Kitsch aspects in film music

CRISTIAN ILIE DOBOȘ, PhD Student
"George Enescu" National University of Arts Iași
ROMANIA*

Abstract: History has documented the human species' struggles to understand beauty and communities' efforts to grow through education. Figures of universal culture, such as Plato, Aristotle, G. W. F. von Leibniz, A. G. Baumgarten, I. Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, etc. tackled matters of aesthetics with great care. In the postmodernist period art, one of the four pillars of a peoples' culture, together with language, history and religion, goes through a particular phase about which we cannot unequivocally say that is evolutionary. Under the onslaught of common people's entertainment culture, contemporary art has a hard time maintaining its initial mission, that of elevating man's soul and generating aesthetic projections of reality on a cognitive plane. The overwhelming significance that art and natural beauty carry in the intellectual life, beginning with the 18th century, is challenged by kitsch, this scourge, which came to prominence within society from the time when bourgeois civilization reached its peak, towards the end of the 19th century. Following a short presentation of various kitsch forms, associations and typologies in music, history, architecture, sculpture, decorative art and interior design, choreography, media, etc., we discuss kitsch aspects in film music, emphasising unjustified, incongruous and unempathetic associations between music and the rest of the filmic units. At the same time, we also present possible solutions for avoiding association errors. The examples are structured in the following subchapters: stylistic incongruities between filmic units vs. characteristics of the epoch augmented by music; using mainly dissonant or atonal sonorities in movies; exploring different cultures: ethnic music between deformation and authenticity; national and international in Romanian movies; representative songs - the more or less commercial exogenous motivation of film music; regarding the quantity of musical events in movies.

Keywords: kitsch, film, music, movie, soundtrack.

1. Foreword

The reference system according to which we approach kitsch depends on the art critic's level of culture, but also on the existence of the artwork in time and space.

The examined Anglo-Saxon bibliography has uncovered a linguistic issue related to translation, since the English term *popular* has an ambiguous meaning in Romanian and this can cause confusion. The translators of some of the consulted bibliographical sources did not differentiate between the nuances of this word. That is why I have chosen to use the term *mainstream* instead, when

---

* cristiandobos@yahoo.com

referring to that cultural-artistic category deemed to be for consumption, preferred by most members of a community, fashionable at a certain moment in time and, on the other hand, *folklore* or *folkloric works* designating the ancestral art of a human community.

Paraphrasing Andrei Pleșu, who, in his introduction to the book *Ghidul nesimțitului*, says that the author, namely Radu Paraschivescu, "does not work as a bitter moralist, but as a taster of morals" (Paraschivescu, 2006, p. 2), this study is not a witch-hunt for kitsch in film music, but rather the attitude of a taster of kitsch elements that were aptly snuck in by the filmmakers, through a complex cinematic phenomenon whereby it seems that, more and more, the authentic is intermingled with the surrogate. In our opinion, art films often oscillate between art and entertainment, often being fictions based on imagination, as well as fantasy, quite difficult to differentiate from kitsch. In this paper we will focus on film music and we will try to identify the space between art and conformity, where musical kitsch manifests itself, but especially the ways in which music is, congruously or incongruously, integrated with the set of technical, narrative or thematic filmic units.

2. Culture and kitsch

By quoting Johann Gottfried Herder[1], British philosopher Roger Scruton says about culture that it is "the life-blood of a people, the flow of moral energy that holds a society intact". And that civilisation is "the veneer of manners, law and technical know-how" (Scruton, 2017, p. 9). According to German Romantic philosophers, the culture of a people sits on four pillars: language, art, religion and history. Every citizen, as a member of a community, possesses a minimum degree of culture, which is considered common culture, but high culture is only achieved through cultivation (Scruton, 2017, pp. 9-10). "High culture involves a repertoire, an accumulation of works of art and exemplary utterances, which create the common ground in which the new and the surprising are planted." (Scruton, 2017, p. 62) It is worth noting that "fiction is of the greatest significance in high culture, for the reason that fictional objects are creatures of the imagination" (Scruton, 2017, p. 58). Also, "in a high culture, fictional situations and characters are topics of meditation and instruction" (Scruton, 2017, p. 58).

"A common culture dignifies people, by setting their desires and projects within an enduring context. It makes the spirit believable and commitment sincere, by providing the words, gestures, rituals and beliefs which moralize our actions. A high culture attempts to keep these things alive, by giving imaginative reality to the long-term view of things, and by setting us in the context of an imagined redemption." (Scruton, 2017, p. 58) In the modern world, where people travel a lot or change their residence, in a time when information travels at high

---

[1] Johann Gottfried Herder (1774-1803) – German philosopher, theologian and poet.

speeds, some specific traditions can dissipate or mix with others. Out of a desire to assemble in new mini-communities, people who share the same choices, tastes, leisure-time activities, and who feed off the same kinds of art and entertainment will, at some point, promote a form of their own mainstream culture, rather acquired than inherited, in the context of accelerating globalisation. But a form of mainstream culture has always existed, as Raymond Williams[2] says, namely the culture of the common people, alongside the elitist culture of the upper classes, and which is not necessarily inferior to the latter. Due to Raymond Williams's efforts, "the concept of culture was extended to describe the forms of popular art and entertainment in modern conditions" (Scruton, 2017, pp. 11-12).

Kitsch came to prominence within society at the peak of the bourgeois civilisation, towards the end of the 19th century, when a part of the bourgeois class claimed the position of ruler and opinion-former, both regarding everyday life and artistic creation. In fact, culture in general and art in particular were influenced by the economic framework of fast production and sales that were as profitable as possible. Thus, unfortunately, works of art should be created quickly and cheaply, according to certain standards demanded by the beneficiaries, resulting in a commodity that must be sold profitably to buyers who are more or less in a rush and have varying degrees of education. Since the 20th century, art lovers have become art consumers. "Consumption means rather the excitation of a function that produces the parading through everyday life of an ever-increasing flow of objects on the way between factory and dustbin, [...] the object becomes a product, this is the new way of kitsch life." (Moles, 1980, p. 16) Kitsch always aims a little to the side, it replaces that which is pure with something impure, even when it describes purity itself. However, educated persons take kitsch elements from a show, a situation or a set of objects and rearrange them according to their own thinking or simply eliminate them.

2.1. Etymology and meaning. A short history of kitsch

According to Abraham Moles, the term KITSCH was first used in German aesthetics in the second half of the 19th century, referring to:

- *a lack of style,*
- *a chaotic mixture of styles,*
- *effortlessly obtained comfort,*
- *in the sense of disfiguring, degrading, deforming, altering or imitating.*

The basis of kitsch is the denial of authenticity, the same author noting that the term "kitschen" means "to carelessly make something" and "verkitschen" means "to degrade, disfigure, alter" (Moles, 1980, p. 5). The setting and conditions for the emergence of kitsch are mediocre education and the consumer

---

[2] Raymond Williams (1921-1988) – Welsh academic, literary critic and novelist.

society existing in a mutual relationship with mass production in the artistic sphere.

By reading the work of Abraham Moles, entitled *The Psychology of Kitsch. Art of Happiness*, we can draw several conclusions about kitsch. Thus, kitsch is a phenomenon that has existed at all times and in all arts, which is based on a consumer civilisation that produces for consumption and creates for production, within a cultural cycle where the fundamental notion is acceleration. This means that consumer humans are tied to the surrounding material elements and that the value of all things is altered because of this subordination to things. Industrially produced cultural goods are organised by the criterion of marketability and not by their inherent content or their own structure. In other words, cultural products resulting from the copying of an original model are created, in terms of value, according to the requirements of the existing market, rather than having them determine the market. This is why, for example, many musical works are not appreciated simply because they are beautiful but because they are in demand.

2.2. Functional art and the typology of kitsch – aspects, forms, associations

It is known that "aesthetic objects [...] invite us to an interest of reason – a self-conscious placing of ourselves in relation to the thing considered, and a search for meaning which looks neither for information nor practical utility, but for the insight which religion also promises: insight into the why and whither of our being here." (Scruton, 2017, pp. 57-58) Kitsch, on the other hand, is like a cheap aesthetic distraction of the averagely-educated citizen, mindlessly built according to the criterion of unlimited agglomeration, the criterion of artistic "salad", of inner or outer deformation of the object by over- or under-sizing, and, according to the criterion of anti-functionality, says Abraham Moles, functionality involving the existence of an exact series of objects, all of which comply with utilitarian criteria (Moles, 1980, p. 52). In fact, we are talking about the difference between "creating", i.e. bringing into the world aspects that did not exist before, in other words, an invention of the artist or the inventor, of the intellectual, generally a producer of unique forms or messages, and "producing", i.e. copying an already existing model by more or less automatic means, always reproducing the same forms. Also from the book *The Psychology of Kitsch. Art of Happiness,* we understand that there is a kitsch art or rather a kitsch of art, which refers either to art objects, in the classical sense of the term, or to a certain type of arrangement of such objects in a given setting and to the relations between them (Moles, 1980, p. 19). In other words, in this essay we will try to identify kitsch film music, but also kitsch ambiances in cinema, by analysing the incongruity of music with the other filmic units. Kitsch associations follow a certain typology, usually reflected by random pile-ups of styles and decorative elements in an ensemble, by limitless and unjustified agglomerations of heterogeneous, anti-functional objects, collected only for sedimentation (Moles,

1980, pp. 51-52). It is also important to mention a couple of notorious antagonistic combinations: the exotic and the provincial, science fiction and tradition, the heroic and the poor, religion and drunkenness, etc. (Moles, 1980, pp. 56-57).

Abraham Moles speaks of *kitsch situations*, such as apartment art, decorative art, etc., of *kitsch acts*, e.g. the industrialisation of souvenirs, industrial *design*, etc. or of *kitsch objects*, such as the categories of "sedimentary" objects, i. e. objects crammed in time, "transient" objects meant for disposal, etc. (Moles, 1980, p. 41), all of which are subjected to the following principles: of inadequacy, accumulation, mediocrity, comfort and synesthetic perception.

By following the principle, which claims that, if you want to have "good taste", the easiest way is to go through "bad taste" first, we present a small anthology of "famous" Romanian kitsch:

Historical kitsch: *Dracula.* Probably the biggest kitsch from our bucolic realm, since its brand was created by mixing historical truth with the false and fantastic, being insistently and chaotically marketed. Vlad Ţepeş and Dracula have little to do with each other, except for his famous stakes that thrill-seekers would get…

Communist regime kitsch: *Elena Ceauşescu*. How "blackened" were the minds of some Romanians that they made an "academic-doctor-engineer, world-renowned scientist" out of an ill-formed fourth-grade repeater?

Moş Gerilă. During the Soviet Union's influence on Eastern Europe, communist regimes tried to introduce Moş Gerilă in local traditions as a substitute for the other two "fathers" (Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus), in an attempt to remove the role of religion from traditions and to forcibly secularise the cultures of these countries.

Architectural and sculptural kitsch: *Scorniceşti Bust, Maramureş gate* from the Ştefan cel Mare pedestrian area of Iaşi, *The Stake of Ghilduş* from the Revolution Square, named *"Memorialul Renaşterii" (Memorial of Rebirth)*, *The Eiffel Tower* from Slobozia, *The Heart of Jesus* from Lupeni, etc.

The history of Romanian kitsch in fine art reached its peak when the communist regime declined donations from Brâncuşi, who intended to offer several masterpieces to the Romanian state. With such a history of culture and after many years of darkness for Romanian aesthetics, it is only natural that a janitor from the National Museum of Contemporary Art would ask themselves, utterly confused: "Is this art or should I throw it away?"

Decorative art and interior design: tapestry with *the abduction from seraglio*, *"aesthetic" arrangements in truck cabins*, based on icons and plastic crosses, posters of naked women and Chinese towels imitating Romanian folk motifs, *Glass fish on embroidery*, *plastic flowers, stuffed animals*, *garden gnomes*, etc.

Fashion: Track suit matched with dress shoes, fluffy shoes, bling, woven plastic bag, etc.

Choreography. An eloquent example for the degradation of men's dancing is the one attached here, a combination of pagan dancing used in the ancestral ritual of crow banishing, with displays based on unpredictable tossing of the upper and lower limbs, of the kind that one usually sees during exorcisms, and something of the "grace" of a crass game from my adolescence, called "lapte gros" (*ad litteram* translated "thick milk"):

Media and digital: *OTV* television channel, *Acces Direct* TV show, holiday-themed text messages, etc. …

Religious kitsch: plastic icons with a pixelated image of Arsenie Boca downloaded from the Internet. Christian religion is still the backbone of the Romanian people but I must point out the toxicity of merchants exploiting the ancestral Orthodox faith by selling religious symbols that had their purpose altered. The current general situation offers imitations of objects of worship rather than worship itself. Also, religious art is constantly under threat from kitsch. Examples inherited from the past, authentic values, speak for themselves: the Voroneț Monastery, nicknamed the "Sistine Chapel of the East", Neamț Monastery, etc.

The movie "Bean: The Ultimate Disaster" with Mr. Bean is a fine allusion to contemporary kitsch.

2.3. Kitsch associations in music

Of course that in a consumer civilisation, desperate to sell anything quickly, no compromise on quality is shameful. It is well known that aestheticians have always spoken of a severe conflict between music and commercialism throughout history, with famous cases such as that of Ludwig van Beethoven – who lived all his life in rented housing, Franz Schubert – who did not even have his own piano, etc., while musicians who knew how to combine valuable music with the general preferences of their times are few and far between, with famous cases such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Giuseppe Verdi or Paul McCartney...

The principle of marketability of contemporary music has also guided famous American magazines, especially Billboard, which admits that it deals with the music industry and not with the art of music, and Rolling Stone as well. While in the '60s these two magazines preferred pertinent musical criticism articles, gradually, by the year 2000, under the obsessive pressure of American commercialism, these two large publications let their guard down against kitsch and became some kind of afternoon-news TV channel.

With the advent of MTV in 1981, which originally had the noble aim of popularising quality non-academic contemporary music, the art of music underwent significant mutations. The act of watching contemporary music has been a slow but sure slide into everyday kitsch, done with the complicity of

opinion makers, i. e. media people, producers, etc., most of them musically uneducated, but desperate to sell or interested in growing their audience, choosing to promote pseudo-musicians who spend more time in gyms and beauty salons than in study halls or music studios.

The fundamental recipes for contemporary kitsch music could be:

- melodic-harmonic textures without dissonances, that are astonishingly simple, or, at the other extreme, with exaggerated ornamentation and helter-skelter dissonances seemingly conceived as a result of an intellectual rape and given birth to in terrible pain, possibly with the use of forceps;

- stereotypical or messily complicated rhythmic structures, especially performed to deny the cleanliness and natural order that characterize music;

- musical timbres with imprecise, synthetic and bombastic sonorities, aiming to distort natural and clear sound colours;

- glassy, conventional vocal-instrumental arrangements, outdated for the era in which they were created, boring or chaotic experimental-revolutionary, created as if on purpose to tease the aesthetic;

- a general lack of originality and obsession with non-cultural subjects;

- on top of that, a consistent erotic sauce: sweet, toady voices, double entendre lyrics, lascivious movements and missing clothes.

3. Aesthetics and style in film music

We would like to highlight some milestones in the evolution of aesthetics over time. Thus, after Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten[3] published his work, called *Aesthetics*, in 1750, aspects of aesthetics, discussed ever since Plato and Aristotle, take on a new, modern meaning, while art and natural beauty reach an overwhelming importance in intellectual life, a status they have retained to this day. The 18th century was a period when the arts and especially their study were no longer just means for leisure but, above all, a means for instructing and refining the soul. After summarising Immanuel Kant's writings on aesthetics, Roger Scruton says that "the aesthetic is a realm of value." (Scruton, 2017, p. 52) In the 19th century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work, entitled *Lectures on Aesthetics*, essentially promotes the idea that the Romantic movement is defined as "the exaltation of the subjective over the objective, and the inner yearning over the outward form" (Scruton, 2017, p. 69). Then, for more than a century, we are dealing with modernism. Modernist culture was strongly influenced by the principle that everything is for sale. "Value is price and price is value, where feelings are bartered, and the sentimental fake no longer distinguished from the genuine article, the artist becomes a modernist, and culture escapes to a garrett,

---

[3] Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) – German philosopher, professor, aesthetician, writer, he carried on the doctrine of G. W. F. von Leibniz (1646-1716), founder of the Age of Enlightenment.

high above the market place." (Scruton, 2017, p. 96) It is a period set up by Richard Wagner, Charles Baudelaire, Édouard Manet, etc., with central ideas that are embodied especially in the works of the poet T(homas) S(tearns) Eliot[4].

Film music, as a whole, is not strictly subordinated to the basic principles laid out by the great aestheticians and debated on by philosophers throughout the ages, but generally, nowadays, the field of aesthetics seems to be more slippery than ever. Even the concept of *catharsis*, which, for Aristotle, meant purification through art, has a variously nuanced palette in contemporary discourse.

Clearly, film music, with all its states of generic music, narrative music, leitmotif and thematic development, *background* music, representative song and ending music, cannot be objectively analysed if we extract it from the context for which it was created, thus losing some of its expressivity. That is why a gestalt or neo-formalist analysis can offer a more precise image for the quality of film music, congruous or incongruous with the other filmic units. A limitation to the analysis of musical language elements, compositional procedures, means of processing the sonic material or performance techniques may lead to inaccurate conclusions. Film music must be integrated in the three planes of cinema, namely stylistic, narrative and thematic. The role granted to music in films derives from motivations justified from a realistic, compositional, trans-textual and artistic point of view, or from an exogenous motivation, but also from its functions, namely perceptual, cognitive and emotion-shaping.

The use of *pop music* or other non-academic music genres, such as *rock*, *folk*, *rap*, etc. to construct representative songs in film music has often had exogenous motivations. These songs, whether they appeared as diegetic or nondiegetic music, onscreen or offscreen, more or less addressed the theme of the film or a moment in the film, and had an obvious role in popularising the film in question on the cinema product market. In many cases, the fame of these songs depends on the awards they received, the Oscars being the most notorious ones, but also on the sales of audio materials containing sound samples from the film, called a *soundtrack*, on the popularity of the performer or composer, and on the congruence of the music from these songs with the other filmic units or the intrinsic value of those musical pieces, these criteria being, unfortunately, the last. Among many valuable film songs we mention masterpieces such as *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) – music by Harold Arlen and Herbert Stothart, sung by Judy Garland, or *My Heart Will Go On* from the movie *Titanic* (1997) – music by James Horner, performed by Celine Dion, the former being presented even as a form of diegetic music and the latter as the basis for the entire score written by the late American musician. However, in this essay we will also discuss other songs which, sheltered by

---

[4] T.S. Elliot (1888-1965) – American-born British poet, dramatist, philosopher and literary theoretician.

justifications such as: congruence with the other filmic units, empathetic music or simply the lack of funds for the production of a song make you wonder what aesthetic justifications were behind the composition or interpretation of these songs, which, considering the elements of musical language, compositional procedures, means of processing sonic material or basic rules of interpretation, do not do justice to the art of sound in general or to film music in particular.

4. Kitsch art in cinema

In cinema, as in all arts, "artistic tradition is a constantly evolving system of conventions, allusions, cross-references and shared expectations. Themes, forms, ornaments and styles are things both inherited and invented, and the inheritance is part of what makes the invention possible" (Scruton, 2017, p. 62). But "in art, meaning does not arise from conventions or rules. On the contrary, conventions and rules arise from meaning. [...] Art [...] is intrinsically suspicious of this standardising process. Convention is tolerable only as a background to other and more individual meanings: if it becomes the foreground of the artistic enterprise, the result is cliché. The constant lapse into cliché, and the fastidious fear of it, are marks of a high culture in decline" (Scruton, 2017, p. 63). As a movie-goer, I have found that many films produced in the last twenty or thirty years are suffering tremendously in what regards music and originality.

The first concrete act of protest against the transformation of cinema art into a commercially structured commodity was the founding of the United Artists company by Charlie Chaplin and David Wark Griffith, mainly as a reaction of frustration to the restrictions imposed by managers who prioritised the sale of the cinema product (Borden, Duijsens *et al.*, 2010, pp. 10-15).

In the context of social and economic development from the late 19th century, the commercialisation of modern life led Oscar Wilde to say that "a cynic is a man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing" (Scruton, 2017, p. 79).

On the whole, art film contains, more or less, unrealities generated either by imagination or fantasy. However, "while the unrealities of fantasy penetrate and pollute the world, those of the imagination exist in a world of their own, in which we wander freely and in full knowledge of the really real" (Scruton, 2017, p. 79). "Fantasy covets the gross, the explicit, the no-holds-barred display of the unobtainable. [...] It eschews style and convention, since these impede the building of the surrogate, and veil it in thought." (Scruton, 2017, p. 80) "The matter of imagination is not realised but represented. It comes to us, as a rule, heavily masked by thought, and in no sense is it a surrogate, standing in place of the unobtainable. On the contrary, it is deliberately placed at a distance, in a world of its own." (Scruton, 2017, p. 81) "Imagination idealizes, ennobles, embellishes and re-presents the world. [...] Fantasy, by contrast, is frequently degrading. For it begins from the premise of a given emotion, which it can neither improve nor

criticise but only feed. It is a slave of the actual, and deals in forbidden goods. Where imagination offers glimpses of the sacred, fantasy offers sacrilege and profanation." (Scruton, 2017, p. 80) In conclusion, "the emotions inspired by serious art belong to imagination, not to fantasy" (Scruton, 2017, p. 83).

5. The issue of musical kitsch in movies and possible solutions for avoiding such mistakes

The most effective way of identifying and analysing aspects of musical kitsch in films is the practical method of using concrete examples. In this chapter I have chosen to analyse fragments of films where the music has several kitsch features, whether it is an analysis carried out strictly from a musical point of view on the one hand or taken as a whole filmic unit on the other, thus giving rise to stylistic, narrative or thematic incongruities that can be interpreted as kitsch associations. In what regards the comparison criteria, I have taken into account several aspects related to the concordance between the music and themes of the films, the periods they were created in, stylistic and narrative elements of the films in question.

5.1. Stylistic inconsistencies between filmic units vs. features of the era augmented by music

Alexander, 2004, music by Vangelis vs. *Troy,* 2004, music by James Horner

The basic feature of Vangelis's music, which gives his cinematic works their sonic identity, is the predominantly electronic sound. The score written for this film seems inferior to the Oscar-winning score of the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* or the much-publicised *Conquest of Paradise* theme from the movie *1492: Conquest of Paradise.* Why do we say this? Justification can be found in the example selected from the movie *Alexander,* which garnered 6 *Golden Raspberry* nominations, namely in the scene which shows Alexander the Great entering Babylon, where the composer chooses:

- a conventional theme, built on a diatonic scale of six sounds, incongruous with the musical history and traditions of ancient Babylon or the Macedonians – according to research carried out by historians;
- the timbre chosen for the presentation of the theme has an unclear, imprecise color, being a synthetic imitation of brass wind instruments; moreover, most of the electronic timbres used by the composer in the music of this film seem outdated, outmoded, from the generation of timbres used in the '80s and '90s;
- repetitive rhythmic-harmonic structure, i. e. the sound that the Greek musician had accustomed us to in the above-mentioned films, is simplified here, with no variation or development, already seeming a cliché.

Trying to augment a monumental, grandiose scene, Vangelis chooses a simplistic, even bombastic music, incongruous with the other filmic units, to highlight Alexander's triumph.

In contrast, an example of congruence between the storyline of the film and the music is the final scene depicting the battle between Hector and Achilles in the film *Troy*. The outrageous cruelty of the victor is underscored by music which empathises with the pain of Hector's close relatives, who are witnessing the scene, thus generating a heartrending emotion, a state of suspension beyond any reason. In the soundtrack of *Troy*, the late American composer James Horner uses musical themes from the Balkans and Asia Minor, perhaps even with influences from the Near and Middle East:

- the vocal score is modal, chromatic or even enharmonic, in the sense that microtones were used in modal scales in an accompanied monody-like presentation;
- the performance of Macedonian soloist Tanja Tzarovska, which is "sprinkled" with decorations, *glissando*, *vibrato*, etc., makes me wonder whether or not she is "sweetening up" certain intervals by using untempered intonation;
- rubato rhythmic moments performed on big drums;
- a surprising and discreet plurimelodic piece in the second part;
- an interesting detail was the use of $A = 432$ Hz tuning.

King Arthur, 2004, music by Hans Zimmer vs. *Kingdom of Heaven,* 2005, music by Harry Gregson-Williams

The musical score for the movie *King Arthur* seems more tailored to the taste and expectations of the early 3rd millennium music consumer rather than composed so as to reflect the early Middle Ages – the legend evokes human communities of Germanic tribes that roamed Europe from east to west in the 4th - 10th centuries. This hypothesis is backed by the lack of medieval musical instruments, the sparse use of musical language elements, with only a few rhythmic and, rarely, melodic elements standing out, as well as the musician's tendency to use electronic effects and timbres. The fragment that I chose, *Woad to Ruin*, is an example where Hans Zimmer alternates between homophony and accompanied monody, with a tonal-modal sonic organisation, in which the synthesizer *sound* is integrated with the timbres of the symphonic orchestra, superimposed with voices and, additionally, we sometimes hear rhythmic structures with ternary subdivisions played by percussion instruments.

In contrast, the music of British composer Harry Gregson-Williams, critically acclaimed by specialists, demonstrates the composer's knowledge of medieval music, from early Renaissance to neoclassical cultivated music, Near East ethnic music and electronic music. The soundtrack for the film *Kingdom of Heaven* – set in the Crusader era, 11th-13th centuries – is an example of syncretism

in film music, where medieval vocal themes are arranged according to models from the dawn of polyphony, other instrumental modal themes from the Western European Middle Ages are alternated with those from the Near East, depending on the geographical location where the film's action takes place. In the score we notice moments of polyrhythm, surprising harmony, where dissonances are not resolved in line with the principles of classical harmony, and the richness of timbre colors, with instruments from the symphonic orchestra, synthetically produced instruments, medieval or archaic, etc. is also noteworthy.

5.2. The use of predominantly dissonant or even atonal sonorities in films

Neamul Şoimăreştilor, 1965, music by Theodor Grigoriu vs. *Planet of the Apes*, 1968, music by Jerry Goldsmith; *Telegrame*, 1959, music by Mircea Chiriac; *Undeva în Est*, 1991, music by Cornel Ţăranu

The Romanian music school of composition from the 20th century can be identified in the musical scores of films *Neamul Şoimăreştilor* and *Undeva în Est.*

From the film *Neamul Şoimăreştilor* I have chosen a love scene, which is accompanied by incongruous music from Theodor Grigoriu. The consonant harmony, a fundamental feature of love, is not reflected in the dissonance - dominated music that accompanies the little love story unfolding in the middle of nature. Only the hypothesis of music with a connotative function, incongruous in this sequence, but which could become justified towards the end of the film, would be an argument in favour of using such sonorities but by using a gestalt approach to analyse Theodor Grigoriu's score from this film, we consider that the Romanian musician did not find empathetic solutions. It is an example of music that is valuable in its own right but applied in a rather ordinary way to the film as a whole and not integrated with the context.

On the other hand, the film *Undeva în Est*, which tells the harrowing story of a family mocked by communists during the collectivisation period, benefits from a highly qualitative music composed by Cornel Ţăranu, both intrinsically and in terms of its congruence with the other filmic units. The drama, turmoil and tragedies of Romanian peasants are perfectly reflected by predominantly dissonant or even atonal sounds, dominated by monody, and we also encounter non-thematic scores or narrative music built on musical themes close to Romanian folklore, masterfully arranged, sometimes in an expressionist manner. The instability or even the lack of a tonal center of attraction in Cornel Ţăranu's score amplifies the state of fear in the micro-universe of Romanian villages from the '50s, where people were disoriented and unable to create hypotheses about what was to come.

A representative example of atonal film music is the hunting scene from the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, with music by Jerry Goldsmith. The horror and desperation of the people chased by the apes that rule the land is perfectly reflected and even amplified by the music, which was masterfully and

ingeniously superimposed on the images. The composer uses dissonant harmony/sound clusters; maximum nuances, repeated rhythms. I take note of the intensive use of the entire orchestral apparatus.

But dissonant sonorities are not only used to underline negative moods or feelings. Humour can also be enhanced by predominantly dissonant music. Here is a wonderful scene from the film *Telegrame*, made in 1959, with music by Mircea Chiriac, featuring Grigore Vasiliu Birlic, the Charlie Chaplin of Romanian cinema, in the main role. The comedy resulting from situations where characters think highly of themselves but act foolishly, contrary to expectations, can be underlined by simple melodic lines, sometimes even oligochordal, but played simultaneously a semitone apart or built on a deliberately chosen dissonant harmony, possibly a semitone away from the melody. Technical procedures for instrumental or vocal performance can play an important role in bringing out the comedy by using exaggerated *vibrato*, *glissando*, *flutter tonguing*, *tremolo*, etc.

5.3. Exploring different cultures: ethnic music between distortion and authenticity

The song *Arabian Nights* from *Aladdin*, 2019, music by Alan Menken vs. *The Kite Runner*, 2007, music by Alberto Iglesias; The song *Pi's Lullaby* from *Life of Pi*, 2012, music by Mychael Danna and Bombay Jayashri

In the film *Aladdin*, multi *Oscar*-winning American composer Alan Menken paints the world of the Middle East in the way American audiences would like it to be, rather than as it really is. Highly acclaimed for animation film music in particular, this musician reworks or even invents musical themes that are not really part of the Arab-Persian space. Throughout the score we notice only a few *glissandos*, discreet ornaments and sporadic use of the augmented second or Phrygian cadence, but all are transposed into the tempered system and have a pronounced tonal character, not in line with the richly ornamented and untempered modal music of the native culture. Furthermore, the film's signature song, *Arabian Nights*, is presented as diegetic music with a mediocre performance by actor Will Smith.

In my opinion, in order to create predominantly congruous and empathetic music that enhances cinematic emotions, musicians must know and use the full range of stylistic elements and musical language specific to an era, a region, a culture, and only then make allowances for the taste of the audience for whom the film is intended. Examples of this are the scores written for the films *The Kite Runner* and *Life of Pi*.

In the musical score written by Alberto Iglesias for the film *The Kite Runner*, we can randomly find untempered intonations and sonorities specific to the Middle East, created through the use of ethnic and archaic instruments and oriental rhythms. We notice the Spanish composer's predilection for monodic or

heterophonic discourse supported by ethnic percussion instruments, in a surprising and pleasant symbiosis with the guitar or modern synthetic effects.

The theme from *Lullaby of Pi* composed by Mychael Danna is a demonstration of mastery in the synthetic composition of film music. Here we have a vocal song, in the *Tamil* language, performed by artist Bombay Jayashri in the style of South Asian music, who is in a dialogue with untempered ethnic instruments. The song is supported by alternative rhythms, ethnic percussion instruments that blend naturally with electronic timbres or the accordion, in a modern vision of tonal-modal harmony.

5.4. National and international in Romanian movies:

Queen Marie of Romania, 2019, music by Giancarlo Russo vs. *Ştefan cel Mare – Vaslui 1475*, 1975, music by Theodor Grigoriu, *Cu mâinile curate*, 1972, music by Richard Oschanitzky, *Răzbunarea haiducilor*, 1968, music by Mircea Istrate.

The historical film *Queen Marie of Romania* was made in 2019, directed by Alexis Sweet Cahill, with music by Italian composer Giancarlo Russo. It is a film I had been eagerly waiting for, and my hopes were mostly confirmed. However, although the referential meanings, the explicit as well as the implicit ones, are properly highlighted on the narrative plane, the musical score does not contain any musical motif or theme of Romanian specificity. I have extracted only two moments from the film, in which the music seems incongruous with the other filmic units: the score, written in English waltz-like ternary rhythm, accompanying a scene where the Queen of Romania offers food to a group of poor citizens on the outskirts of Bucharest, and the second one, in which the Queen, dressed in Romanian folk costume, receives news that the steps she took in Europe for the recognition of Greater Romania have not been in vain. In this case too, the composer prefers a music devoid of national "sonorous colour" or patriotic fulfillment.

We believe that Romanian historical films do not necessarily have to contain elements of predominantly national musical language but inserting musical illustrations or folklore-inspired adaptations throughout the soundtrack, as well as creating original scores that come close to the specific sound of the music that Romanians play and listen to, would enhance the cinematic emotion much more realistically and effectively. For example, composer Mircea Istrate showed great mastery in creating the musical score for the 1968 film *Răzbunarea haiducilor*, directed by Dinu Cocea, a film in which the picturesque characters develop an "attractive and well-articulated plot", woven with folkloric motifs, according to critic Călin Căliman (Căliman, 2000, p. 210). In addition to the original music which is congruous with the other filmic units, the film's soundtrack also contains fragments of folk music. The choral fragment accompanying the final scene of the film demonstrates the potential of Romanian

music in emphasising the national element in films. A remark is needed here: it is not always customary in Romanian films to meticulously add in the credits the origin of all the musical sources included in the soundtrack.

The main musical theme from the film *Ștefan cel Mare – Vaslui 1475*, music by Theodor Grigoriu, also used a year earlier, namely in 1974, in the film *Frații Jderi*, is one of the most successful scores in Romanian film music. Based on a pentatonic musical motif, i.e.

Fig. 1 Th. Grigoriu, the main motif in the film's music theme
Ștefan cel Mare – Vaslui 1475

… benefiting from a well thought out orchestration, this narrative theme uses music to tell the dramatic story of the Romanians led by the great voivode in the fight against the Ottomans. While in other films the composer preferred predominantly atonal scores with dissonant sonorities that are more or less congruous with the other filmic units, examples including the films *Neamul Șoimăreștilor*, 1965, *Pădurea spânzuraților* (Forest of the Hanged), 1965, *Dacii*, 1967, *Columna*, 1968, etc., in the case of the theme from *Frații Jderi*, artfully rearranged in *Ștefan cel Mare – Vaslui 1475*, the Romanian composer opts for a tonal-modal music that is an excellent support for the narrative plane of the film.

On the other hand, in Romanian films that copy universal themes such as the detective film model, appropriate music from the same vein should be used. An example of excellent jazz-pop music used in the soundtrack of the first Romanian detective film, i.e. *Cu mâinile curate* from 1972, is Richard Oschanitzky's score. The fashion of jazz and pop sounds in film music suggested by Henry Mancini in the series *Peter Gunn*, 1958-1961, or in the famous *The Pink Panther*, a series which started in 1963, by Lalo Schifrin, especially in the music of the series *Mission Impossible*, 1966-1973, or even by Alex North, in the film *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951, is introduced in Romania as well by the talented musician Richard Oschanitzky.

5.5. Representative songs – the exogenous motivation of more or less commercial film music:

The song *Love or Money* from the film *Under the Cherry Moon*, 1986, music by Prince Rogers Nelson vs. (*I've Had) The Time of My Life* from the film *Dirty Dancing*, 1987, music by John DeNicola and Donald Markowitz, lyrics by Franke Previte, performed by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes

The film *Under the Cherry Moon*, a 1986 romantic dramedy musical, "won" 5 *Golden Raspberry* Awards, Prince being a three-time recipient, for the

weakest musical-filmic components: original song, direction and lead actor. Harshly criticised by commentators, the film nevertheless had a *soundtrack* called *Parade* that sold over 1 million copies, for which it went *Platinum*! The assertion made in the first part of this essay, that the intrinsic value of a piece of music is not reflected in the commercial value of the musical product, is also demonstrated by the song *Love or Money* from this film, which was not included on the album with sound samples from the film, a song based on a monotonous, inexpressive and boring melody, with simplistic rhythmic accompaniment structures repeated obsessively, a straying harmony that seems to belong in a completely different song, etc., all in all a kind of noise pollution.

On the other hand, the song (*I've Had) The Time of My Life* from the ending of the movie *Dirty Dancing*, a romantic drama about dancing, can be seen as a genuine value. This *Oscar*, *Golden Globe* and *Grammy*-winning song, also created in the style of '80s American pop music, included on the album containing the *soundtrack* of the film, which received two platinum discs, has a pleasant melodic line performed by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes, as a dialogue or polyphony in which the two voices often overlap at intervals of sixths or thirds. Seamlessly integrated into the film, the song begins with a prelude in which the voices are accompanied only by an electric piano and synthesiser. The stanza is based on the vocal line built on an instrumental harmonic pedal that suggests suspense, resulting in alternating consonances and dissonances between melody and harmony. The pre-chorus and chorus, in which the rhythmic-harmonic structures follow the melodic performance, perfectly amplify the dancers' synchronisation.

Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari (Soldiers. Story from Ferentari), 2017 vs. *Ani de liceu* from *Liceenii,* 1986, music by Florin Bogardo.

Dramedy directed by Ivana Mladenović in 2017, based on Adrian Schiop's novel of the same name, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* (Soldiers. Story from Ferentari)*,* tells the story of an anthropologist who, after breaking up with his girlfriend, moves to a poor neighborhood from Bucharest. In his attempt to write a doctoral thesis on manele, the main character begins a love affair with a Roma man. In my opinion, the film is an eloquent example for the promotion of the LGBTI community and the Roma ethnicity, while the artistic quality of the film elements has no relevance. The Prix Découverte award granted at the 32nd edition of the *Festival International du Film Francophone de Namur*, as well as other mentions and nominations, made me seriously question the future of cinema. The musical sequence selected from the film is relevant.

On the other hand, I have selected the representative song from the film *Liceenii*, directed in 1986 by Nicolae Corjos. Composed by Florin Bogardo, the song *Ani de liceu*, performed by Stela Enache in duet with the author, far exceeds the notoriety of the film so loved by the teenagers of the '80s and beyond. Created in the style of easy-listening Romanian music of the time, the song benefits from

good vocal interpretation and a remarkable symbiosis between an inspired melody and a literary text that is the quintessence of the film. The perfect congruence between the musical side and the other filmic units is noteworthy, a model for the relevance of a representative song used in films.

5.6. On the quantity of musical events in films

- balanced use – *Drumul oaselor*, 1980, music by George Grigoriu;
- high density of music – *Blonde Venus*, 1932, music by Franke Harling, Richard Whiting, Sam Coslow, Ralph Rainger, Oskar Potoker, etc.;
- the almost total absence of music in "new wave" Romanian films – *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005, music by Andreea Păduraru[5], *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, 2007.

Drumul oaselor is the first film in the Mărgelatu series, made in 1980 and directed by Doru Năstase, a historical adventure film which benefits from a cast of actors from the golden era of Romanian cinema: Florin Piersic, Marga Barbu, Ion Marinescu, Iurie Darie, Ernest Maftei, etc. George Grigoriu's masterful music is a model score for Romanian films, very well and carefully integrated with the film's story. Music is used exactly where it needs to act as an acoustic support for the image. The main theme of the film, inspired by Ennio Morricone's song *Ecstacy of Gold* from the film *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, appears several times, in whole or in part, with several variations pertaining to timbre, melody, rhythm or harmony. This narrative theme acts as a leitmotif for the journey of unpredictable adventures the characters of the film go through.

Billed as a drama, Josef von Sternberg's 1932 film *Blonde Venus* has nondiegetic or diegetic musical scores included in over 50% of the film's running time (Buhler & Newmayer, 2014, p. 33), with music composed by Franke Harling, Richard Whiting, Sam Coslow, Ralph Rainger, Oskar Potoker, among others. Songs performed by Marlene Dietrich in the movie, such as "You Little So-and-So", "I Couldn't Be Annoyed", "Hot Voodoo" stand out in the music score, the latter lasting for almost eight minutes.

I ask myself the rhetorical question of why some filmmakers choose to do away with music altogether, thus depriving audiences of the referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic meanings of sonic art, both in terms of perception and emotion, which are considered primary-level mental processes, involuntary and autonomous rather than consciously elaborated, and in terms of projections onto the cognitive plane. This is the case of some films from the neorealist Romanian "new wave", such as *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (The Death of Mr Lăzărescu) or *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days), films very well received both by film critics and viewers.

---

[5] Although the credits mention "Original music by Andreea Păduraru", the musical contribution of the mentioned person is not apparent from the content of the film score.

In addition to the substantial input brought by the film industry, the art of cinema has succeeded in asserting itself over the last 100 years or so also due to the fact that it is a synthesis of the arts that existed until the end of the 19th century and that it appeals to several senses. Such is the case with the sense of sight, stimulated by images based on elements and principles of fine art like sets, costumes, make-up, masks, architectural elements, sculpture, design, painting, graphics, photography, but also inspired by dramatic art, such as acting. Another example is hearing, with stimuli coming from the acoustic atmosphere of the film, edited, mixed and mastered in the final stage of sound editing, i. e. silence, speech, nature sounds or noises, some *foley* sounds and music, which can be credits, narrative music, leitmotif and thematic development, *background* music, non-thematic music, isolated musical sounds, representative songs and ending music. When the actors and narrators say their lines, literature is also expressed, which is received by the filmgoer either through hearing or by reading the subtitles. Thus, I believe that a film is all the more expressive when all the other arts are harnessed effectively and in accordance with the technology existing at the time, in what Martin Scorsese called the key elements: *word, movement, light, sound, time* and *the eyes of the filmgoer* (Fredfilmradio, 2015). If a soundtrack contains memorable music, the film will only benefit from this. If the music is kitsch or wrongly associated, in a kitsch-like manner, with the other filmic units, then the film will suffer. However, how should a film with no musical moments be analysed, so that the perception of some sequences or of the entire film, the triggering and shaping of emotions and the projection on a cognitive level will not be "aided" by musical art? Is the association between "no-music" and other filmic units a superior form of expressiveness of a film?

6. Conclusions

A kitsch musical score is not justified in a "serious" association with other filmic elements because it does not respect unity in the organisation of features on the three levels — stylistic, narrative and thematic. On the other hand, it is debatable whether kitsch music used to "mock" or "make fun of" other kitsch aspects in a film could contribute to enhancing cinematic emotion, from the perception phase all the way up to concrete projections on a cognitive level. In my view, using kitsch music to parody an ensemble consisting of a sub-average script combined with poor acting, based on unprofessional editing where image and light were used haphazardly, is not an artistic act.

The incongruous or unempathetic pairing of quality music with other valuable filmic elements, as per the "artistic salad" criterion, is a coordinate that could compromise a cinematic work, through negative expert criticism and a lukewarm reception of the filmgoers. There are also a few cases of films in which a sequence is underlined by incongruous or unempathetic music but strong and complex arguments are needed to justify such atypical associations.

A general conclusion about kitsch would be that it is eternal and goes hand-in-hand with authenticity, with value. But, naturally and judging optimistically, bad taste can be a precursor to good taste. "A sliver of kitsch exists in any kind of art, says Broch[6], because in any kind of art there is a minimum of conventionalism, of a desire to please the customer, from which no master is exempt." (Moles, 1980, p. 6) On the other hand, "a high culture [...] cannot survive the triumph of fantasy, cynicism and sentimentality. For these re-focus our emotions. They cheapen our endeavors, by directing them away from what is serious, long-term and committed, towards what is immediate, effortless and for sale" (Scruton, 2017, p. 94).

References

Căliman, C. (2000). *Istoria filmului românesc (1897-2000)* [*History of Romanian Film (1897-2000)*]. București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române.

Moles, A. (1980). *Psihologia kitschului. Arta fericirii* [The Psychology of Kitsch. Art of Happiness]. București: Editura Meridiane.

Paraschivescu, R. (2006). *Ghidul nesimțitului*. [*The Pachyderm's Guide*]. București: Editura Humanitas.

Scruton, R. (2017). *Cultura modernă pe înțelesul oamenilor inteligenți*. [*An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*]. București: Editura Humanitas.

Borden, D. & Duijsens, F. & Gilbert, T. & Smith, A. (2010). *Filmul – regizori, genuri, capodopere – de la origini la al doilea război mondial*, vol. 1. [*Film – Directors, genres, works of art – From origins to the second world war*]. București: Editura Litera.

Buhler, J. & Newmayer, D. (2014). *Music and the Ontology of the Sound Film: The Classical Hollywood System*. Oxford University Press.

*** (Fredfilmradio), 2015. *4 – Limbajul cinematografic* [*4 – The cinematic language*] (podcast), Fred, February 7.

---

[6] Hermann Broch (1886-1951) – Austrian proser and essayist.