
REVIEWS

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Tobias Pontara, *Andrei Tarkovsky’s Sounding Cinema: Music and Meaning from Solaris to The Sacrifice*, New York & London: Routledge, 2020, 206 pp.

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Few figures in the history of cinematography have managed to achieve cult filmmaker status like Andrei Tarkovsky (1932–1986). This versatile Russian director, screenwriter, film theorist and aesthetician crafted unique sonic worlds in his short film oeuvre by weaving together fragments of original and pre-existing music. Yet, despite his distinctive poetico-narrative exploration of cinematic soundscapes, Tarkovsky’s contributions have been sadly overlooked in academic circles for decades. In his latest monograph, *Andrei Tarkovsky’s Sounding Cinema: Music and Meaning from Solaris to The Sacrifice*, Tobias Pontara attempts to fill this “gap” in film music scholarship

by delving deeper into the musical aspect of five of the director’s feature films.

The extensive research and decades of dedication that have gone into this monograph underscore the author’s unwavering commitment to the subject matter and his profound expertise in the research field. This book, comprising 163 bibliographical references, 15 digitally edited film stills and three score fragments, consists of seven thoughtfully crafted chapters that together form a coherent whole. The author initiates the discussion by introducing the reader to the metaphysical dimensions of Andrei Tarkovsky’s cinematic world, primarily through a hermeneutical exploration of the narrative. Significantly, throughout the book and notably in the introductory chapter, Pontara meticulously points out

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factual errors and omissions in the musical discourse that have found their way into discussions among Tarkovsky's film theorists. Accordingly, he bases his discursive flow on musicologico-narrative analyses, demonstrating the complexity and diversity (but not unlimited interpretive freedom) of comprehending genre- and stylistically diverse musical references.

In contrast to the other chapters of the book, which contain the usual case study components, the second chapter is characterised by a strikingly dense content structure and a taxonomically fractured discourse. Namely, in the film *Solaris* (1972), the author observes various non-binary narrative musical structures. The discussion of the nuanced levelling of musical narration applied to the cinematic use of Johann Sebastian Bach's chorale prelude *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* is enriched by theoretical and methodological insights drawn from Claudia Gorbman's concept of "metadiegetic music" and Robynn Stilwell's exploration of the "fantastical gap between diegetic and nondiegetic". At the same time, special attention is paid to the specific dichotomous relationship between electronic and classical music in film, a topic that will be further elaborated theoretically in the following chapters of the monograph. For instance, the electronic score of the film *Mirror* (1975) is associated with a supernatural humanist presence, marked by a sonic abstraction that delves into the realm of existential Otherness and abjectness. Fragments of classical music, on the other hand, deepen the

intimate space of the main character in a meaning-related and conceptual way. Therefore, although the selected examples from classical music are crucial in expressing the protagonist's mental images and emotional depth, the author also attempts to determine how electronic music enhances the effect of his alienation.

The film *Stalker* (1979) receives a distinct theoretical elaboration in the fourth chapter of the book. The discussion extends to the realm of composite film sound, exploring the intricate divide between classical and electronic film scores. By introducing the term sonic figure – a "unified sound gestalt" (17) merging the triumphant pathos of Ludwig van Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" or Maurice Ravel's "Bolero" with the noise of trains – the author establishes the link between the recognisable sound image at the end of the film and a symbol of the technological, political and ideological development of post-Enlightenment society. The concept of the sound figure, however, is anything but static. As the author asserts, it undergoes a dynamic transformation or recoding that fundamentally reshapes the meaning of both musical and non-musical sounds in the film. Tarkovsky's remarkable aural imagination is particularly evident in the film's ambivalent use of classical music, which differs markedly from his earlier works that foregrounded baroque compositions and electronic sounds. In the context of this cinematic masterpiece, the director strategically dispensed with baroque musical content. He also eschewed long, flowing musical

phrases, opting instead for a distorted and fragmented use of pre-existing sonic material. This remarkable stylistic, structural and conceptual shift in the treatment of classical music probably led Pontara to classify the non-Baroque musical fragments in Tarkovskian cinema as “Post-Baroque music”. Accordingly, the author has rightly identified *Stalker* as an important turning point in the director’s sounding cinema, because instead of a somewhat predictable dichotomous relationship between classical and electronic music, it instead sheds new light on the nuanced interaction between the composite film score, human emotions and the socio-political climate.

Various forms of deep nostalgia characterise Andrei Tarkovsky’s next feature film, which is rich in emotionally stimulating musical examples. In *Nostalghia* (1983), the complicated interplay between Beethoven’s and Verdi’s music is explored in depth. Pontara refrains from attributing the peculiar blending of classical and local musical elements (such as Verdi’s Requiem and the Russian folk song *Oi Vi Kumusciki*) to arbitrary directorial choices, for their poetics are remarkably compatible. It is particularly commendable that the author recognises the profound layers of meaning in the Requiem Mass and its multi-layered role in the film’s narrative, avoiding a simplistic description of the musical flow. While exploring the evident associations between the music and the visual narrative (e.g. the Requiem Mass’s connection to the protagonist’s death and his shattered ideal of Italy), Pontara congruently aligns

the musical practices with the film’s distinct spiritual resonance.

In the book’s sixth chapter, the author deepens the hermeneutic discourse using the liminal musical spaces of the film *The Sacrifice* (1986) as an example. Through an analysis of the film’s ambivalent narrative – whose paradoxical simultaneity oscillates between dream and reality, the ideological critique of utopian socialism and capitalist consumerism – the author observes a specific kind of non-binary sonic spatiality, which he calls “transcendental diegetic music”. It is a remarkably heterogeneous level of musical narration that coexists at the margins of narrative diegesis while manifesting itself aurally in *The Sacrifice* through pastoral Scandinavian music and the sound of the Japanese flute. The author logically connects these sonic fragments to the existential brokenness of the protagonist, thus acknowledging the central role of music in emulating and conceptualising humanistic inner spirituality. Considering the unique structure of the film, which blends black and white with colourful moving images – a technique Tarkovsky had employed in his earlier works – Pontara presents the reader with multiple interpretations of film scenes. These interpretations explore the role and significance of film music as a catalyst for perceptually evoking transformative elements, such as love and spirituality on the one hand and the stark emptiness of everyday life on the other.

The utopian function of music in Tarkovsky’s films is the subject of the book’s concluding chapter. Although the

author first summarises the already known research results in this chapter, he also provides the reader with alternative interpretations of Andrei Tarkovsky's specific diegetic world. Thus, the paradigm of the "Tarkovskian diegesis" is used to deepen the discussion of the narrative indulgence of applied music, and alternative options to the transcendental diegesis are considered using the example of interpretative diversity and hermeneutic flexibility. A special space is devoted to the oft-initiated discussion of the meaning of artistic, electronic and traditional music, with reference to the director's philosophico-aesthetic experiments on musical art and film. Pontara devotes the last subchapter to a discussion of the director's problematic utopianism, concluding that artistic music in the Russian creator's films is always compromised by the presence of conflicting sonic, visual and stylistic elements.

The book *Andrei Tarkovsky's Sounding Cinema: Music and Meaning from Solaris to The Sacrifice* is distinguished by exceptional methodological insights, a solid dramaturgical structure, a discursively consistent tone and remarkable re-

search findings. It represents a valuable scholarly contribution to the Russian cinematographic tradition and to film musicology in general. The particular value of the monograph lies in the recontextualisation of the director's own autopoetic utterances, which bring the reader closer to his artistic and aesthetic ideal of music. For the way Andrei Tarkovsky introduces the (listening) spectator to the world of cinematic reality/illusion confirms that it is the musical component that provides unique expressive possibilities beyond the clichéd affective stimulation of romantic sound. Nonetheless, the omission of the first two feature films, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), may leave the reader longing for more insight into the director's initial artistic poetics, given that music plays a crucial role in the audio-visual storytelling. This should not, however, overshadow the overall positive assessment of the monograph, bound to be a valuable resource for film theorists and aficionados alike, offering a holistic understanding of the Tarkovskian provocatively unique sounding cinema.