The ›song-ification‹ of the Tannhäuser Overture in Lars von Trier's EPIDEMIC

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»*Why do you use Wagner in the fiction sequences?* Because it's a very bombastic music. To me it perfectly corresponds to film music« (Lumholdt 2003, 62).[1] This short statement is one of the most pertinent comments Lars von Trier made about the role of sound design in EPIDEMIC (DK 1987, Lars von Trier), particularly in regard to the adaptation of the *Tannhäuser Overture*. Although the aural dimension often is an integral part of a carefully planned narrative construction, turning out to be an important element in the director's unabated research for the right technique to tell a story, its strong integration with visual and other structural features has been rarely addressed in his own words and neither in the critical discussion of his films. As argued by Caroline Bainbridge (2007, 33), the close relationship between form and content is a constant feature of von Trier's œuvre. In this light, she proposes the use of the Bakhtinian concept of ›chronotope‹ as a useful tool to analyze the director's filming practices, as it »[...] allows external history to be represented within the text; it constructs the film's own images of space and time; and it plays a role within the film's own formal construction«. This frame of reference is relevant in creating connections between formal features and cultural values, such as European history and cultural heritage – as we will see in the last part of this article – as well as to define the director's position within the history of cinema.

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[1] Original quotation from the interview by Michel Ciment and Philippe Rouyer, published on *Positif*, 334 (December 1988). Here quoted from the reprinted edition in Lumholdt (2003, 58–63).

His peculiar expressive style, together with his repeated attempts to theorize its creative practice with ›manifest‹ and programmatic declarations, recall the language and the experimentation typical of the avant-garde art, above all in the playful use of established conventions and clichés. On the other hand, the link to such practices is also underlined by the display of a strong authorial *persona*. This last element is a claim regarding his own authenticity as an artist that makes a peculiar use of images and sounds to mark the unique qualities of his creations and to link them with expressive genres of high cultural prestige, such as classical or experimental music and *auteur* cinema.[2] At the same time, this attitude is balanced by a self-ironic detachment and a strong demystification of his own concept of ›art‹, shown in the emphasis he places on the technique as the original starting point for new expressive means, as the director explains in the EPIDEMIC press kit:

> I use them [i.e. the self imposed rules] in the present film only because of the need for a less restrictive aesthetic form – a form which reached its provisional culmination in THE ELEMENT OF CRIME.
>
> This ›new‹ technique is as inexpensive and effective as it is commonplace. It also tallies well with the idea of a more primitive film.
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> During much of the filming of EPIDEMIC, no ›film technicians‹ were used. Thus, for almost one third of the film, the camera rolled unmanned. This provided the film its intimate atmosphere and most important of all – ease of mind.

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[2] Something similar is noted by Ralf von Appen (2003, 8) discussing the influence of *musique concrète* in the contemporary production of musicians such as Matthew Herbert, Matmos and, above all, Björk (not by chance a later collaborator of Lars von Trier). In this sense, the recent theoretical and historical reassessment of the category of ›avant-garde‹ as a pluralist phenomenon that actively crosses the boundaries between disciplines, arts and different ideas about the research of new linguistic and expressive means, can be applied in both cinema and music history of the last decades (cfr. Graf-Scheunemann 2007; Borio 2007; Verrone 2012).

In this paper I want to draw attention to some elements in the soundtrack, whose distribution and cultural meaning seem to foreshadow an underlying ›system‹ which is consistent with the plot and the topic of the whole film. In EPIDEMIC sound is organically connected to the set of self-imposed rules von Trier has devised for a specific reason; a mode of audiovisual construction that has led many commentators to speak of a ›parametric‹ film form:

> […] in which stylistic devices are independent of narrative functions and motivations, and which exist primarily to call attention to themselves (Bordwell 1985, 280; Thompson 1988, 248–249). In parametric films, the filmmaker selects a limited number of stylistic devices from the repertoire of a filmic mode of narration (classical, art cinema, historical- materialistic, etc. – see Bordwell 1985) and distributes these devices systematically in the film according to an independent logic (Simons 2007, 34).

David Bordwell goes further in commenting on this specific film form, linking such formal options with serialism in music (1985, 276), and with E. H. Gombrich's concept of ›order‹. The latter would explain »[…] the viewing skills that allow us to grasp abstract elements even in a narrative work« (Thompson 1988, 248). In the case of EPIDEMIC, as we will see as the article progresses, the overall structure of the film and its soundtrack is reminiscent of a fractal, in which form and content are mutually intertwined through shared criteria and a set of common reference points.

1. Visual styles and soundscapes in EPIDEMIC

In the first sequence of the film, we are told how the main characters – Niels, the writer and Lars, the director – have lost the script for their new film, *The Cop and the Whore*, because of some unexplained computer malfunction. The director and his co-worker are due to have an important meeting with the film producer in five days in order to secure funding and define other practical issues, but, finding it impossible to remember any detail of the original screenplay or recover the lost data, they decide to write something ›more dynamic‹ (00:07:29–00:08:58). The moment when they begin to imagine the new story is the true starting point of the film, then follows the first sequence in which we hear something different than ambient or incidental sounds. With an abrupt change in image and sound texture, we are now brought to the end of the plot – as it is revealed by the voice over – without any human presence, without the characters just introduced; the only element in common being the apartment where most part of the action will take place. The estrangement is deepened by the detached presentation of the events from the seemingly omniscient narrator and by the music from the *Tannhäuser Overture*, two features whose effect is to move the point of view of the audiovisual complex from an internal to an external focalization.

In these first sequences two contrasting modes of narration are presented: on the one hand, we have the story of Lars and Niels, in which they play characters with the same names and professions as their real-life (off-screen) identities. On the other hand, there is the film-within-the-film telling the story the two protagonists are inventing and writing under the title EPIDEMIC. From now on, the film will show a constant interplay between

these two poles, a shift affecting a range of technical and expressive issues such as image texture, editing, genre references, cognitive approach. Until the beginning of the sequence just described, the blunt and grainy black and white images shot on 16mm camera have conformed to the canon of a realistic, documentary-style shooting, but from now on the illusion of any possible realism is superseded in favor of the display of mediatization processes, as the use of the more cinematographic 35mm film gauge suggests.[3] First of all, these passages refer to the most widespread visual conventions regarding the divide between documentary and fictional audiovisual products – acting as a sort of genre synecdoche alluding to the (seemingly) contrasting option of witnessing or telling a story with images and sounds. The montage is also contrasted: whereas in the 16mm scenes the action is fragmented by cuts and discontinuities, the film-within-the-film is characterized by long, continuous shots in the tradition of analytical editing, especially that of classic *noir* films.[4] This contrast also marks the difference between two perceptual regimes: the quality of the images in the 35mm sequences is more focused and brilliant, the camera is not static but moves around the scene, and the sound elements are now superimposed on the image and acousmatic, in the case of both the voice over and Wagner's music. In the first mode of audiovisual narration, the use of meta-fictional distancing devices are meant to enhance the divide between the spectator

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3 A similar strategy will be later employed in DANCER IN THE DARK, where: »Rather than trying to synthesize these disparate elements, von Trier's film energetically seeks to exploit the disjunction between them, so that the whole film is characterized by a nervous edginess. [...] Von Trier's cinematography creates various frames of reference, or levels of cinematic reality, which Bjork's individual musical numbers both reinforce and deconstruct [...]« (Grimley 2005, p. 38). On the other structural and narrative parallelism between the two films, see also the following pages.

4 As von Trier himself acknowledges in the audio commentary included in the DVD edition of EPIDEMIC (Home Vision Entertainment, EPI 010, 2004).

and the images, whereas the realistic documentary shooting in the framing story tends to obliterate such distance (Wuss 2000; Grodal 2009; Gyenge 2009).

From the point of view of macro-formal construction, the interaction between different techniques seems carefully planned to make the different narrative levels collapse as the film unfolds. The table below (table 1) shows how in each the part of the plot – the five days in which the new script has to be completed – three different soundscapes are used at least once each, either in isolation or in combination.

Sound captured on location, with the occasional overdub of electronic sounds,[5] is extensively used during both the film-within-the-film and the ›realistic‹ part of the plot focused on Lars and Niels, with occasional interferences of synthesizer and background music. These large narrative sequences are regularly interspersed by sections of voice over, whose aim is to point out the many ›coincidences‹ between the fictional story of the main protagonist (Dr. Mesmer) and what is happening to its writers. The third soundscape is reserved for the film-within-the film; here fragments of the first part of the *Tannhäuser Overture* are mixed in the soundtrack with dialogues and incidental sounds. On a semantic level, the music reinforces the heroic, idealistic and Romantic connotations of Dr. Mesmer, played by von Trier himself.[6] By combining these three narrative modes with the temporal axis of the narration, each ›chapter‹ of the film replays on a small

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5 We shall later return to the relevance of such elements in the narrative plan of the film.

6 On the problematic nature of the hero character in the *Tannhäuser* as a tool for meta-reflections on theatre and on this kind of character, see Williams (2004, 38–56). Also there, it is noted, it is a song that plays a crucial role in the drama as the moment of structural imbalance.

scale the basic structure of the whole film, recalling again the concept of fractal.[7]

Each sonic environment also implies a particular narrative perspective and a different chronological position in respect to the story we are being told. The voice-over looks backwards to events in the past, the realistic sequences purport to happen in the present tense, and the project of the film-within-the-film probably will not be realized in the future, unless the characters will escape the plague they caused. Jan Simons calls this superimposition of temporal points of view the ›prospectivity‹ of the film itself, whose aim is to highlight the gap »between the moment of narration and the unfolding of Dr. Mesmer's story« (Simons 2007, 117).[8] The complexity is deepened by the specific use of different soundscapes, with overlapping and ambiguities whose aim is to put into question and problematize what at a first glance seems simple and straightforward.

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[7] About this last point, Thomas Elsaesser notes that the fractal-like correspondence between different structural elements that are »reproduced and repeated at micro and macro-level« in European minor cinema, shape »the way a national cinema tries to address its national and international audiences, and it may characterize, at the macro-level, the way that the European cinema has been, and perhaps continues to be ›face to face with Hollywood‹« (2005, 20).

[8] It is also important to note that the recurrence of such devices act as an authorial mark: »This simultaneity of narration and production of history, and the manipulation of characters instead of chronicling their trials and tribulations, is a recurring figure in almost all von Trier's films« (Simons 2007, 118).

Section	Time	16/35 mm	Sound in/out (+background music)	Voice over	*Tannhäuser* Overture
Day 1	00:00:00	16 mm	•		
	00:08:02	35 mm		•	bb. 16/32
	00:08:59	16 mm	•		
	00:13:56	35 mm	•		bb. 3/15; 34/41
Day 2 *The line*	00:20:04	16 mm	•	•	
	00:34:25	35 mm	•		bb. 16/60
Day 3 *Germany*	00:37:02	16 mm	•		
	00:43:46	35 mm	•[9]		
	00:44:18	16 mm	•	•	
	00:54:09	35 mm	•		bb. 32/40
	00:59:44	16 mm	•		
Day 4 *The hospital*	01:00:07	16 mm	•	•	
	01:09:48	35 mm	•		bb. 16/41
Day 5 *The girl from Atlantic City*	01:11:55	16 mm	•	•	
	01:27:41	35 mm	•	•[10]	final chords
	01:29:26	16/35 mm	•		final chords

Table 1 – Distribution of visual textures and soundscapes within EPIDEMIC.

2. Epidemic (We All Fall Down)*: the song in the soundtrack*

The picture just sketched of the audiovisual situations we find in EPIDEMIC is not complete without mentioning the song *Epidemic (We All Fall Down)*,

[9] With added choir in background.

[10] Here the voice over is Lars's, who is presenting the end of the framing story during the dinner with the producer at the end of the film.

an element that may at first seem irrelevant, since its presence in the film is confined to seemingly peripheral moments, but that actually plays a crucial role in von Trier's narrative project. The song represents the last phase of a transformative process in which various issues are involved; in this regard its role shares a marked similarity with what happens in DANCER IN THE DARK (DK 2000, Lars von Trier). In the latter film the songs create a narrative space of their own, detached from the main plot, acting as representations and visualizations of the dreams of the main character Selma (Björk).[11] Her blindness lets her imagine a different shape for reality: her dreamlike ›visions‹ are triggered by rhythmical sounds such as an assembly line, a train, the inner groove of a vinyl record, reconfigured as starting points for sing-and-dance numbers in the style of a classical Hollywood musical. Analyzing this film for an essay I published in 2010, I tried to define the role of different audiovisual strategies by pointing out these passages as ›sonic thresholds‹ between realistic plot and fantastic sequences, access points for entering into Selma's subjective point of view – in contrast with the more impassioned, objective documentary approach of the rest of the film (Bratus 2010). For her hearing is more trustworthy than sight, and music (i. e. organized sound) is her way to deal with a chaotic and painful world; in von Trier's own words: »the music and the song come from Selma's mind, and she uses it as something else, she uses it *to escape and to analyze*, that it's what she uses the song for«.[12]

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[11] In this respect, a shared problem addressed in both films is the divide between fiction and reality, between subjective and objective perception of the world, utopian representation and pragmatic reflection, and the crucial role music plays in this constant interplay (Dyer 1998; Conrich 2002; McMillan 2004; Grimley 2005).

[12] Comments by von Trier taken from the extra audio features of the US DVD edition of DANCER IN THE DARK (»New Line Platinum Series«, New Line, N5199, 2001).

Rather than being just a narrative device, this is also a critical tool for questioning the status of reality and its reproduction in the process of mediatization. Seen in the context of his entire creative output, not least against the background of the (in)famous Dogma 95 manifesto, we can see how such metafilmic discourses became growingly important in von Trier's reflection on what cinema should be. If the visual perception is less reliable than the act of hearing – as he seems to imply in the example just mentioned – then image has a deceptive nature hidden behind its own spectacular qualities; conversely, the sound acts as a sort of compass needle to guide our perception through the unordered mass of visual stimuli.[13] The relevance granted to the aural dimension by von Trier is aimed at challenging his own position as an artist trying to achieve depth and authenticity of expression working in a media context where the sheer amount of audiovisual products we are experiencing in our everyday life inevitably conditions our ability to distinguish between what is real and what is fictional.

A second parallel feature between EPIDEMIC and DANCER IN THE DARK is the shared reference to opera as a genre: in the first underlined by the direct quotation of the Wagnerian Overture, and in the second with the reconfiguration of the Hollywood musical in the direction of genres with higher cultural prestige.[14] The melodramatic tones and effects are a recurring feature of his films and, in the words of Torben Grodal, are employed to activate specific types of reactions from the spectators in perceptual terms:

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13 On the problem of ›realism‹ in von Trier's only ›Dogma‹ film, see for example Jerslev (2002).

14 As stated in the presentation of the film von Trier wrote for the DANCER IN THE DARK website, whose contents are available on the US DVD edition of the film (cfr. note 11): »What I wanted to achieve in DANCER IN THE DARK is that you take things as seriously as you do in an opera. Some years ago, people really cried at operas. I thinks it's a skill to be able to find such emotions in something so stylized.«

> The melodramatic-excessive modes of representation activate central innate ways of abandonment and giving in to sublime and saturated experiences, and are, thus, expressive elements that have no transgressive purposes. The lyrical elements in melodrama indicate its orientation towards inner experiences, not an orientation towards action. […] In film after film, Trier has tried out the many possibilities for creating excessive strategies and creating passive, saturated emotions, although his later films have some openings towards more active narratives (2004, 138).

Something similar seems to be at work in the sound design of EPIDEMIC: the different soundscapes listed above turn out to replicate the structural coordinates of the entire film – stressing its narrative structure and overall design and the rational distinction between different narrative plans, rather than personal involvement relying on strong feelings and emotions.

As the film progresses, the boundaries between the two main strands of the story are increasingly blurred, and the connective tissue for this confusion is provided by the abstract concept of disease, replicated at different levels while maintaining its fundamental quality of something endogenous that triggers change and transformation in the infected subjects.[15] The transformative power affecting their cells and organs is reflected in the transition between musical elements employed in EPIDEMIC, whose origin can be connected with the ›original‹ source of the *Tannhäuser Overture.* The first and final stages of such a transformation process are the orchestral version of the classical piece and the song *Epidemic (We All Fall Down)*,

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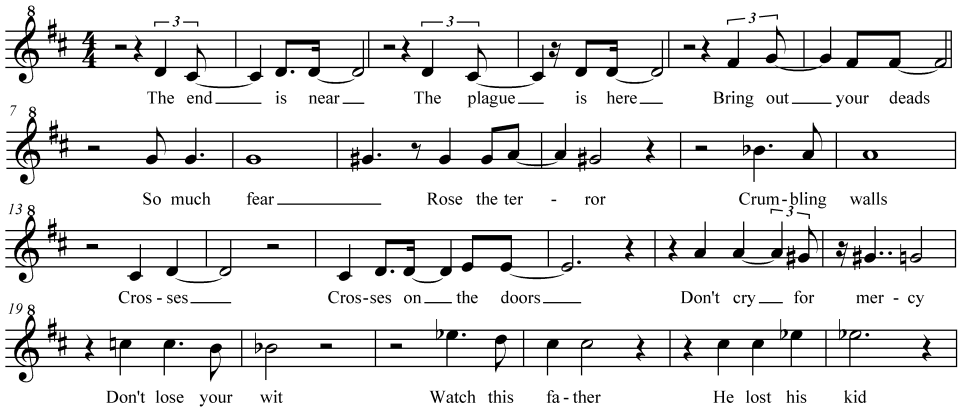
[15] For its ›apocalyptic‹ imagery, EPIDEMIC has been compared with the later MELANCHOLIA (DK 2011, Lars von Trier), especially underlining how the depiction of the world demise in the two films relies on different audiovisual strategies (Kollig 2013).

which we hear in an instrumental version in the middle of the film and in a sung version over the closing credits.



Example 1 – Transcription of the vocal part of *Epidemic (We All fall Down)*.

As shown in the above example, the melody and harmony of the song are somewhat related on a motivical level to the Wagnerian overture, not by a close paraphrase of the model but fragmenting and recombining its main stylistic elements. Peter Bach, who is credited as the composer of the soundtrack and the author of the music for *Epidemic (We All fall Down)*, extensively paraphrased the musical material of the *Overture* in order to obtain a classic 1980s pop-disco number. But the melody, with its chromatic movements and the limited use of musematic repetition,[16] is markedly different from any example of mainstream pop dance song, and could be read as an allusion to Wagner's extended and metrically free melodic

[16] For an introduction to the topic of the repetition and variation as structuring forces in popular song, see for example Middleton (1998 and 2000) and Moore (2012, pp. 51–69).

writing. The clearer reference to the *Tannhäuser Overture* can be found at bb. 17–22 of Example 1, where a brief but easily detectable progression based on the repeated transposition of a chromatic descending major second provides an unmistakable quotation of the central part of the ›Pilgrim's Chorus‹. The same element plays a crucial role in the musical plan of EPIDEMIC, as we will see in the next paragraph commenting on the different uses of the synthesizer sounds within the film soundtrack. The lyrics of *Epidemic (We All Fall Down)*, written by von Trier with his partner-in-crime Niels Vørsel, dispassionately recount the spread of the plague with a cruel tone that contrasts harshly with the mood and the immediate connotations of the musical style. The title of the song itself, with the reference to the final words of the nursery rhyme *Ring-a-ring o' Roses* (… *we all fall down*) – a popular game song in the English-speaking world which is credited to be originated by the traditional mimicry of the symptoms of the Black Death (Shearman/Sauer-Thompson 1997, 3) –, refers back to the traditional narration of the tragic experience of the plague with a lighthearted tone, and acts as an umpteenth declination of the topic of the disease still extensively explored throughout the film.

Moreover, the song provides the stronger aural link between the framing story and the overture used in the film-within-the-film, binding together narrative lines whose connection is progressively tightened by the accumulation of different visual and sound elements. As the main character of the film-within-the-film is a sort of distorted reflection of von Trier himself, the song perverts the classical model. Like a disease, pop music at the same time corrupts and helps in spreading Wagner's Overture, thus becoming a symbol of the collapse between the story we are watching and the one Niels and Lars are writing while the plague breaks out in the real world. Not by chance, the first time we hear the song (in an instrumental

version) is when the director and the writer are on a short trip to Germany to meet Udo Kier in Cologne, just before the voice over explains that mass transport was one of the main vehicles for the diffusion of the pandemic virus over all Europe in only five days. As in DANCER IN THE DARK, the distribution of the different elements of the soundtrack over the film is deeply correlated with the visual narration, providing premonitions of the events to come. While visual communication can show something more clearly, possessing immediate figurative power, music has the capacity to connect pieces of reality with hidden (but, perhaps for this reason, more important) mutual relationships.

3. Three types of electronic sounds and the transfiguration of the Tannhäuser Overture

If the *Overture* and the song respectively represent the beginning and the end of a transformative process, there is a third series of components in the soundtrack that act as an intermediate stage between the two, adding another level of ›prospectivity‹ to the sound design of the film (Simons 2007, 117–118). By fragmenting the temporal duration and quoting the harmonic style of the Wagnerian music, and changing the natural timbre of acoustic instruments with electronic synthesized sounds, a third layer is presented in the soundtrack of EPIDEMIC, and it further contributes to the audiovisual narration. In order to understand how this last musical element acts as a connective tissue, we have to stress both the typology and the temporal distribution of the interventions of these sounds, as can be summarized in Table 2, which is a sort of ›musical map‹ of the film as a whole.

Day	*Tannhäuser*	›harmonic‹ synth	›melodic‹ synth	drones	song
1	00:08:02 00:13:39 00:15:51 00:19:46	00:09:25		00:12:24	
2	00:34:27	00:22:26	00:31:33		
3	00:54:09 00:59:19	00:43:38 (synth/choir) 00:49:43		00:44:19	00:38:18 (instrumental)
4	01:11:20		01:05:25		
5	01:27:43 01:29:20 01:43:12			01:20:06 01:32:46 01:38:00 01:39:22 01:41:09	01:43:25

Table 2 - Temporal distribution of the musical elements in EPIDEMIC.

Basically, there are three different uses of electronic timbres: slowly moving harmonic textures, polyphonic melodic lines, and single pulsating drones. In the first typology (column 3), the synthetic sounds form layers of superimposing pitched sounds of long and short duration. Such harmonic aggregates are present only in the first half of the film, as a reference alluding in an oblique way to the *Tannhäuser Overture*, that recalls Wagner's harmonic writing especially thanks to its highly chromatic vertical style. The ›melodic‹ use of the synth (column 4) shows closer resemblance to the operatic precedent: its upper melodic lines quoted a fragment of the second part of the ›Pilgrim's chorus‹, with its short chromatic progression involving cells based on a double semitone descent twice transposed up a fourth.[17] This specific feature can be grasped by looking at the sonogram below: in the upper part of the image the augmentation of the basic movements of Wagnerian motif clearly appears (see figure 1 below).[18]

This musical element is heard for the first time during the second day of the framing story, accompanying the images of Lars taking a bath while Niels and his friend Kruff are talking about the grapevine pest which devastated French wine production from the mid-XIX to the early XX century. The second instance occurs immediately before the end of the fourth day, when we see Lars in the dark underground corridors of the Riget hospital in Copenhagen, on his way to visit a friend who works there as a forensic pathologist. There, Lars is informed that over the past few days there had been some strange and inexplicable deaths characterized by glandular tissue

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17 As one of the most characteristic features of the first part of the Overture, we already noted the use of this melodic fragment in the song *Epidemic (We All Fall Down)*. See Example 1.

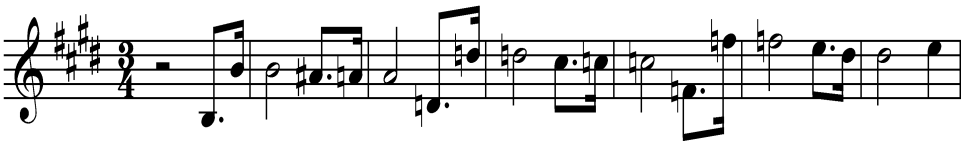
18 The sonogram presented here (figure 1) is made using the audio extracted from the DVD edition of the film (from 01:25:05).

changes which led to the formation of odd *granulae* (a sort of cancerous growth) in the major lymph nodes of the neck. In their temporal distribution this second use of the synthesizer could be seen as a development of the first – as it exposes more overtly the connection with the *Overture*. The third layer of electronic sound (column 5) are the electronic drones, in the form of pulsating pitched impulses somewhere in-between a ›pure‹ tone and noise. In quantitative terms, the use of this third typology of sonic material is spanned all over the soundtrack, and its function is remarkably different. It is neither thematically nor stylistically connected with the Overture, but it serves as a signal that something strange is going to happen, suggesting menace and unknown terror – an established cliché in the tradition of sci-fi and horror movies.[19]

The three uses of electronic sound show a progression from the hidden stylistic reference to the Wagnerian overture, to the homage paid by the melodic allusion to the second part of the ›Pilgrim chorus‹, and finally to the undifferentiated electronic drones that sonically symbolize the spreading disease in the ›real‹ world. The distribution of the musical materials in the course of EPIDEMIC makes it clear how the different typologies of sounds are meant to connect the beginning and the end of the plot, when the classical overture finally erupts outside the film-within-the film immediately before the closing credits, and its transformation into a pop song is complete. The transition affects both the motivic and harmonic content of the classical model as well as its sound, by substituting acoustic with electronic instruments and sounds – in this respect the electronic timbres taken into consideration in this paragraph have a transitional role between the two that cannot be overshadowed –, and changing the generic reference

[19] For a first overview on this topic, cfr. Whittington 2007; Corbella-Windisch 2013.

of the original piece from opera to disco music. The question whether pop music is the disease affecting the European tradition of art music, or whether Wagner is the disease of European art music remains unanswered, and it is consistent with other ambiguities on which the film is built. What is more important is that von Trier seems to have planned the musical unity of the film as carefully as its visual counterpart, by placing different musical materials related to the Wagnerian overture in the audiovisual structure and using them as structural pillars throughout EPIDEMIC.



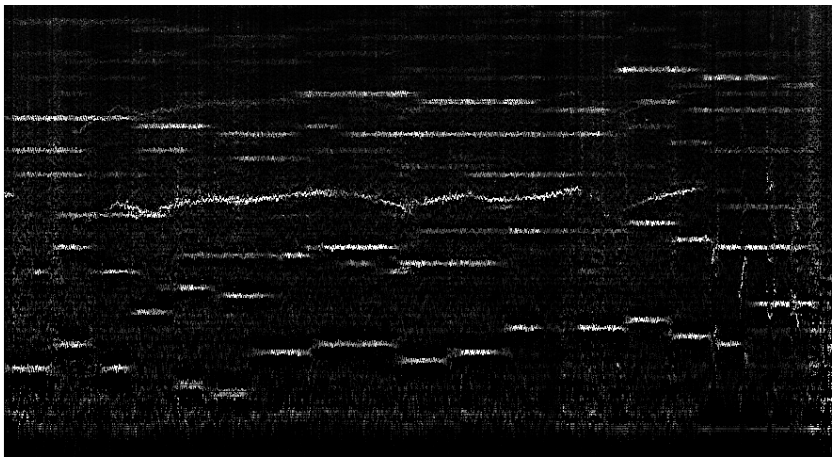


Figure 1 - Melodic excerpt from the *Tannhäuser Overture* and sonogram from the soundtrack of EPIDEMIC (01:05:27–01:06:36).

4. Wagner, von Trier and the cyclical view of European history

The final issue to address when giving an account of the choices made in the sound design of EPIDEMIC is the cultural value the director attributes to Wagner and his opera. The heritage of German culture and its historical relevance is obviously a crucial topic in von Trier's early creative output, here as well as in the other films of the so-called ›Europa-trilogy‹, THE ELEMENT OF CRIME (DK 1984, Lars von Trier) and EUROPA (DK 1991, Lars von Trier). In the words of Angelos Koutsourakis:

> The three films that make up the *Europa* trilogy adopt formal strategies that dispute the portrayal of history as a photographic reproduction of events, prioritising fragments/constellations that allude to the historical traumas of the past. […] I suggest that the *Europa* trilogy aspires to think history in terms of Benjaminian constellations that defy the European enlightenment narrative according to which history is a route to human emancipation and progress. These constellations offer a materialist view of history which negates the conformist understanding of the past historical catastrophes as aberrations. The concept of history as a heterogeneous temporality which resists teleological progress has been theorised by Benjamin (2012a, 517–8).[20]

All three films deal with common thematic concerns for the past and its legacy and call into question a vision of history as progress, underlining how the events in postwar Europe deny any hope for a better future. In EPIDEMIC the trip from Copenhagen to Cologne »develops into an elaborate

[20] Here the reference is to Benjamin's essay on the philosophy of history (1999, 252).

chronotope linking the bubonic plague, the Holocaust, the German occupation of Europe, and the Allied occupation of Germany with industrial domination and pollution« (Badley 2010, 30). Using Germany as a key place for the entire continent, the fear expressed by the director is that the repetition of the sudden outburst of violence and collective hysteria – affecting different countries across Europe and here figuratively depicted as the pandemic disease – can never be stopped. History is not a linear progression of events; rather it is a cyclical chain of effects and causes whose main coordinates reverberate across time and space along the same underlying patterns.

In the soundtrack of EPIDEMIC the reference to Wagner's overture acts as an identity marker of the European roots of von Trier's creative output. At the same time, as the quotation I provided at the beginning of this article clarifies, for him this music represents the quintessential ›film music‹, alluding to the foundational value of Wagner's theatre for any subsequent form of dramatic art – including the Hollywood tradition von Trier constantly challenges.[21] The research for a personal style – also shown in the programmatic efforts put into effect some years later in the ›Dogma 95 manifest‹ – is consistent with his reference to the operatic tradition, as the dramatic art least affected by American influence and its visual tradition, though foundational in historical terms (Koutsourakis 2012b, p. 106). In this context, the choice of Wagner as the paramount point of reference for a complex dramaturgical and aesthetic project resonates strongly with his own ambition to establish a new filmic praxis on radically different bases, a fresh

[21] It is also worth noting that other aspects of Wagner's personality might have been influential on von Trier, above all his construction of an unconventional public *persona* (what Baudelaire, in his essay on the *Tannhäuser*, defined the »wagnerian experience«). Cfr. Vaszony (2010, 121 and 178).

start from the original model with different extent.[22]

What is also relevant in EPIDEMIC is the specific choice of *Tannhäuser* as the main source for the building blocks of the film soundtrack. The main character of the opera, torn between the evil and good forces in his own soul, retains at his core the same idealistic impulse that forces Dr. Mesmer to undertake his trip outside the city to experiment on a cure for the plague. Like the German bard, his behavior is motivated by a concern for the greater good, but his actions result in failure and, ultimately, in his unredeemed death. In other words, both Tannhäuser and Dr. Mesmer are attempting a synthesis between opposed, irreconcilable instances (Williams 2004, p. 52; Emslie 2010, p. 11). In this context, the fact that in the film we heard not the entire melodic substance of the *Tannhäuser Overture* but only the first part, in which Wagner uses the thematic material of the ›Pilgrim's chorus‹ (Act III, scene 1), is also meaningful. The musical material refers to topics such as religion and the quest for spiritual purification, perfectly aligned with the overall project of EPIDEMIC. From the same point of view, it is also important to note that the most important character Dr. Mesmer meets on his journey in the country is a priest, a character introduced in the script by the fictional persona of Lars, to ›make fun of religion‹ and its institutional apparatus. It is the priest who first understands and who tells Mesmer that the pandemic contagion has been spread by his own doctor's bag, revealing the futility of his efforts and his final defeat. The fact that the whole story is

[22] On this point, I do not agree with Kollig's reading of Wagner's music as the sign of the »[…] irony in Mesmer's futile effort to bring salvation to the world when in fact he is contributing to its demise« (2013, 95). On the contrary, the ironic gaze by von Trier is best understood in the exploitation of the contrasts between musical and cinematographic genres, as well as in the transformation of the operatic model into a pop song. Consequently, in the film-within-the film, the heroic and utopian overtones associated to the character of Tannhäuser are to be taken at its face value, being the starting point for its subsequent (also ironical) transformation.

accompanied by a reference to a melody expressing a tension for the sacred and a desire for purification provides another strong connection between the music and the story told in the film-within-the-film. In respect to the ›realistic‹ plot recounting the writing of the script, however, the result of such a reference is at the same time ironic and bitter, implying that no redemption is possible – as the collapse of the narrative lines seems to foreshadow at the end of the film. To add further emphasis on von Trier's pessimistic attitude towards history, the changes in the mood of the lyrics, from the request for purification to the celebration of the disease after which ›we all fall down‹, allows no space for any optimistic hope for any future progress and perhaps it shows another way to catharsis.

Conclusions. The song as the unifying force behind the soundtrack

All in all, what I have tried to highlight in this article is a very peculiar example of the role a song can assume in a cinematic narration, and the structural transformation linking the Wagnerian overture with almost all the sounds we hear as the film progresses. Although I cannot find any trace or authorial statement about the intentionality of such details, their number and their parallelism with the plot and main topics explored in EPIDEMIC can be easily interpreted as an organic part of the audiovisual complex built before our eyes and ears. Given von Trier's aesthetic and stylistic interests, and especially his repeated attempts to find the best technique to present a story, possibly outside the established conventions of filmmaking, it would be odd to think of his use of sound as a random component of the overall narrative project. As he wrote in his *Second Manifest* (some excerpts of which are

reprinted in the booklet of the DVD edition of EPIDEMIC I quoted in note 4), such filming practices are aimed to counteract the »new generation of film« characterized by a »›wildness‹ [that] lacks discipline and their ›discipline‹ lacks wildness«. In contrast, he describes his film as a ›bagatelle‹, a form that »is humble and all-embracing. It exposes a corner without making a secret of eternity. EPIDEMIC manifests itself in the legitimate/serious relationships of the young men as a bagatelle – for among the bagatelle the masterpieces are numbered«. My reading of the EPIDEMIC emphasizes the strong structural role assumed by sound design in this project, reconstructing the ›set of rules‹ the director adopts in presenting the story to his audience. It is part of the ›hypnotic effect‹ created by the film: the reconfiguration of the basic narrative devices draws the audience into the construction of fictional worlds, emphasizing their artificiality. In the play with narrative and genre conventions von Trier proposes, the song *Epidemic (We All Fall Down)* does not just act as the theme song: it unifies the entire audiovisual structure, becoming the aural symbol of the film in terms of both formal features, cultural value and narrative content.

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