

## **Silent Strategies: Audiovisual Functions of the Music for Silent Cinema**

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### *Abstract*

Studies on film music have often overlooked the difference between the audiovisual strategies of sound cinema and the ones of silent cinema. However, there are at least two audiovisual strategies which are peculiar to silent cinema: a ›bridge‹ function born from the improvisational nature of silent film music practice, and a ›interdiegetic‹ function, which takes advantage of the impossibility to hear the sounds of the world seemingly positioned beyond the silver screen. This paper comments upon these two strategies. A succinct review of the literature that already acknowledged the existence of these strategies, mostly in an indirect way (from Ricciotto Canudo to Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, Edith Lang and George West) leads to the discussion of examples from historical musical illustrations of silents (e.g. one by Hugo Riesenfeld for Cecil B. DeMille's *CARMEN*, USA 1915) as well as from contemporary ones (e. g. Neil Brand's 2004 music for *THE CAT AND THE CANARY*, USA 1927, Paul Leni). The change in reception conditions of silent films between the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present days is certainly relevant; however, this paper does not aim to offer an insight into cultural-historical context and reception, but to point out how the silent film language invited composers in different periods to develop a set of audiovisual strategies that are identical on a theoretical level.

The renaissance of silent film studies that started more than thirty years ago<sup>1</sup> had only a minor impact on film music theory. Silent film music has often been regarded just as a vehicle of a ›primitive‹ audiovisual aesthetic, waiting for the ›evolution‹ into sound film music (Lissa 1965, 98). As Tom Gunning wrote this is »a biological and teleological logic« (Gunning 1996, 71) that conceives the later styles of cinema as »a sort of natural norm that early cinema envisioned but was not yet capable of realizing because of technological and economic immaturity and a natural need for a period of development guided by a method of trial and error« (Gunning, 1996, 71-72). However, whereas contemporary studies about the visual aspects of cinema consistently dismiss such a logic, following the work of theorists such as Gunning, André Gaudreault, Richard Abel, Noël Burch and Charles Musser, the field of film music studies is still indulging in this old perspective. At least, Rick Altman said in 2004 that »[i]t is time to include sound in silent cinema's historiographical revival« (Altman 2004, 9); however, no one spoke about such a revival in the studies about theory and aesthetics of silent film music.

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<sup>1</sup> The main events that marked the beginning of this renaissance were the 1978 FIAF international conference *Cinema 1900-1906* and the presentation of Kevin Brownlow's reconstruction of Abel Gance's *NAPOLÉON* (France, 1927), in two versions. The first one, produced by the British Film Institute and by the Images Film Archives in association with Thames Television, had a projection speed of 20 frames per second (fps) and a new original score by Carl Davis; it had its debut at the Telluride Film Festival in September 1979, and it was then reprised on November 30, 1980 at the London Film Festival. The second version had a projection speed of 24 fps and music by Carmine Coppola; it debuted at the Radio City Music Hall in New York in January 1981. See Brownlow 1981; Holman/Gaudreault 1982; Carl Davis in Brand 1998, p. 93.

### *1. Historical descriptions of audiovisual strategies specific to silent films*

The present instruments of film music theory surely allow to delve deeper into the field of the music for silent films. It is true that many audiovisual strategies are shared between silent and sound cinema. However, the different nature of the two kinds of audiovisual entertainment gives profoundly different meanings to strategies which seem to be identical only on a superficial level.

Two peculiar audiovisual strategies will be discussed here: a ›bridge‹ function, born from the improvisational roots of silent film music practice (which in its maturity relied more on compilation, though, while improvisation itself was based on a sort of extemporaneous ›compilation‹ of a known musical repertoire), and an ›interdiegetic‹ function, which takes advantage of the impossibility to hear the sounds of the world seemingly positioned beyond the silver screen. Both these strategies have a common purpose: to create unity in the discourse of the images. They seem to respond to a necessity to counterbalance the ›fragmentary‹ aspect of the spectacle which, even before the advent of the classic style of montage, was a primary concern for filmmakers and audiences. Cinema was fragmentary even in the age of the ›single-shot‹ films (approximately 1895-1903), because it selected a portion of the visual space. The various and notorious accounts of peasants scared to death by the vision of heads floating in the dark of the cinema hall could be remembered as funny yet meaningful evidence of this problem.

My exploration starts from a succinct review of the historical literature that already acknowledged the existence of these strategies, mostly in an indirect way. Examples of these strategies will be given by quoting historical

musical illustrations of silents as well as contemporary ones, which, notwithstanding the relevant differences in the way silent cinema is today received and understood by audiences, still invite composers to develop audiovisual devices which seem identical to the ones used by historical composers, on a theoretical level.

It is true that, especially during the early period (1895 – ca. 1907), film music did not spoil the audience with refined examples of audiovisual interactions. Even if the popular story of the birth of film music<sup>2</sup> – because of the necessity to hide the noise coming from the Geneva drive mechanism and the sprockets of the projector – is today regarded just as a legend (Simeon 1995, 18-19), many accounts report how often music stayed in the cinema hall just to entertain the ear, without paying much attention to the moving images. In a 1913 editorial of the monthly magazine *The Metronome*, a cinema pianist from London admitted that some of his colleagues would »simply strum a waltz or rag-time through, and go on to the end of it, whether people in the pictures are dying or marrying [...]« (Anderson 2004, 175).<sup>3</sup> Actually, many of the venues where cinema was screened during the silent age could not afford high-level professionals at the piano or holding the baton (Simeon, 1995, 117), even during the ›maturity‹ of the silents, when big cities in Europe and, especially, in America, hosted deluxe musical presentations in extravagantly baroque movie palaces (Beynon 1921, 13; Hampton 1970 [1931], 172; Herzog 1981, 15; Anderson 1988, xv-xxvi). While these expensive presentations often relied upon original compositions or lush and eccentric compilations of

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<sup>2</sup> The work that is at the origin of the diffusion of this legend is London, 1970 [1936], 28.

<sup>3</sup> Development of the Picture-Pianist. In: *The Metronome* 29:7 (July 1913).

staples from the symphonic repertory (Cavalcanti 1939, 100; Anderson 1988, xxiv-xxv), as was the case at the Regent, Strand and Capitol theatres in New York, the routine in the smaller centers consisted of compilations of piano pieces (on the basis of repertoires or cue sheets), or of free improvisation, which did not mean free extemporaneous creation of music but, more likely an extemporaneous assemblage of pieces from a certain musician's repertoire. When the word ›improvisation‹ is used to speak about the silent film music practice, it should always be understood with the meaning explained by Sergio Miceli (as it is in this article):

Everyone relied upon their own repertoire, reading the music or playing by heart, with little and more or less questionable adjustments to the film. So it should not be excluded that the definition [of improvisation], especially when used by a musician, was used as a reference more to the etymological root than to the musical practice, identifying thus a performance staged with an improvisational mindset, that is to say without preliminary preparation. (Miceli, 2009, 40)

Witnessing the prevalence of this kind of ›improvisational‹ practices, which did not possess the ability to relate to the images in a precise way, several early theorists were induced to underline how film music did not really have any further function beyond the creation of a distraction from the otherwise unreal silence of the spectacle. In 1913, Ernst Bloch argued that the black-and-white world shown by cinema had the »lugubrious appearance of a

solar eclipse«<sup>4</sup> (quoted after Simeon 1995, 19): it was a mute reality, deprived of many sensorial perceptions. The music, in his opinion, was there just to »provide a substitution of all the missing senses« (ibid.). Later, Béla Balázs indirectly agreed with Bloch, when he said that

a great part of the audience, in the cinema hall, is not aware of the music; its existence is acknowledged just when it stops. From a psychological point of view, this phenomenon can be explained as follows: the human being does not normally perceive the reality with a single sense. The things we only see, we only hear, etc., do not have the aspect of a three-dimensional reality (Balázs, 1975 [1948], 328; my translation).

So, for the sake of these basic purposes a continuous improvisation, even if not conceived carefully to match or illustrate the images, would have been enough. However, improvisation in the literal sense might not be the only factor responsible for comments such as the ones by Bloch and Balázs. In fact, the influence of improvisational practices also on the other musical routines of silent cinema was a relevant one: so, it was possible to perceive a certain ›detachment‹ between music and images also in, for example, written compilations. Even the original scores that started to be composed since 1905-1908<sup>5</sup> and flourished during the 1920s retained some traits of

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<sup>4</sup> Bloch, Ernst (1913) Über die Melodie im Kino. In: *Die Argonauten* (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Among the first films to be paired with original scores were LA MALIA DELL'ORO (Italy 1905, Gaston Velle), NOZZE TRAGICHE (Italy 1906, Gaston Velle) and ROMANZO DI UN PIERROT (Italy 1906, Mario Caserini, Filoteo Alberini, Dante Santoni), with music by Romolo Bacchini, that preceded Camille Saint-Saëns' work

improvisation. The fact that silent film music was prevalently a matter of live performances reinforced the connection with improvisation. As Philip Alperson argued,

musical improvisation can be appreciated for some of the same values as can the action of musical performances in the conventional musical situation. In particular, one can appreciate the improviser's sensitivity, lyricism and general virtuosity as an instrumentalist or vocalist which we associate with the narrower sense of musical performance (Alperson 1984, 23).

This means that a performance always offers the musician a certain degree of freedom, freedom that could be used to add something to the information contained in the written score which is being played. However, this is just the weaker bond between written silent film music and the practice of improvisation. In fact, to improvise for the silents, as mentioned before, usually involved a creative assemblage of pieces, generated from the memory and sensibility of the player while the film was screened. The use of fragments from a repertory is absolutely not in contrast with the idea of improvisation: as Alperson noticed, »learning to improvise is often, in large part, learning to master that tradition. Jazz musicians, for example, frequently begin to learn to improvise by listening to and copying [...] other players' musical phrases [...] many of which have long ago attained the status of formulae [...]« (Alperson 1984, 22). The key feature of this basic

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for *L'ASSASSINAT DU DUC DE GUISE* (France 1908, André Calmettes, Charles Le Bargy). See Redi 1999, 54.

aspect of the improvisation is thus repetition: of a phrase, of a melody or of a longer formula within a piece, or in different pieces referring to similar situations.

It is possible to ascertain how – even in the most sophisticated scores for the silents – repetitions and formulas remain relevant features: This is the stronger link between the written practice of silent film music and improvisation, a link that involves the musical material at a deeper level.

This independence of silent film music from the on-screen action due to live performance and improvisational features was embedded in the discourse of other early silent film music theorists. Many of the discussions reaffirmed that, at the core, music for silent films is not something that plays *with* the film, but, in a sense, *next to* the film. However, together with this largely diffused opinion, an acknowledgement that silent film music could play a more active part in the cinematographic communication started to spread. The Italian critic and theorist Sebastiano Arturo Luciani wrote in 1919:

The music that was played during silent film screenings was of two kinds: it included suites of marches and dances, or pieces with a dramatic lyricism, usually taken from famous operas. The first kind had a rhythmic function, the second one was expressive. The two kinds were alternatively used, whether the action had a dynamic or pathetic character, that is to say whether the music should unify a group of scenes or should express a particular feeling in a certain scene. (Luciani 1980 [1919], 356; my translation)



Luciani recognized at least two active relations between music and moving images. However, he added:

All the compositions especially written for cinema screening still have not had any success and their role was not different from the one of the music improvised by the anonymous pianist we usually listen to: to fill the void that the silent vision would produce. (Luciani 1980 [1919], 357)

This idea is reflected in Luciani's definition of the so-called ›rhythmic‹ function: He does not say that the music follows the visual rhythms of the film, but rather that it unifies a group of scenes. He was probably imagining audiovisual situations in which a series of similarly paced actions share common musical ideas conveying a similar pace, without precise connections with the details of what was happening on screen. However, even if Luciani considered this feature as a hindrance to cinema, it is evident that he implicitly admits how music could enhance the perception of a film, at least by underlining a relevant visual characteristic (the rhythm) and creating a stronger sense of unification for a section of the spectacle. The result is already an active audiovisual relationship, one in which music is not just an adjunct to the image, but a contributive element.

Other voices in the early debates about film music agreed with Luciani in testifying how even the most generic musical choices could benefit silent film presentations, often by aiding the unity of the visual discourse. That happened also in respect to the other audiovisual function identified by Luciani, the ›expressive one‹. The way in which the music conveyed

consistent moods and emotions through different situations on screen could also serve as a means of expressive unification. The 1920 manual *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures* by Edith Lang and George West observed how the nature of the spectacle (based on performance and with improvised features) would not allow constant close correspondence between image and sound. The music was required to be ›generic‹, and to use this necessity to become a unifier of different visual elements. Even if the authors recommended a »close and minute following of every phase of the photo play« (Lang/West 1920, 5), they had to admit that »[m]usic, it may as well be stated, cannot always shift as quickly as will the facial play of the actor in some scene or other. It will then behoove the player to give the keynote of the situation with illustrative strains« (Lang/West 1920, 5).

This quotation introduced a key word in silent film music practice: illustration. As it was used in one of the most authoritative historical texts about silent film music theory and practice, the 1927 *Allgemeines Handbuch der Filmmusik* by Hans Erdmann, Giuseppe Becce and Ludwig Brav, it perfectly identified the two conflicting sides of this art. To illustrate a film with music meant a dependence of the music on the meanings of the images. However, it also meant that, within this dependence, the music was asked just to draw an overall sketch of the rhythmic or expressive content of the images. This is demonstrated by the structure of the *Allgemeines Handbuch der Filmmusik* itself, which subdivides its repertoire into categories marked by generic labels alluding to moods or situations, which could occur in any film. This choice guaranteed a maximum of versatility to the *Handbuch*. However, it also allowed musicians to stick with generic image-sound relationships, with no urge to introduce more detailed and specific interactions. It might be possible to describe the musical illustration in this way: If the precision of some audiovisual relationships in sound

cinema can be compared to the accurateness of a still life or a portrait, the overall audiovisual bond in silent cinema has frequently the expressive freedom of a drawing done by memory. This is a key distinction between the aesthetic of silent film music and the one of music for sound films; however, this is also the aspect of silent film music that was most misunderstood. As Ennio Simeon remarked, even Erdmann, Becce and Brav were induced to overlook the creative potential of the audiovisual setting of silent film because of a conception of the musical illustration that was too rigid. They believed that because of the unavailability of a mechanical and fixed music-image synchronization, even written scores could just hope for a role as »author's illustration« (Becce/Brav/Erdmann 1927, I, 6). Because of that, Simeon commented:

The limit of Erdmann and Becce's setting is [...] never going beyond the basic assumption which says that silent film music has always and only to illustrate: the prohibition, even at a theoretical level, of an active and interactive role of the sound element is the proof of a belief in a subordination of music to film and of a confinement of it in a role of subsidiary art, a belief which would not fail to retain an influence for decades and that it is still not completely gone (Simeon, 1987, 76; my translation).

Instead, the ›freedom‹ of the musical element in silent cinema does not imply its complete passivity. The fact that the music can relate to the film by freely spreading over the images without too strict obligations to the

rhythms and the moods is an element of peculiar richness. French critic Arthur Hoérée wrote in 1934 a few meaningful considerations about this topic and imagined an example:

Music is based on continuity, on the developments of themes, following rules of its own. The film, on the contrary, has to continuously break this continuity [...]. It works by contrast, while the music works by extension. [...] Let's imagine an episode where on one side there is an aviator caught in a storm and on another side, as to underline the contrast, there is his family happily preparing for his return. If the director opposes eight times these elements, as to stress the pathetic content of the situation, the music should alternatively declaim *The King of the Elves* by Schubert and murmur the *Pastoral Symphony* by Beethoven... It is evident how it is necessary to seek a mixed solution [...]. It should be sufficient to conceive a piece which is generally agitated [...] in order to comment upon the struggle between the aviator and the raging elements. The violins, however, could sing a happy theme combined with the rest of the polyphony. Such a music could accompany the two series of sights [...] and combine them in a sort of synthesis. The simultaneity of the sound is here more correct than the film, as the two groups of images show simultaneous situations. So the music fixes the conventional character of the film, it completes it or, better, it explains it (Hoérée, 1934, 46-47; my translation).

By following these suggestions, it is possible to argue that when the lack of tight bonds between music and the moving image was used with creative purpose, it paved the way for effective audiovisual settings that sound film could not exactly replicate because of its different audiovisual nature (e. g. because of the creation of an expectation in the audience for diegetic or nondiegetic sounds, using Claudia Gorbman's terminology [Gorbman 1987, 22-26]: a kind of expectation which was not part of the experience of the silent film moviegoer).

## *2. The ›bridge‹ function*

It seems suitable to refer to the first audiovisual relationship discussed here as ›bridge function‹. It is directly related to the capability of silent film music to freely expand over different sequences. At the origin of the ›bridge‹ function there surely are musical routines related to improvisation, and to improvisation done with a lack of attention or accuracy in particular. Before becoming a conscious audiovisual strategy, the ›bridge‹ function could often have been the result of the work of a lazy or tired pianist, who kept repeating a certain musical mood or episode without concern for the images on the screen.

In fact, evidence of the presence of a ›bridge‹ function in cue sheets, compilations or full scores is actually the repetition. The prevalent dramaturgical model appears as follows: a certain visual or narrative element, with some form of relevance, triggers a musical episode which is pertinent to the content of the scene. For instance, if there is a sad scene, a sad music starts. At the beginning, the audiovisual setting is quite

conventional. It could be identified with one of the two basic functions that Sergio Miceli identifies in film music as a whole, that is to say: accompaniment and commentary (Miceli 2009, 632-635), which more or less coincide with the two options suggested by Luciani, the »rhythmic function« and the »expressive function«. As the film continues, however, the on-screen action distances itself from the musical element. The music keeps repeating the same idea (a theme, or also a little piece with a simple structure), with no or little developments or variations. The monotony of the sound retains thus a memory of the visual element from which the repetitions started, until a new relevant feature of the film requires a change in the music.

Many pertinent examples of that could be quoted from Hugo Riesenfeld's illustration for *CARMEN* (USA 1915, Cecil B. DeMille), reconstructed in 1991 by Gillian B. Anderson and based on music by Georges Bizet (Anderson 2005).<sup>6</sup> One instance is the sequence of the fight between José and lieutenant Zuniga, a sequence that culminates in the killing of the latter. When José and Carmen enter a tavern, a place where they are going to meet the smugglers and Zuniga, the music introduces the *Danse bohémienne* from the Suite *La jolie fille de Perth*. The apparent function is the one of a comment (or an expressive function): the graceful mood of the melody is connected with the romantic undertones of the entrance of José and Carmen together. These undertones will be the cause of Zuniga's scorn and of the

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<sup>6</sup> The musical material of this illustration mainly comes from the two symphonic suites from the opera by Georges Bizet. However, there are also some arias (*L'amour est enfant de Bohème*, *La fleur que vous m'avez donnée*), which Anderson included because some documents testify the presence of singers during the first screenings of the film. However, there are also quotations from other works by Bizet, like the two *Suites* from *L'Arlésienne* and the *Suite* from the opera *La jolie fille de Perth*.

following fight: notwithstanding this, the violence and the pace of the events, let alone the sudden mutation of the mood, do not compel the music to change. Instead, the score asks for an almost obsessive repetition of a long episode from the *Danse*, featuring a progressive enrichment of the orchestration and a modulation from B minor to F sharp major, two elements whose potential connection with the scene (they could vaguely hint at the increase of tension during the fight) is negated by the repetition that restores the initial aspect of the music. When the action leaves the tavern, the music comes to an end: the apparition of a shot of Carmen approaching a river is then commented by the famous *Habanera* from the original opera. So, the whole sequence appears ›bridged‹ together by a music that constantly reminds the audience of the reason for the fight, more than commenting upon the fight itself.

It is interesting to note how in *CARMEN* some of the elements that most frequently bring a ›bridge‹ function to an end are intertitles with a descriptive purpose, signaling a shift from one location to another. In the principal document that Anderson used for her reconstruction – the piano score from Riesenfeld’s illustration preserved by the Library of Congress – the music is often accompanied by cues that explicitly ask for the repetition of a certain episode until the apparition of a certain intertitle, using the formula: »Play until Title« (Anderson 2005, 30).

Not every use of the ›bridge‹ function is an effective one. It is in fact easy for this function to lose its meaning and return to its origin of passive and inaccurate repetition. The reason of that lies in the fact that the ›bridge‹ function can be recognized only if framed between two other audiovisual functions. It is possible to argue that a ›bridge‹ function can only be defined by the presence and the relationship with other audiovisual settings. If the

beginning and the ending of the ›bridge‹ do not convey a sufficient audiovisual meaning, the purpose of the ›bridge‹ itself becomes inconsistent. This is what differentiates the ›bridge‹ function of silent cinema from the ›continuity‹ function described by Gorbman and others in their discussion of sound films (Gorbman 1987, 25-26). The continuity function has always an explainable narrative purpose and it can use the diegetic/nondiegetic dialectic. It can ›bridge‹ together »two spatially discontinuous shots«, or it can serve as a »depth cue« by letting the same diegetic music play louder or softer according to the different supposed distance between the spectator and the sound source. But those are just two basic examples from a wide set of occurrences, where the continuity function is always »a nonrepresentational provider of relations, among all levels of the narration«. (Gorbman 1987, 26). Instead, the silent film ›bridge‹ function is not related to the narrative. It can sometimes have an impact on the narration, thus creating a continuity function, but this is a side effect. At its core, the ›bridge‹ function is a connecting tissue between two other audiovisual functions, which occur at a relevant temporal distance from each other. So, it is a way to fill the gap between two meaningful associations between image and music, disregarding the actual narrative content of the scenes framed by those functions. More than a function, this is a configuration of functions. It is necessary to keep in mind this when analyzing silent film music, in order to avoid confusion between this weak and relative, yet meaningful configuration, and mere cases of unconsidered and accidental repetitions. In sound cinema, the bridge function could theoretically be used, but it actually lost its purpose, as it became possible to stop the music and continue the audiovisual interactions with other sound configuration, or to create a shift between the diegetic and nondiegetic levels of sound.



### *3. The ›interdiegetic‹ function*

A second instance of an audiovisual strategy that is specific to silent film can be identified by considering precisely the relationship that exists between the music and the narrative world of the film: the diegesis (Genette 1976 [1972], 75; Genette 1987 [1983], 12). In order to develop this topic, it is first of all necessary to recall the system of »levels« of film music, as explained by Sergio Miceli.

Miceli identified three levels of interaction between music and film narrative. The first one is the internal level: the music is »produced in the narrative context of the scene/sequence« (Miceli 2009, 643). It corresponds to an audiovisual setting that is called »diegetic music« by other authors, for example Claudia Gorbman (1987, 22-26) or David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2003 [1979]). Basically, it is possible to say that every intervention of the music that can be perceived by both the audience and the characters on-screen belongs to the internal level.

The external level proposes a setting where the music is audible by the audience, but not by the characters (Miceli 2009, 649). Miceli argued that there could be two occurrences of this level: a non-critical one and a critical one. The non-critical external level is identified when »a musical event [...] just confirms and reinforces the expressive content of the episode« (Miceli, 2009 651). The critical one, instead, »comments upon the episode of the film by using contrasting ideas and by generating a semantic short circuit which denies the expectations of the spectator and asks for an active role, that is to say an interpretative role« (Miceli 2009, 652). Even if it is possible to conceive a critical external level in silent film music, it seems that it did not belong to the historical practice. The illustrative basis of silent film

music usually asked for parallelism and mutual reinforcement of music and image. Counter-examples were rather individual incidents than expressive ideas: as Stephen Bottomore (1995, 120) recalled, »sometimes [the pianists] misjudged the mood badly, and one correspondent complained in 1912: ›I find nothing more irritating than to have to listen to variations on *Ginger, you're barmy* when the operator is showing a serious dramatic film«.

Miceli also talks about a mediate level. This includes all the instances where the music is accessible within the diegesis, but is not equally audible by all the characters. It includes music perceived through memory of a previous musical event on the internal level, that is, so to say, shared with the audience (Miceli 2009, 654-657). Miceli uses this classification to speak about film music in general; however, it seems difficult to completely adapt it to silent film music. In fact, one of these levels cannot be found in silent cinema: the internal level.

The central point of this problem lies within what Zofia Lissa already observed in 1965: »In silent film, the music [...] was an instrument connected with the image itself in a purely external way« (99-100; my translation). In sound cinema, the definitive and unchangeable recording of an acoustic event in synchrony with a visual event generates the illusion of the internal level. The sound ›belongs‹ to the images because of a threefold bind: qualitative, temporal and mechanical. In fact, the link between the two elements does not depend only on the quality and the intensity of the sound, which is consistent with the expectations of the audience in relation to a certain visual feature, or by the simultaneous occurrence. The two elements are also materially related, because of their respective positions on the soundtrack and on the visual track of the film. This threefold bind makes the audiovisual relationship an obligatory one. In silent film, instead, the

mechanical association is not a rule: usually, the film contains only a visual track (the sequence of frames). The qualitative association is moreover used with great freedom: a visual event could be associated with sounds with an expressive meaning, which can be achieved even if those sound effects or musical elements are not perfect simulations of sounds heard in everyday life. Finally, the synchrony could be used also in silent cinema, but it is not compulsory. For example, the image of a firing cannon could be accompanied by absolute silence: If this choice is adequately prepared and it is pertinent with the sense of that particular sequence, the audience would accept it as an expressive feature and not as if something is ›missing‹. This could of course also happen in sound cinema; however, in sound cinema the silence would be much more difficult to accept. This is because of the implicit agreement between the director and the audience. In sound cinema, the audience expects to be able to hear the sounds that come from the narrative world; the inaccessibility is an exception. The central reason behind this is the fact that in sound cinema, the most important acoustic element is the human voice. As Michel Chion said, the cinema after 1927 became vococentric: the voice of the actor, which comes from the world of the film, must be constantly perceivable (Chion 1982, 15). In silent cinema, the exact opposite is true: the audience does not expect to be able to hear the sounds coming from within the film. While in sound cinema the triple bind (qualitative, temporal and mechanical) is usually an obligatory one, in silent cinema it is a choice.

On top of that, in silent cinema there is no fixed hierarchy of importance between acoustic events. The human voice, when used, is just a sound among the others. It could become extremely relevant in practices of silent film accompaniment based on lecturers and readers (Altman 2004, 55-72) or on more refined performances of actors, as in the case of the Japanese *benshi*. It was not, however, the dominant sound by rule.

It is possible to comment upon this by considering a short sequence from the film *THE CAT AND THE CANARY* (USA 1927, Paul Leni) and from its musical score written by British composer Neil Brand in 2004. The use of examples from contemporary authors is justified here by the purpose of the present article, which does not intend to develop a discourse about the change in the reception of audiovisual strategies from historical audiences to the present day's public. The intent here is instead to point out how both historical and contemporary musical illustrations of silents take equally advantage of the absence of diegetic sound to propose audiovisual settings based upon an apparent diegetic ambiguity.

In the film by Leni, while the lawyer and the housemaid Mammy Pleasant are arguing inside a house, the detail of an unknown hand knocking at the door is superimposed to the frame. The two characters react to this, so it is implied that they heard the knocking. The audience, on the other hand, is not supposed to hear anything. A causal relationship between the events derives from the visual superimposition alone. Neil Brand, however, decided to join the image of the hand knocking with the rhythmic sound of a kettle drum. That was an expressive choice, evidently aimed to reinforce the already evident meaning of the images. Even without the synchrony with the kettle drum, the sequence would have been perfectly understood by the spectator. In sound cinema, instead, the silence or the absence of synchrony would

have added a sense of strangeness and unreality to the sequence. On the contrary, the presence of this synchrony in a silent film, precisely because it was not strictly necessary, becomes a way to emphasize the expressive meaning of the image: in this case, the image of the hand becomes particularly ominous and unsettling.

Even with such a short example, it is possible to understand how silent cinema learnt to take advantage of the absence of a diegetic level of the sound. One of the most interesting results of this premise is a function that could be called ›interdiegetic‹, or ›interlevel‹ function. It is a function that uses the freedom of association between music and image in silent cinema to create situations in which the music is simultaneously extraneous and in relation to the diegesis, in a way different from sound cinema because of the different basis of its communicative agreement with the audience. The term ›metadiegetic‹ could be used as well; however, it has already come into use in film music analysis through Gorbman's work on narrative film music, with the sense of a sound event expressing subjective perceptions (Gorbman 1987, 26). In the present article, the meaning of ›metadiegetic‹ would instead be closer to its original sense in Gérard Genette's theory of narrativity, where it identifies a situation in which a character narrates a story within the main story, creating a frame where different levels of diegesis are convoluted (Genette 1976 [1972], 276). To avoid confusion, the term ›interdiegetic‹ will be used.

The basic setting of the interdiegetic function is the following: the music is pertinent to more than one of the three levels identified by Miceli at the same time. Each one of these levels is equally related with the music: there is no predominant level. Also, within each level it could relate simultaneously to multiple visual features, without creating distraction or awkwardness in the spectator.

As an example, it could be useful to quote a fragment from Detlev Glanert's reconstruction of Giuseppe Becce's illustration for *DER LETZTE MANN* (Germany 1924, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau), which was published on DVD by Transit Film in 2003. After having lost his job as chief doorman, Emil Jannings returns to his house, drunk. While his neighbor, the woman who will spread the news of the old man's misfortune, enters his apartment, Jannings takes his whistle, one of the symbols of his former role, and blows it. This event is synchronized with a high-pitched trill of a solo piccolo flute. This trill is simultaneously part of two levels: it hints to the internal level (it imitates the sound of the whistle), but it is also part of a musical discourse of external level: a discourse that precedes and follows the trill, and which is logically and aesthetically connected with it. The music, before the trill, is reaffirming the fifth grade of the tonality of C major and stops on a chord (G-B-D), which has a D as its highest note. The trill is, coherently, based on a D. After the trill, the music makes a brief cadenza and regularly moves to C major. But this sequence is also noteworthy because of the ambivalence of the music within the apparent internal level: thanks to the editing, which alternates a shot of Jannings with the image of the neighbor laughing, the trill feels like a simultaneous allusion to the whistle and to the shrill laughter of the woman. Cause and effect of two actions collapse into a single acoustic event and join in the grotesque, the one who is laughable and the one who laughs, believing to be superior.

The sequence continues with the sound of the piccolo, imitating the whistle and the laughter, mixed with the orchestral accompaniment. Soon after that, Murnau introduces a new event with an important musical potential. Two drunk men stop under the window of Jannings' apartment, and one of them starts playing a trumpet. The man is interrupted twice by his companion. In these instances, Glanert's reconstruction uses a close synchronization with the pace of the action: we can hear the sound of a solo trumpet just when we see the character playing it. Also, the way the sound is intonated and the way in which it stops are quite consistent with the situation that is being enacted. This really seems a simulation of an internal level; however, the illusion is negated by the fact that we are not able to hear the voices of the two men, which visibly start to speak as soon as the trumpet player stops. The partial allusion to the internal level rendered by the music, in the silent context, stands out as an expressive choice; in a sound film, instead, it would have been the absence of the voices which would have unsettled the spectator the most. Moreover, in case of a real silent film screening, the audience would be constantly conscious of the presence of a real trumpet player in the cinema hall.

When finally the man with the trumpet manages to start playing a full piece, the sound of an orchestra appears as a discreet accompaniment to the main melody. The behavior of Jannings at the window clearly communicates that he is actually listening to the sound of the trumpet: however, the musical dramaturgy also implies that he could not be listening to the same sound the audience is hearing, because in the world of the film there could not be an orchestra at that moment and in that place. In a sound film, this would have been a solution hinting maybe to a mediate level (Jannings hears a trumpet melody which the audience hears as well, but his imagination »completes« it with the sound of an orchestra). In a silent film, it is not possible to clearly

classify the level of this musical episode, because we cannot know if the melody Jannings is hearing is exactly the same melody which is being played in the world of the film. So, it could certainly be a music staying in the mediate level, but it could also be a music from the external level, at the same time.

Another instance can be found in a musical illustration composed in 1992 by Richard McLaughlin for Jean Grémillon's *GARDIENS DE PHARE* (France 1929).<sup>7</sup> The film deals with a lighthouse guardian and his son, who have to live isolated on an island for a long time. However, the son has been infected with rabies by a dog bite just before their isolation begins. He slowly slips into a feverish state which leads him to bursts of violence and hallucinations.

A sequence of the film shows the old guardian remembering a country festival. The audience can see a scene where young men and women dance while some musicians play violins and drums. McLaughlin coherently decided to use the instruments suggested by the images to illustrate the situation. However, it is not possible to say that this music is part of the internal level. Even if the timbres of the instruments are correct, in fact, there is no synchrony between the music and the image: the blows from the drums do not follow the movements on screen, as well as it is clear how the violins in the film are not playing what the audience can hear. So, the music is separated from the diegesis, but it is related with it at the same time. However, the music also belongs to the mediate level. In fact, it appears inside a memory of the old guardian, and it appropriately continues when

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<sup>7</sup> This illustration was presented at the International Silent Film Festival Le Giornate del Cinema Muto on October 18, 1992. It was recorded on a videotape which is property of the Cineteca del Friuli in Gemona, Italy.



the film reintroduces the character in his present situation, at the lighthouse. So, the music can pass simultaneously through the various levels, ›embracing‹ them from a privileged position. It becomes in a sense, an ubiquitous entity.

This ubiquity of the music is different from the kind that can be found in sound cinema, because of the already cited ›agreement‹ between the director and the audience: the inner acoustic world of the film must always be accessible. An example of an attempt of ›ubiquity‹ in sound cinema mentioned by Miceli (2009, 662-663) involves a sequence from Milos Forman's *AMADEUS* (1984): as Mozart dictates his *Requiem* to Antonio Salieri, we hear the materialization of his creative thoughts in the form of a full orchestral rendering. This appears as a mediate level, which, however, seems to suddenly shift to an external level as the director cuts to the coach who is bringing back Mozart's wife to his dying husband. But actually, the music is always positioned in a mediate level by the constant presence of an element from the internal level. The feeble singing of the ill Mozart, which the orchestra transforms into the finished *Requiem*, clarifies the role of the music proposed by soundtrack, making it a projection of the composer's mind. In a silent film, there would not have been such a reference. The music would always have belonged to more than one level simultaneously: in this case possibly the mediate and the external one.

#### *4. Conclusion*

The ›bridge‹ and the ›interdiegetic‹ functions have been described as to suggest an integration to the usual schemes of analysis of film music, in

order to provide theoretical devices which would be more fitting to the necessities of the audiovisual language of silent cinema. This kind of suggestion aims to integrate the already existing theoretical schemes, and not to substitute them or to deny their effectiveness. In fact, one of the most urgent problems film music theory has to face is surely the absence of a dialogue between the many languages of film music analysis, because of a proliferation of classifications of functions which often overlap. This is a problem that was evidenced as early as 1981 by Hansjörg Pauli, who criticized Lissa's description of eleven audiovisual functions calling it the consequence of a »Systematisierungswut« (Pauli 1981, 187), that is to say a »fury in systematizing«. The ›bridge‹ and ›interdiegetic‹ functions, however, should not be regarded just as two more theoretical categories. Instead, they are material indicators of the nature of the audiovisual setting of silent cinema. In this regard, and as a final consideration, it could be said that a description of the audiovisual functions of silent cinema might lead towards a definition of silent cinema as a whole. It seems in fact difficult to find relevant differences between silent and sound cinema, if the comparison is made just on the basis of the visual language. Early cinema certainly displayed some peculiar visual traits (like the fixed camera and the theatrical setting) that make it immediately recognizable. The presence of the intertitles is as well often considered a typical feature of silent cinema. However, these elements are not indispensable. In fact, it is possible to conceive a sound film with theatrical setting and fixed camera; also, there have been silent films, which used only a few or no intertitles (DER LETZTE MANN was among them). On the other hand, it is as well possible to imagine a silent film created with the contemporary cinema technologies or aesthetics: it might be sufficient to cite Aki Kaurismäki's JUHA (Finland 1999), which had a recorded soundtrack, but was nonetheless silent mostly

because of his use of the human voice as a sound among sounds, with no central role, and because of the presence of a score by Anssi Tikanmäki which was prepared to be performed live during the film screening. Therefore, it could be suggested here that, more than the images, it was the presentation of sound and music, which identified the true nature of silent cinema as a communicative device. The performance and improvisation (which are the causes behind the ›bridge‹ function) gave a distinct uniqueness to each screening. Silent films imposed conditions to the cinema hall that were similar to those of a concert hall which, as Tomlinson Holman argued, »is a space for production [...] [while] a movie theater is a space for reproduction« (Lo Brutto 1994, 204). In silent cinema, every new screening could be legitimately different from the precedent and the differences could also be dramatic, especially in the case of improvisations. Along with that, the ›interdiegetic‹ function reveals how the music and the sound did not have to comply any obligation towards a fixed acoustic hierarchy with the human voice at the top, and also how the sound could fulfill the expectations of the audience without adhering to a strict division between the diegetic levels or to a synchrony mimicking the perception of sound experiences in everyday life. Even without trying to propose a final definition of silent cinema, which would go beyond the scope of this work, the study of the ›bridge‹ and ›interdiegetic‹ function could at least invite to confirm, once more, that silent cinema really was not a precursor or a less developed ancestor to sound cinema. It was, and still is, a different instance of audiovisual entertainment: *another cinema*.

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