

Shifting Sounds Sequences within the Audio-Visual Space: Case of Hans Zimmer

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Abstract: *The paper discusses certain aspects of the use of compositional techniques practiced by Hans Zimmer for the purpose of building the dynamics of the narrative of the film image. Based on the analysis of selected scenes from the movie *Interstellar* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2014), it shows how the development of musical material inspired by American minimalism serves the specific functions of a sci-fi genre, and the appropriate manipulation of this material by the director significantly influences the construction of spatio-temporal relations in the cinematographic picture.*

Key-words: *“Interstellar”, Christopher Nolan, Hans Zimmer, soundtrack, film music, narrative*

1. Introduction

Hans Zimmer is one of the most talented and, undoubtedly, most sought-after composers of film music in contemporary cinema. Even a cursory acquaintance with his artistic achievements confirms the artist's spectacular successes in the Hollywood industry, including, in particular, twelve Oscar nominations, over two hundred soundtracks for various films and over thirty years of intense professional activity (Hans Zimmer Official). His first notable achievement was the score for *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson in 1988; but it was only the blockbuster *The Lion King* (1994) that became Zimmer's ticket to real success in American cinematography (cf. MacDonald 2013, 384).

Well-known from such movies like: *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Mission Impossible 2* and *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), *Hannibal* (R. Scott, 2001), *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), *Batman – The Beginning* (Christopher Nolan, 2005), *Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006), three parts of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Dark Knight* (Ch. Nolan, 2008), *Inception* (Ch. Nolan,

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2010), *Dunkirk* (Ch. Nolan, 2017), born in Frankfurt in 1957, Hans Florian Zimmer, studied in Switzerland and England (cf. Cotta Vaz 2014, 137; Engel and Wildfeuer 2015, 233–246; Hexel 2016, 1–13; Horton 2017, 198–199; Mooney 2018, 39, 44–45, 52, 70; Wierzbicki 2019, 56–57; Wilson 2022, 197–198). Although not a professional musician, he played the piano and mastered synthesizers very well; and quickly developed his individual, very distinctive style, which – although not minimalistic in origin – is often described by critics in the terms of minimalism (cf. Shone 2020, 144; B. Wright 2015, 325).

2. Hans Zimmer's Compositional Practices: The Context of Minimal Music

Without a doubt, minimalism is one of the most important styles that inspire Zimmer's work, especially since minimalist techniques are widespread in American cinema. As Jonathan Bernard writes: "this type of non-developmental treatment should be very familiar to anyone who has been in a movie theater lately; many contemporary Hollywood film-score composers use similar techniques, endlessly recycling thematic material with little or no change from one appearance to the next" (Bernard 2003, 122). For example, composer Natasha Paulberg, and – after her – critic Aaron Gilmartin, define Zimmer's style as post-minimalist, and even construct the term "romantic post-minimalism" (in fact, used by Zimmer himself, cf. Wierzbicki 2019, 32) or – on the other hand – "neoclassical post-minimalism" to clarify the properties of aforementioned style (cf. Gilmartin 2019). Romantic post-minimalism is also a term used to describe Zimmer by Benjamin Wright, a Canadian film music researcher:

romantic minimalism is an idea which I think really does originate with Hans Zimmer [...] and that it's a combination of romantic musical ideas, which are like traditional Hollywood film themes [...] and you are combining that with something very different and that is minimalism, which is not about melody, and, in fact, it's about a stripping away of musical textures and getting to the root of an idea and then repeating that idea over a length of time. [...] I think it offers [...] a fresh palette of musical ideas, which is not necessarily connected to classical Hollywood scoring practices (B. Wright 2015, 325; Wright 2016).

Composer Diego Delfino also perceives Zimmer as the heir to Philip Glass, especially since 2014's *Interstellar* (Delfino 2015) – a film by Christopher Nolan, a director Zimmer particularly enjoys working with. The dystopian image, unfolding before the viewer a classic narrative about a climate catastrophe that will occur in

the near future and about the search for a new place to live in intergalactic space (Nolan 2014), seems to perfectly harmonize with the characteristic, cold sound of Zimmer's music – a sound seemingly unencumbered by the means of musical rhetoric. It was this specific quality that made Ridley Scott choose Zimmer to write the soundtrack to *Gladiator* in 2000, because he wanted to avoid unnecessary sentimentality and popular pathos (cf. Hexel 2016, 5). Zimmer's shift from classic Hollywood film music to so-called "romantic minimalism" (if we choose to use that term) is also accompanied by a transformation in the range of instruments he uses. From an extensive classical neo-romantic orchestra, he gradually shifts his interests towards electronics, now becoming one of the most important pioneering representatives of this trend in Hollywood, alongside Vangelis and Wendy Carlos.

In the case of a film music composer, the individual style also includes his way of working on the film and his approach – both to the image and the director's intentions. Therefore, Zimmer follows certain specific rules of filmmaking, which then govern how the director will use the soundtrack provided by the composer. Ilario Meandri Sanchez describes these principles as follows:

Hans Zimmer, for example, has changed his tactics in the course of time, also from a contractual point of view, resorting to what we could define as a "preventive scoring". Throughout his career, [...] he has progressively increased the use of synthesizers and sampling, marginalizing the orchestra and thus making the massive use of music synthesis technologies his own recognizable style. One of the reasons for it is the attempt to re-establish creative control over the decisions that will determine the score identity, creating the temp tracks himself. In the case of those cues that cannot be reproduced through digital synthesis, Zimmer requests an early session to record some of the main themes for the preview while the movie is still being produced. The cues themselves will of course have to be re-edited for the final editing of the sequence, but it is also possible in some cases, as in *Gladiator*, for the director to be so deeply struck by them to adapt the editing of some scenes. The massive use of synthesizers makes this approach feasible, and prevents certain decisions over which the composer wants to have full control from being taken away from him. It is twice the amount of work, but this method defends his creative integrity (Meandri Sanchez 2014, 72).

As you can see, the principle of "preventive composing" – which we could also call "overcomposing" – is not only that the composer, thanks to the technology he uses, can decide on important details of his music, such as the final tempo used in

the image, but in particular means that Zimmer always composes much more musical material than will actually be used during editing. This approach also partially influences his musical poetics, which is based on long, wide-breathing musical periods in which – similarly to minimal music – a relatively small fragment of material is processed, but the way in which the musical narrative is developed is slow, which can be observed, for example, in the most famous theme from *Inception* (directed by Nolan, 2010) – the track titled “Time” (Zimmer 2011). Craig Wright perfectly characterizes this technique, so let us recall his statement: “this material – usually four or five notes, or a few slow-moving chords – is thematicized and repeated, with a layer of instrumentation or a new rhythmic beat added with each repetition. This accumulative process continues until the theme can’t get any louder or more complex, at which point the texture is suddenly reduced to just a few isolated sounds” (C. Wright 2015, 441).

From the point of view of film technology, this may seem a rather uneconomical technique: we are aware that long musical episodes, several minutes long, with a slow melodic and harmonic progression, are completely incompatible with the dynamics of a modern picture. Especially when we realize that Zimmer writes music for quite specific film genres, such as sci-fi, fantasy and action films. Of course, we can imagine specific shots for which this style would be appropriate: extended, solemn battle scenes in costume films or the camera’s eye directed into galactic space. Basically, however, the director must learn to properly manipulate the sound sequences provided to him by Zimmer.

3. Analysis of the Audio-Visual Practices

Now let us take a closer look at the example of the particular film, i.e. *Interstellar*. I chose this example because Benjamin Wright considers it an absolutely groundbreaking work for the development of Zimmer’s compositional technique. The soundtrack album, for which Zimmer received a Grammy Award, was released in 2014 and contains over thirty songs, the longest of which (titled “Murph”) is almost twelve minutes long (Zimmer 2014). The practice of giving titles to songs is, of course, of a programmatic nature, and subsequent tracks are related to specific scenes in the film, but the listener doesn’t deal here with the classic use of leitmotifs, in the same way as, for example, John Williams or Howard Shore (cf. Albrecht and Wöllner 2016, 155; Christopoulos 2012, 173–176). Interestingly, Nolan partially left the scenes taking place in outer space without the slightest sound or added motifs and themes with an exceptionally warm, lyrical, even danceable sound, which is an unusual feature in Zimmer’s work (but can also be a kind of reference to the cult film *The Odyssey Space: 2001* by Stanley Kubrick).

Many scenes in *Interstellar* open up room for the use of the regular technique of building musical sequences so favored by Zimmer. However, Nolan manipulates them accordingly. A very telling example is the scene in which the pilots of the Endurance spacecraft reach the first water-covered planet, where a time disruption occurs, transporting them twenty-three years into the future².

It becomes extremely clear here that Zimmer is not one of those film composers whose presence remains somewhat on the periphery of the film image. On the contrary, the music – previously composed for the film – clearly becomes part of the whole, on which image and sound seem to have an equal impact. A four-note motif, imitating water with an impressionistic shimmering sound, moves along with the movement of the camera on the cosmic sea, intensifies with the intermittent, trembling voice of Amelia (Anne Hathaway), and reaches its dynamic culmination when the camera's eye floats along a vertical line according to the stillness of the motionless wave. However, the acceleration of the tempo in the developing sequence, built on a repeating, looped motif, is not a simple imitation of the image of water. Its main goal is to convey the growing confusion of the characters trapped in time – even if within the shot itself the dense wall of sound (the climax of the sequence described by Benjamin Wright) corresponds on the visual level to a dense wall of water.

The aesthetics of musical narrative is not so much romantic as simply, in a broader sense, classically Hollywood, inherent in epic action cinema. The narrative potential of Zimmer's music seems to be fully released when a rescue operation by a robot takes place. Zimmer's stable, static sequence provides a counterpoint to the camera's wobbling motion, imitating hand-held shooting. In this aspect, we actually deal with a film counterpoint – situation in which music opposes the image – although on an emotional level it is, of course, classical accompaniment. We have practically the same technique of dealing by Nolan with Zimmer's score in one of the later scenes with a spinning space station³. It is worth noting, in addition, that the very motives and themes of Zimmer, although – as I already mentioned – exhibit certain characteristics of using of the leitmotifs, are in fact very similarly structured: they are based on the regular movement of seconds in both directions and duple metres, rhythmic structures are regular, blurring at climax of the sequence into a homogeneous vibrating wall of sounds.

Let us take a closer look at the next scene from the second part of the movie: the main character Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) fights with Mann (Matt Damon)

² Example: *Interstellar* – The Giant Wave Scene, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TF2nllCs9Qg&t=41s>, accessed: 15.10.2023.

³ *Interstellar* – Spinning Space Station Docking Scene, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxabLA7UQ9k>, accessed: 15.10.2023.

awakened from hibernation on the ice planet reached by the Endurance mission⁴.

There is another, characteristic of Nolan, way of using Zimmer's musical sequences to bind and seal cinematic narrative. Short theme, based on seconds and thirds, developed in a post-minimalistic way, combines two planes of reality: cosmic and terrestrial, in which we see Cooper's daughter, Murph, now adult, driving a car. Zimmer's poetics of a certain cool, pulsating anxiety is so universal that it merges non-conflictingly with both these images, although – as I mentioned – it fits especially well with dystopian empty, single-coloured spaces. Nolan avoids mixing the three elements of the soundtrack: the music is not intertwined or with the sounds of the world presented either with the dialogues. In the scenes on the ice planet, it is withdrawn to the background, even as it develops into an alienated, melancholic, cold theme on the keyboards. On the other hand, in the scenes which take place on Earth, it aggressively and dominantly fills the entire tight space. It gives us the impression that Murph's inner turmoil is much more emotionally emphasized than the fight scene itself. With an almost identical treatment of musical sequences, with using dynamics and texture to emphasize the parallelism of space, we deal in another moments of *Interstellar* – for example, in the initial scene, where Cooper and his children are chasing the airplane through the corn field⁵.

It is worth noting, however, that in the scenes in which the interactions between Cooper and his daughter are shown, this synchronization of space through musical sequences has additional symbolic meaning. Before leaving on the mission, Cooper gives his daughter a watch identical to his own. The watch is a symbol of the bond between people who love each other – a bond that remains permanent and unchanging beyond time and space. Thus, music, as a visible sign of the passage of time, becomes the director's best means of showing this bond.

4. Conclusion

Thus, looking at the ways in which the director cooperates with the composer and the techniques of using his "over-composed musical material leads us to an important conclusion. We see that the use of complex sound sequences and the construction of a musical narrative in order to connect various small, seemingly insignificant elements of the image in the unstable eye of the camera have both technical and metaphysical implications for the creators. It realizes not only the

⁴ *Interstellar* – Ice Planet Fight Scene, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWLKsMmq320>, accessed: 15.10.2023.

⁵ *Interstellar* – Cornfield Drone Chase Scene, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmz9IMP6aQU>, accessed: 15.04.2022.

part of the picture that talks about complex space-time issues, but also emphasizes the special metaphysical dimension of Nolan's story – a story about complicated interpersonal relationships and their fragility, but also extraordinary power. It also confirms the unique unity of the director's aesthetic vision with the properties of the composer's musical poetics, making the Nolan-Zimmer duo the only one of its kind in Hollywood.

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