-linear warfare' strategy in the Ukraine as a prominent example, Curtis argues for a shift in the style and content of political and news media discourses from clear-headed argument to fragmentary patchworks of affecting, troubling but ultimately incoherent sensations. He claims that Putin's (anti)method, guided by Situationist turned politician Vladislav Surkov, is to maximise unpredictability as a means of maintaining control. Does this represent a wider preoccupation with immediate affects replacing logical argument or narrative? The launch of the 2015 UK election campaign (a day on which all three major parties issued inflammatory statements 'proving' that all three major parties were lying in their launch statements) provided a more mundane but nonetheless unnerving example: in place of a rational debate, the MPs served up dollops of affecting yet vacuous political theatre.

Such practices may warrant, or at least excuse, a certain investment in affective distraction via intensified continuity, iPhones, social media, etc., by those lacking power (i.e. almost everyone else). From the Millennium Bug to Ebola, via economic collapse and austerity, the war on terror, global warming, overpopulation, and much, much more besides, it sometimes feels as if a structural darkening of human consciousness is presently occurring, and one that is constantly being intensified, refracted and obscured through the mediations of perversely entertaining cultural texts. Is the tincturing of the ever-present chiaroscuro of the human condition returning to a level of existential bleakness last experienced at the peak of the Cold War? While there is never a shortage of breezy distraction in mainstream entertainment media, the shadows of a cultural darkening can be located right across the artistic spectrum – all the way, so to speak, from the Angry Birds games to that even angrier bird, Crake, who destroys humanity in novelist Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* cli-fi

trilogy (2003–2013). TV dramas like *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and games like *The Last of Us* (2013) hardly inspire, in turn, more optimism about humanity's future than the evening news.

Consuming such cultural productions can make life feel as if one is constantly living with disaster. But then, as Maurice Blanchot has argued, a disaster's disastrousness resides in its imminence (Blanchot 1986). Writing on the apocalypse presented in Massive Attack's 'Splitting the Atom' music video (2010) – Edouard Salier's beautiful but terrifying animated imagery explores a frozen moment in a monochrome metropolis, and a network of surreally motionless streets, just as an apocalyptic weapon is being detonated – Shaviro elaborates on the text's structure of feeling in relation to post-continuity (Shaviro 2011).¹² A disaster is always impending and never ceases arriving. Such texts cannot achieve closure; like a trauma, one can never be done with it all and move on. In this context, one might be tempted to note corporate classicism's integral role in movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and the glut of recent superhero films in which global catastrophe can only be averted by a burst of supernatural power (powers sadly unavailable to actual humanity), as in *Superman Returns* (2006). What may be more interesting, however, in texts utilising corporate classicism and intensified continuity, is the possibility that one need never *think* about how they are representing certain social contexts in order to experience their representation (or rather embodiment) of such phenomena – indeed, to never be done with and move on from that experience. The impact aesthetic of intensified/post-continuity film ensures that one feels and is affected by the style of the epoch even if one never truly notices it exploding all around one.

Little wonder screen composers have fashioned metaphysical scoring, as if to provide an alternative to corporate classicism. A body in pain craves visions of transcendence, and musicians in many traditions offer palliative glimpses of nirvana. One accesses these moments gladly, like opening the door to a safe room in a survival horror game – rooms often scored, as in the *Resident Evil* series, in the metaphysical style. As Julian Anderson said of his 2013 Proms commission, *Harmony*, 'what's so magical about music [...] is transcending everyday clock-timing and replacing it with a completely illusory musical time, which suspends our awareness of normal time altogether' (n.a. 2013). *Harmony* ends with the words of nineteenth-century nature writer Richard Jeffries: 'Haste not, be at rest. This now is eternity'. Or, as Ellie Goulding sang in the chorus of 'Burn', a UK number one single in the month Anderson's choral work opened the Proms, 'We don't wanna leave, no, we just wanna be right now, right now'. Perhaps now, more than ever, earth-bound cultural communities need music's harmony and beauty, and the illusion that both could be eternal.

¹² My thanks to Steven Shaviro for sending me a copy of this unpublished talk.

They are not eternal, though, and their metaphysical moments are just that: momentary and not really of this world.¹³ Notably, in this regard, Hans Zimmer's score to Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) – escapist entertainment which leaves the earth in search of fictional solutions to the potentially dystopian outcomes of humanity's very real global challenges – balances corporate classicism with cues cast in the metaphysical style, complete with eerie electronica and Preces and Response-like piano themes.

To indulge in this pessimistic interpretive vein, though, risks succumbing to the allure of a tradition of aesthetic criticism claiming that experiences in which affect trumps intellect are always negative: the 'delusions', identified by Richard Dyer, that 'because we cannot name or categorise affects they are either ineffable and mysterious or else dangerous and inchoate', and 'the sense – or rather the furious desire – that what is beyond language must either be transcendent or transgressive' (2007: 249). Kassabian's perspective on distributed subjectivity is balanced, open-minded and generally positive; Shaviro's work on post-continuity's representations of contemporary subjectivity resists both sides of Dyer's delusory coin in search of a nuanced theorisation of contemporary western consciousness. So while one should not substitute arguments about narrative's coercive power for the equally simplistic vision that texts privileging affect over representation are unproblematically emancipatory, it is necessary to acknowledge the extent to which films scored in the corporate classical style fashion exceptionally pleasurable experiences. The *Sherlock Holmes*/Mozart mash-up discussed at the start of this essay, for instance, is exhilarating cinema. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up every time I audio-viewed it for this essay, and then later, again and again, just for pleasure. Furthermore, as Zimmer's own ability considerably to nuance his style in *Interstellar* and elsewhere indicates, corporate classicism may be developing into a practice no more uniform than the classical Hollywood style.

Alongside its more straightforward manifestations in the current slew of comic book movies – where even composers famed for thematic inventiveness can be heard harnessing corporate classicism's powers to the action genre, as in Danny Elfman and Brian Tyler's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) – there are also more idiosyncratic, playful and subtle expressions. Michael Giacchino's end title cue to *Star Trek* (2009) may highlight the manner in which its thematic materials are light years away from Alexander Courage's original TV theme by juxtaposing their main melodies, but its tongue-in-cheek manipulation of style topics associated with the western and sci-fi genres is a significant contribution to the tone of J. J. Abrams's reboot, one eyebrow of which remained cocked at a Spock-like incline. Similarly, while Jeff Beal's main title 'theme' to David Fincher's *House of Cards* (2013-) is anything but straightforwardly

¹³ Anderson's *Harmony* might be heard as an elegy to the current fragility of the natural realms yielding the experiences evoked by Jeffries, rather than as an exercise in escapism.

melodic, it is as texturally entralling as the machinations of Frank and Claire Underwood – not least because, between seasons of the drama, its textural contents are developed. All of these soundtracks nevertheless share the key traits detailed above and, primarily, the privileging of affective accentuation over other forms of narrative representation. And in the thrall of such scores, can one truly remain mindful of the manner in which, as Caryl Flinn argued, ‘the utopian projections of music are construed differently according to their different critical or historical backgrounds’ – or does the ‘social surfeit or excess’ generated by their affects inoculate one against caring what these styles represent (1992: 9)?¹⁴

Yet this may be an equally valid point: who could break free of such moments of affective immersion to care about anything else? The distractions generated by these filmmaking practices, while paralleling broader societal trends in corporeally immersive and/or interactive forms of entertainment, remain problematic in (for screen theorists at least) peculiarly familiar ways. Melodies may literally be unheard in much corporate classicism, but the key polemical thrust of Claudia Gorbman’s *Unheard Melodies* (1987) is, if anything, even more pertinent to scholars considering the effects of contemporary entertainment films than it was to films of the Golden Age or its post-classical 1970s–80s reboot – films in which a score’s thematic and harmonic contributions to narrative tended to be more closely balanced with the music’s extra-semiotic dimensions. Suture theory is far from trendy nowadays, but is that not, in a sense, what the affective power and immersive/distracting qualities of corporate classicism and intensified continuity perform (i.e. suture)? And don’t they perform it all the more effectively because they are even more overwhelmingly affecting than earlier screen practices, and prioritise (to a far greater extent) feeling the music over interpreting its representational content? If so, one might be forgiven for wondering if this is one way in which today’s audio-viewers are being sutured into newly fashioned subject-positions, fit for contemporary forms of political and corporate coercion adequate to Shaviro’s ‘delirium of globalised financial capitalism’. Alternatively, such texts and their creators may be, for the most part, unwitting participants in the fashioning of art works inducing a kind of anti-subject position that renders audio-viewers more malleable or merely docile by inducing affective distractions. Immersed in the delirium of a network of fragments, emancipated from the burden of having to comprehend a more sustained argument or narrative, and with, in any case, every possible counterargument and sensation emerging at the touch of a button from one’s screens, speakers and headphones, one might still be missing something.

¹⁴ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of Flinn’s arguments in her important book *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (and for other constructive suggestions).



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