

Essays on sound and vision

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In order to view a variety of techniques used, the title sequences of four films will be analysed: from classic Hollywood cinema *Casablanca* and *Psycho*, a modern Hollywood film, *Edward Scissorhands*, and a recent Russian film, *Prisoner of the Mountains* (*Kavkazky Plennik*). In non-musical terms *Casablanca*, *Psycho* and *Edward Scissorhands* all present different versions of the classic Hollywood technique of using a closed, self-contained titles sequence.

Meanwhile in *Prisoner of the Mountains* there is an extended sequence before the titles begin, and this sequence includes music. The following points need to be addressed with regard to each film: how the music in the title sequence coincides with the visuals (i. e. how the sequence works on its own); what kind of role the music plays; how this can be interpreted in terms of its effects on audience expectation and manipulation; and finally how the music of the title sequence relates to that which is used later on, and in what context the title music itself is used.

In *Casablanca* the normal Warner Bros fanfare accompanies the studio's logo at the very opening, and drum music links the picture to the visually static title sequence which uses a map of Africa as its background. This develops into 'oriental' music for the full orchestra, using several clichés developed from the western perception of the 'orient', such as the persistent use of the melodic progression tonic/leading note/flattened-submediant/dominant (i. e. C, B, A-flat, G) played predominantly by brass and reed instruments.

When the credit for the composer Max Steiner appears, the music shifts and plays *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, but this concludes with an

interrupted cadence rather than its normal perfect version. We must also examine the next sequence as it forms a unit with the title sequence, using both music and partly-animated visuals. We see another globe, this time used for the mapping of the physical and causal route to Casablanca, from France and other places. Clips of paradigm journeys are superimposed onto the map as the refugees flee Paris and Marseilles.

The music accompanying this follows on from the pessimistic nature of the interrupted cadence of *La Marseillaise*, building down to low, dissonant and lugubrious chords on brass which begins to be accompanied by a romantic high, intense and chromatic melody for strings in octaves. Finally, as the first scene of the film begins in a market square in Casablanca, the music returns to oriental music, this time, supposedly, diegetically. The role of this sequence is manifold: firstly it establishes Casablanca as the physical and spiritual setting for the film, corresponding to the geographically blatant use of maps.

It also adds interest to an otherwise static title sequence, and indeed, is a montage of the musical themes that are to be presented in the film. The first two themes ('Oriental' and *Marseillaise*) are so explicit that they do not take on much contextual meaning in this original setting, but rather set up purely musical expectation, which can be utilised by transformation or by various possibilities of juxtaposition with visuals. The third 'suffering, yearning' theme is less familiar and therefore takes meaning from its context and becomes associated with the desire for freedom and liberty.

In this sense the themes sum up the plot: as captivity in a wild land (oriental), fettered liberty (La Marseillaise and its cadence), and romantic human yearning for freedom. Generically, the nationalistic music also helps establish the film as a 'serious' war film as well as a melodrama. The main strategies of the musical sequence, then, are clear: to introduce the main musical themes in a way that makes the introduction understandable and establishes its genre.

By its nature the music also manipulates the audience into feeling the setting to be removed from their own settings by the fact that the oriental music is exotic in an Romantic orientalist sense rather than in a Moroccan sense, establishing the film as a western work. The manner in which the title music influences the rest of the film is generally easy to detail. Unlike the manner in which *As Time Goes By* is used in a proliferating way, the occurrences of the title themes are used to remind us of their original or implied contexts and meanings.

The Marseillaise theme is used as a symbol of France (for the flashback sequence) but more generally as a marker of the success or failure of idealism and the Allies in its battle against cynicism and Fascism: its overall movement is from the interruption of the titles to the only full cadence in the final scene as Louis finally gives in to patriotism by throwing away the Vichy water. Oriental music is used more scarcely as the setting has been established, but it is used diegetically in the Blue Parrot scenes to distinguish it from the more homely and American Rick's ('Cafe Americain').

Thus some of the title music was truly introductory and other parts were to be used for future reference. The fact that *As Time Goes By* was not used indicates that it did not attempt a full musical accumulation of themes but concentrated on those necessary to understand the first scene. The title sequence of *Psycho* is more closed and self-contained than that of *Casablanca* due to the manner in which the music of the titles is separated - both by silence and by change of mood - from the opening scene.

The sequence is also far more visually captivating due to the thrusting horizontal lines that shoot across the screen and distort the titles themselves, culminating in a vertical meeting of upwards and downwards-moving lines and a release. Unlike *Casablanca* there is no aspect of narrative or historical context, but rather the establishing of a mood, as the lines suggest frenetic activity, violence, splitting and then final dying union, as the lines meet and fall away. The music, meanwhile, uses three primary textures in succession, all of which are linked by the modernist language and string scoring of Herrmann's score.

The first is a driving 'motor' rhythm of double-stopped dissonances in the tradition of *The Rite of Spring*, which develops by superimposing variants of a basic cell onto itself and thus expanding in volume and texture. The second is this rhythmic idea as an accompaniment to a soaring violin theme which is still not entirely Romantic in character due its persistent crotchet motion. Ostinati are thus the key to the sequence. The third texture is the 'sharp' rhythmic idea used by smaller sections of strings in upwards sequences, dying away with the visual lines, and reaching an extremely high tessitura.

The music stops and pauses before the opening scene begins with slow weakly-discordant descending chords in the style of Debussy. 'The real function of a main title, of course, should be to set the pulse of what is to follow... I am convinced, and so is Hitchcock, that after the main titles you know that something terrible must happen. The main title sequence tells you so, and that is its function: to set the drama. You don't need cymbal crashes or records that never sell'.

Thus Bernard Herrmann both states the specific strategy of the musical cue that accompanies the title sequence in *Psycho* and proposes a general theory of the function of titles sequences. He also justifies his choice of a string orchestra for such dramatic music, and in other places likens the string sound to Hitchcock's anachronistic monochrome. The strategy, then, is to sum up the essence of the film. That essence is surely the surprising 'primitive' (in the primitivist sense of Stravinsky) violence that describes the title word, and in no way sets the scene for that which immediately follows.

The music is fiercely modernist for a cinema audience but still within their understanding so that, along with the visuals and the word 'psycho', the main element of the titles establishes itself as distinctly inhuman and violent. Just as the straight lines penetrating the screen and the titles can be interpreted as predicting the motion of stabbing and also the split character of Bates, the music is 'stabbing' in its chords and ends 'screaming' as Marion will do. The horror genre is thereby indicated, but the music's insistent intensity hints at the obsessively psychological nature of Hitchcock's art.

The influence of this titles music on the rest of the film is subtle. The first scene is entirely removed from it by mood, if not completely by musical language, a feature that unifies the entire score and film. The first time the titles music is reused is when Marion realises that her boss has seen her driving her car after she had told him that she was going straight home to bed. The fright she suffers, and the effort with which she suppresses it in order to force a smile at her boss, seem to initiate the return of the violent double-stopped ostinati of the titles.

Here there is a meaning attached to a mood which we understand to be the essence of the film: the music is in some way linked to the Marion's subjectivity and also the insistent technology of the car. Marion is shown to be a transgressive woman, and this raises the expectation that Marion herself may be the psycho: she has a headache; she hears voices in her head; she has stolen money; she drives - a masculine pastime in most films; and accordingly her fright is expressed not through Romantic scherzo music but by this horror music. This expectation is, of course, entirely false.

Meanwhile the explicit violin theme of the titles is used to fill the screen just as Marion's face does as we watch her watching the road, amounting to a nullification of any reluctance we might have towards voyeurism. The most powerful influence the titles music has over the film is its various ways of presenting ostinati. We learn to decode this new musical language in stages, so that the deep ostinati heard as the dying Marion falls to the floor in the shower is distinguished from the niggling four-note repeated figure associated with Marion's decision to run away with the money.

They mean different things but are united by technique and by the world they draw for the audience. *Edward Scissorhands* toys with genre: it is both a genuine horror film and a parody of one (of the *Frankenstein* and *Beauty and the Beast* traditions); it is also a fantasy, a comedy and a melodrama. This is recognised in the titles sequence and the music that accompanies it. The studio logo is accompanied by snow and then there follows a title sequence that is ambiguous as to whether it is animated or real.

In fact, it turns out that much of the sequence is real and is taken from later scenes involving Vincent Price that are vital to the plot, such as the brief view we have of him dead and the hands that could have been Edward's. However, this is all crafted with elements of Gothic fantasy, using discrete images from the house/castle, beginning with dark shadows and an old door opening, moving to what we later realise was the inventor's laboratory, and this culminates in the purely fantastic animation of hearts and other 'shapes' falling like snow, with which the title sequence concludes.

Danny Elfman's music for this sequence is remarkable mainly for its orchestration: it begins with solo celesta, then strings are added, accompanying a plaintive cor anglais, and then a full (and massive) orchestra plays the main theme, to which is added a celestial and voiceless choir, which sings to 'ooh'. The chord sequence that is most prominent is a major tonic triad moving to a minor triad of the submediant.

In effect, the sequence is akin to an amalgamation of *Casablanca* and *Psycho*, for it uses the technique of joining the titles to a 'false' first scene, whilst dissociating it from the first 'real' flashback scene, which begins in

prosaic silence. Elfman's music is fairly uniform here but multivalent. The magical nature of the film is set by the celesta and the harp/flute-oriented nature of the full orchestration and finally by the angelic voices. The magical interpretation of this combination of instruments is accepted by way of Chaikovsky, Debussy and John Williams, from whom the harmonic progressions are also borrowed.

The element of horror is marginalized but represented by low strings and the melancholy of the cor. The voices add a layer of naive wonder that is rather over the top, something that is a major part of the film. The audience is led to expect a fairy tale with an element of horror to it, but also the clues to the somewhat tongue-in-cheek nature of the film are also present in the music. Importantly, from the very beginning this affective music is associated with the house and Edward.

The element of falling in this film is highly significant: many of the moments of greatest significance revolve around the falling of snow, which is finally associated by the old woman of the present with Edward's very existence, and thus the existence of the film and of magical naivety and goodness, with the falling of snow; in the studio's very logo before the titles there had been no fanfare but silence accompanying the falling of snow; in the titles the 'shapes' are shown to fall like snow: these shapes include hearts, which provide a link to humans and human emotions: the inventor falls when he dies and his fall is emphasised by the way in which we view his face as he realises he is to die. The sequence leading up to the inventor's death is the key to the explanation for Edward's condition, which is half the mystery of

the film (the other half is how it will end), and it is drawn out by its progression being interrupted and alternated with scenes of the 'present' (within the entire flashback of the film).

During this we realise the significance of what we had seen in the titles, and to emphasise this the titles music is brought back, and the tragic nature of the story is shown by the fact that we were ignorant of its intended significance until now. The other scenes in which the titles music features prominently are when Edward sees the picture of Peggy's daughter for the first time (choir 'ooohs') and when snow is falling and Edward magically (for it would not be possible) creates beautiful ice sculptures with the girl as his enraptured audience (full statement of the main theme). Thus the titles music is used to indicate the presence of the picturesque, the naive will to do good and the tragic nature of fate.

Those things not privileged by this music are, by implication, marginalized. However, the titles theme also proliferates the film as Elfman develops it by distortion (quarter-tone glissandi in the main theme) during moments of anguish. This is similar to Steiner's use of *La Marseillaise* in *Casablanca*. Finally, by way of contrast, we will look at *Prisoner of the Mountains*, a strong piece of anti-war propaganda made during, and based on, the ongoing Russo-Chechen conflict. The film begins with a long sequence before the titles, showing the recruitment process of a young man drafted in as a reserve soldier into the Russian army. We see him given a medical examination naked, which has an element of humour to it.

Then we see an older soldier go to play pool outdoors with a friend and they drink in a relaxed, late-evening atmosphere. The contrast between the young and innocent and the hardened cynic is reinforced as the soldier, Sasha, responds to other soldiers being rowdy by firing off rounds of his machine gun in mock attack. As he shoots we see his tensed, macho face, there is a freeze frame and a song begins, the first music of the film. The song is an old one and is obviously recognisable as a popular song of the type popularised during the Second World War, a period that is a subject of great nostalgia for Russians. We then see a military manoeuvre operated by the Russians with both the old and the young soldier aboard a Russian tank.

The song ends and we are brought out of nostalgia for the army to the harsh reality as we hear a solo plucked string instrument play an 'oriental' snippet of melody. This alerts the audience to the possibility of danger from Russia's ethnic 'others' and to the placement of the scene in the Caucasus mountain range. Suddenly the tank is ambushed and our two soldiers are severely wounded and left unconscious and seemingly dead by their comrades and are captured by the Chechens. Finally the titles begin with an endless panorama of the mountains and dramatic orchestral music in an orientalist style. Here it is difficult to determine what constitutes the essential title sequence if one accepts Herrmann's definition.

The music that accompanies the titles certainly does more to emphasise the setting and the drama of the film, but we cannot forget what has already happened. The freeze-frame on Sasha's face as he fires in connection with the ultra-popular song is so strong a device so difficult to interpret on first

viewing that it dominates the opening. Moreover, whilst the opening music is hardly reused before the end of the film, there is another sequence which is crucial to the film's anti-war message: the two Russians are kept hostage, chained together, for a long period and it becomes increasingly likely that they will be killed. As they sit together, back to back, Sasha begins to sing another old WWII song in a triumphant, brave voice, something that is obviously escapist.

Suddenly his voice is multiplied and the song is taken over by a huge chorus and the shot moves from the two men to the vast expanse of the mountains, so that he can be seen to become the might of the Russian army. As the song is still being bellowed out, the shot changes back to the men, and Sasha is crying frantically. The false expectation of escape in patriotism that had been set up by the song is revealed, and this makes sense of the opening song in addition. In a sense, then the titles sequence constructs a conventional colonialist Russian audience led to be wary of foreign subjects, whilst its other musical material works against this.

It is possible to generalise our observations to note that for every film here the titles operate as a kind of first subject of a sonata-form movement: they establish certain information about the film's essence which can be developed in a linear way, as in the thematic references in *Casablanca* and the thematic distortions of *Edward Scissorhands*, or in a more accumulative way, as with the manner in which the music for the titles sequences in *Psycho*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Prisoner of the Mountains* gains in meaning as we acquire more information. As an audience we are led to

believe that the titles have meaning and, like the subject of a sonata, will be recapitulated.