**Music speaks: the role of emotional expression in music for sci-fi fantasy films**

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**Introduction: multimodal translation in sci-fi fantasy films**

How might music ‘speak’ and express emotion to its listener in film? If music ‘speaks’ (Albright 2009), then what does it say, and how does it say it? These questions are not new: the cultural turn in musicology has led many to ask what music means (Cook 2001; Kramer 2014), and indeed how it means, especially since the translation turn (Backmann-Meddick 2009), and more recently the transmedial turn (Minors 2021). Further questions have been raised about the interdisciplinary and collaborative context of much music making, which has led those working in dance (Jordan 2000; Minors 2020), opera (Minors 2013, 2016), multimodal communication (Kress 2010, 2019; Minors 2019), and film (Gorbman 2001, 2003; Kalinak 1992, 2010) to explore the intersectionality between these disciplines. The intersections of the audio-visual multimedia art forms needs further probing. Multimodal translation is a ‘turn’ itself as more scholars question how sense is transferred between, across and through media (Boria et al, 2019). In the case of emotion, there is a long lineage of research in music psychology. Indeed, much film theory has been divided by the disciplines of film studies, musicology and psychology. Of interest is not these divisions, but rather questions concerning the process of communication. When music transmits its ‘message’, and spectators interpret its meaning, that meaning is variable in that each listener will hear something different and therefore construct their understanding differently. As Cook (2001) proposed, meaning is ‘emergent’ in the context of the reception of the film. How might an understanding of the translation process from translation studies offer a supplementary way to reassess how music is able to communicate (and generate emotion) to (and in) the spectator? Specifically, how is music able to construct the emotional space in narrative for film? Music is already considered to be effective in film. As Gorbman asserted: ‘Film music is at once a gel, a space, a language, a cradle, a beat, a signifier. It bonds… narrative event to meaning, spectator to narrative, spectator to audience’ (Gorbman, in Dickinson 2003: 39).

Music is ‘superior to language because it is not fixed to the particular’ (Shaw-Miller 2009: 3). Of significance here is the perspective that ‘an artwork is an artwork precisely because it is especially susceptible to translation into an alien medium’ (Albright 2014: 215). Albright questioned: ‘can music aspire to more precise kinds of translation?’ (2009: 3). To explore how translation methods enable us to chart how music expresses (or generates) emotion in film, I refine my context to that of the sci-fi fantasy film genre. Why this genre? Music takes a greater role to make the foreign seem familiar, when non-human, non-lingual beings are constructed to express human emotions. In what follows, I set out the context and ideas behind multimodal translation, film music, music and emotion. Then examples are used to illustrate how music facilities the expression and interpretation of emotion within sci-fi fantasy film.

Jakobson established the concept of ‘intersemiotic translation’ (1959), referring to the translation from language to a non-verbal system, such as music. This has been expanded in multimodal contexts (Kress 2019; Kaindl 2019). Music cannot translate words but it can speak of itself, expressing through its own means. Sounds are associated with ideas. Such associations are de-coded by those who are culturally aware of them. Such de-coding relies on a process of translation. As Kramer proposes: ‘the process of “translation” therefore presupposes some sort of vital relationship between music and text’ (Clayton et al 2003: 126). Audio-visual media express through and between these senses.

I agree that ‘we partly hear with our eyes and see with our ears’ (Donnelly 2015: 31). Within a film context, music is part of the multilayered mode; it is part of the sonic layer alongside speech and other sound effects, such as foley. It works with the narrative to present the unified artistic form that is film. This does not mean it mirrors the image content. We rely on translation, whether to assess the audio-visual divide that recognizes the differences between what we see and hear, or to create the total film unit, in collaboration between composer, sound editor, director and so on. At every level, film relies on communication in a multimodal context, from its creative context, to its reception by both the film creators and spectators.

This chapter explores how music functions within narrative sci-fi fantasy film to produce the expression of emotions. All narrative films aim to engage the spectator, but a particular group of genres relies more than most on music’s ability to make the unfamiliar seem familiar and therefore facilitate the expression of emotions with which the spectator can empathize. Sci-fi fantasy usually include non-human characters in settings that can be categorized as earth, space, or alien planet. This Other, whether it be an alien species, an alien place, or something unfamiliar in the realm of our own culture, needs to be introduced in film in such a way that the spectator understands the role that Other has in the narrative. Music facilitates engagement with the characters through expressing their emotions through music, enabling a spectator to connect on an empathetic level. The spectator is active in their own translation process: they create their meaning.

The emotional need to connect with the characters, scenes and contexts does not preclude the use of an-empathetic music (in other words music, sounds and effects that contradict the current tone, mode, atmosphere), and rather than requiring similarity in form or musical parallelism (mickey-mousing), the scene in fact often requires media to function differently, to produce media ‘dissonance’ (Albright 2000). Meaning is produced through the combination of the media in this multimodal genre. Differences between media need not produce an incoherent message, rather as Cook proposes (2001: 103), if media are ‘vying’ for attention they each supplement meaning producing a new message from their combination. This multimodal diverse combination is why translation is highly relevant – different art forms together speak as one.

**The translational turn in music**

Why refer to translation within the context of music and film? The translational turn happened over a decade ago when scholars became more aware that translation was a central part of intercultural exchange. Translation is not only a process of language transfer (Minors 2013). Translation methods for charting multimedia transfer, especially the interface between different media (Minors 2021), can be helpful to reassessing the audio-visual relationship in film. What translation offers in language and culture is an observation of difference: the ‘betweenness’ of that difference and the connections to deliver and access meaning across such divides is the focus of this chapter and also the reason why translation processes are needed in the study of the creative arts. Translation draws attention to the multimodal communication between the elements of film, to the need for the spectator to be active, in order that the spectator can empathize with the alien characters and situations. Without such an understanding, the narrative would lose its emotional and dramatic impact.

As Bachmann-Medick showed in establishing the ‘translational turn’ (2009, 2) the ‘interfaces’ between fields is worthy of exploration. When a word or idea travels from one language system to another, we find an equivalent word, but the concepts in travelling between modes must adapt and develop. The disciplinary boundaries and restrictions of translation in language is limited and now understood to be outdated. In the post-millennium world, we communicate increasingly via multimodal and digital means. Music and translation as a field of scholarly study has been developed by translators, musicologists and linguists (Susam-Sarajeva 2008; Minors 2013, 2016, 2019, 2021; Apter and Herman 2016; Desblache 2019). The transfer of meaning between the composer and listener, between music and the visual component of film, or between screening and spectator are areas where an act of interpretation takes place which relies on a process akin to that of language translation, as the creators issue a ‘message’ (the film) which is received by the spectators.

In looking to translation as a ‘new means of knowledge and a methodologically reflected analytical category’ (Bachmann-Medick 2009, 4) we are able to consider the process of Transmitter-Message-Receiver, outlined by Roman Jakobson (1960: 350–377), as analogous to our interpretation of multimedia (Minors 2021). What Bachmann-Medick calls for is a greater emphasis on the ‘interstices and a focus on mediation’ (2009: 4). Likewise, I seek to explore how we mediate our understanding of a message in non-verbal ways. As Eisler discussed, the role of music in film is to create ‘question and answer, affirmation and negation, appearance and essence’ (Adorno and Eisler 1994: 70). There is much negotiation: translation can be ‘seen as a process of negotiation between texts and cultures’ (Bassnett 2014: 5–6). That process is highly relevant to understanding the use of music in film, even more so when that use of music speaks on behalf of the Other.

Music is one of the many communicative modes in film, but its role in creating and encouraging emotional empathy in the spectator is vital. As the history of silent film has shown (Kalinak 1992), music was added early on in film’s development to support the narrative and to break down the unusual ‘silence’ of the image. Life is innately multimodal. In order to demonstrate how music can express emotion, it is necessary to explain how music means. Meaning is ‘emergent’ (Cook 2001) in the experience of the sound, it has a supplementary role in film (Derrida 1976) enabling the expression of emotions within the context of film. Music is used in a variety of ways in film, often to speak on behalf of a character or culture, when words are not sufficient. It is a vital component of the film media, and is often accredited as contributing the emotional heart to the film (Desblache 2019). Whereas language in film can be dubbed or subtitled, the music remains, projecting its message across language borders, in the various versions of the films on international release.

The opening inter-titles of the seminal sci-fi film *Metropolis* (1927) are significant: ‘[The] mediator between head and hand must be the heart’. The inter-title was taken from the book written by Thea Von Harbou (the wife of the director) (2013: iv). This is a call to appreciate the emotional understanding of a story. As a silent film with inter-titles and a live orchestra score composed by Gottfried Huppertz, it is a significant example of music used to introduce the Other and make it understandable. The composer of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *The Aviator* (2004), Howard Shore, shared that: ‘I consider music an emotional language, particularly with this kind of subject, and my approach was often intuitive, an expression of the moment.’ (Adams 2011: xi). An intuitive approach sounds wise. If Shore responds in a way that is immediate, it is culturally and historically located and likely to be familiar to this contemporaneous spectator. It utilizes his own emotive responses which are translated via first his own understanding of the scene, then via his musical application, then latterly by the spectator. The intersections between media and message enable the delivery of meaning that is ‘emergent’ in the spectator: ‘meaning is not intrinsic but a product of relationships’ (Cook 2001: 3).

Language systems have a semantic structure; film has a set of codes and ways of doing things which have become familiar within genres. As Schatz noted: ‘the film genre as a textual system represents a set of rules of construction that are utilized to accomplish a specific communicative function’ (Scheurer 2008: 8). Such codes are well established in the sci-fi fantasy genre including: visual codes of high rise buildings, towers or vehicles flying in the air (*Metropolis* 1927, *Star Wars* 1977, *Bladerunner* 1982); or robots, technologically supplemented humans (*Metropolis*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* 1951); or monoliths (*2001 A Space Odyssey* 1968, *Arrival* 2016); or human replicas (*Bladerunner*); or life under water (*Shape of Water* 2017). It has become commonplace to hear sounds from digital sources, especially the theramin, from 1970s. Music has been considered to be diegetic or non-diegetic (Gorbman 1980). It often uses motivic associations, which can be associated with characters, visual images and ideas. As such, it is an active expressive component.

If music is able to express emotion, then it has an emotive response and significant impact on the narrative of a film and its spectator. As music can make us ‘shiver when listening to Vivaldi’s *Winter* concerto from the *Four Seasons*’ (Chanan, in Minors 2013: xiii), in illustrating music’s emotional capacity in film, this chapter makes reference to a model of expressive potential of the voice from popular music studies (Moore 2016). Moore charts four relational levels (intimate, private, social, public) which enable the listener to interpret meaning from nonverbal gestures. I expand this in the context of Jakobson’s transmitter-message-receiver model.

Figure 1: relational associations

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| Category of relational type | Communication Between Characters  |
| Intimate | One to one, can hear breathe |
| Private | In doors, a few close friends, individuals in the foreground |
| Social  | In groups, not only those close friends and family, individuals start to blend with the background |
| Public | Alien, space. The individual is but part of a much larger context |

The categories can give us a sense of who we hear and how we hear them (See Figure 1). These categories are important for two reasons. First, as they draw from the vocal presence in popular music they can remind us that it is not only the sound of the music that is important but the very sound of any alien, planet or Other world which helps set the scene as part of the sound-track. Second, it can help us consider how the music is used, whether it offers an intimate scene where words and characters are in the foreground, or where music become more dominate to express on behalf of the action or to silence activities occurring on the screen.

One film of particular significance to both translation and to music’s role in expressing emotion is *Arrival* (2016), which follows linguist Louise Banks as she attempts to translate the language of aliens who have parked monolithic ships across the globe. The story questions how we translate and interpret meaning. It embodies the issues here: ‘language is the foundation of civilization. It is the glue that holds people together. It is the first weapon drawn in conflict’ (Villeneuve 2016: Scene 2). The character Ian Donnelly cites these words in the film, written by Banks, as a preface to her book on translation. The aliens in question, named Heptopods, do not communicate in away akin to humans (more below). But their thrumming rhythmic sound offers a significant part of the soundtrack along with a drone.

As *Arrival* makes clear in its narrative, the translation of words, ideas and their meaning is dependent on understanding the context of those words and ideas, which is also dependent on some understanding the context of how the words, gestures, textural symbols, represent and associate ideas, otherwise mistranslations are not only possible but likely. Translation is at the centre of the narrative and therefore the diegesis of film. Translation is central to how we are able to perceive meaning: whether it is felt (emotion), contextualized (within the narrative), situated (within the narrative, e.g. in a memory), affective (emotional response due to the changing narrative), or questioning, such as, *and then what?* (anticipation within the narrative) (Heldt 2013: 129). Music in narrative film is commonplace. In acknowledging that music is released internationally in film (remaining even when the voices are dubbed), it acknowledges that its ability to support, supplement and deliver meaning is vital. The music is able to provide access to a narrative across cultural borders. With this in mind, when we consider music’s role in sci-fi: the role of music is arguably greater – it does not only enable meaning to be better transmitted but it makes the foreign, or alien, seem familiar. It allows the spectator to develop empathy.

**Relational Associations: empathy and emotion**

The two main examples that follow are drawn from narrative sci-fi fantasy films released during 2016-2017 and both premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in their respective years: *Arrival* (2016) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). In both cases, communication and language are an integral part of the story and in both cases the emotional journey changes once communication is instigated. These examples demonstrate: music’s ability to speak on behalf of someone, a culture and a place (whether real or imagined); and music’s capacity to speak on behalf of a non-human species and yet still express emotions and logical meaning to the human characters. The emotional role of music is central to facilitating empathy in the spectator.

The focus is on the ways in which music has the potential for emotional meaning to emerge within, through and during the filmic narrative. There are many shared issues and attributes between these films. Arriving in 2016-2017 they were released during a time of political change globally, when fake news and media streams send stories viral, and technology is able to fake audio and visual content, has meant that interpretation and fact checking have been more important. Awareness of the problems of miscommunication are at the fore of much political debate. Such emphasis on communication during this time further raises the awareness translation processes might bring to the reading of art works, such as film, and beyond. Both these films take translation and communication as their core narrative issues. The potential to communicate, to understand and to co-exist despite difference is a moral attribute of these films. Both films are based on stories. *Arrival*’s screenplay by Eric Heisserer is based on a short story by Ted Chiang, with music by Johann Johannsson. While *The Shape of Water* is based on a screenplay written by the director Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor, with music by Alexandre Desplat. Both have the traditional sci-fi fantasy alien/monster versus human element with the potential for fear feeding misunderstanding.

Film theoryhas often been concerned with diegesis. Gorbman developed the ideas of a diegetic and non-diegetic use of music in proposing that the modes of communication existed in terms of ‘mutual implication’ (1980: 189). Not only do the modes supplement each other, they create ‘a *combinatoire* of expression’ (1980: 190) and so communicate as one, in a cohesive whole. Understanding how such a multimodal text expresses emotion (or facilitates an emotive response) is essential to illustrating how the spectator interprets the filmic meaning, using a process akin to that of translation. Interpreting (Minors 2013: 1) and responding emotionally relies on an act of translation. Kalinak proposes that the media are interdependent (1992: 30). As Kaindl (2019) challenges, translation studies must look wider to go beyond textual and verbal language in order to consider wider forms of multimodal meaning communication. This is even more relevant when we consider the communication and expression of emotions, which though can be delivered with words, are equally expressed through non-verbal means. Genette’s exploration of narration is highly relevant: ‘Who perceives’ (1988: 120)? He distinguishes this from who speaks and who sees. This is relevant to the translational turn in art, as it distinguishes the director/writer/actor/characters (speaking), and the spectator (perceiving). It bears affinity to Jakobson’s communication model: Transmitter-Message-Receiver. Heldt asks in how film speaks, ‘what is perceived’ (2013: 124), and in particular how the spectator understands. Such questions are necessary when we ask how we understand the emotional tone of a scene.

The above theories focus on the interpretation by the spectator, and so draw attention to the translator’s active role in formulating their emotional experience in film. Translation offers the opportunity to look at what is understood from the audio-visual combination, but moreover what is felt in emotive response, how is it affective, situated and anticipated. Transactions occur between music and image text, but they do not need to mimic each other. Their fundamental difference is their power to express together: ‘Why should one and the same thing be reproduced by two different media?’ (Adorno and Eisler 1994: 66). The awareness that communication is multi-directional, active, and relies not only on similarity but also on difference, sometimes confuses – it equates to how we converse as humans. Language is highly structured but its interpretation can be messy. Media must relate in some ways: ‘It is true that there must be some meaningful relation between the picture and the music…. Picture and music, however indirectly or even antithetically, must correspond to each other’ (Adorno and Eisler 1994: 69).

Nevertheless, film has a wide variety of forms and must allow for the different elements each to communicate in their own way, in their own terms. The silent film era relied on music: ‘Music was introduced as a kind of antidote against the picture’ (Adorno and Eisler 1994: 75). Music goes beyond words and images. Music adds implied depth and space to an otherwise 2D screen, though even in 3D experiences it supplements the filmic mode, making it multi-dimensional. It is not natural for humans to experience silence: our bodies make noise. Somehow using a more unnatural element, that of music, mitigates our unease and facilitates a new engaged perspective. We use all out senses when experiencing film and translating (Cronin 2020: 76), so ensuring we see and hear aspects of the narrative as logical and necessitates multimodal communication and therefore multimodal translation. Even in spoken language, we gain much from physical gesture as well as from the spoken words and vocal tone.

What we see and hear is important. As such relational associations (Figure 2) can be refined to identify what we hear, but should also include what we see: an expansion of Moore’s model incorporates isolation, a common narrative feature in sci-fi fantasy.

Figure 2: relational associations in sci-fi fantasy film

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| Category of relational type | Effect / relational connection | Association / Interpretation |
| Isolation | Perceived silence | Expanse of space; lost; unknown |
| Intimate | Breathe sounds; close up; potential for threat of unknown; potential for support from known | Alien close; threat; claustrophobic; potential risk; potential physical potential |
| Private | Enclosed space; potential for character interaction and development  | Cultural setting; specific context of character |
| Social | Alien/non-human space; introduction of new setting | Awareness of the Other; voyeurism of the Other; unknown shock and/or awe |
| Public | Human group; alien group; mixed group; larger context | Reaction to alien/human voice; busy sounds; lots of activity; metropolis; city scape; planet |

**Music and emotion**

There is a long history of music and emotion, not least in music intended to produce emotive response (love songs, tone poems). Scholars have questioned for some time how music elicits emotion, as it is not itself emotional. It facilitates the production of emotions in the listener via association. Aristotle (BC367-347) observed: ‘hearing alone among the objects of sense… affects the emotional temperament of the hearer’ (in Kalinak 1992: 22). Indeed, ‘music appears in classical cinema as a signifier of emotion’ (Gorbman 1987: 79). This link has been considered for over two millennia, but has received much more attention since the cultural turn and the expansion of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Albright was aware of the ‘emotional leakage from one element of a montage into another’ (2014: 116). The multimodal, multidimensional bringing together of the components in film is complex, but this asserts the need not to analyse the components in isolation but rather to consider their interrelatedness. In comparing the process of multimodal translation to that of language, Albright noted further: ‘If a snippet of film is considered a word in the cinema – language of the short take, then it has little meaning itself: exactly as in spoken language, a cinema-word acquires meaning from the context in which it appears’ (Albright 2014: 116). Film should be understood in terms of ‘meanings that are generated through those interactions’ (Cook 2010: 1) between media. As we have a somatic experience of the temporal arts, the spectator needs to be part of their translation process in order to engage with the narrative on an emotional level.

Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva (2008: 189) noted that the ‘mere mention of translation within the context of music opens a huge can of worms for many researchers and practitioners’. That can has been opened wide during the recent translational turn and needs further assessment. Music is not audio description in disguise: ‘the more closely pictures and words are co-ordinated, the more emphatically their intrinsic contradiction and the actual muteness of those who seem to be speaking are felt by the spectator’ (Adorno and Eisler 1994: 77). Something new is produced from the combination.

In commenting on how music and emotion are linked, Larson cautions that ‘music is able to express emotions’ agreeing that ‘a distinction ought to be made between music itself and the experiencing of it’ (2007: 71). The process of translation is a way to understand and see this connection between the message (film narrative) and the spectator’s interpretation (emotive response). The emotion in music is not literal, it is figurative. What else is happening? Our somatic experience of the musical qualities are understood as emotional, but that emotion is generated without a need for a representation of it. If we hear fear *in* music, how do we understand it? We hear something which suggests fear, such as cacophony, extreme dynamics, dissonance, or sounds which mirror vocal screams. There is no direct connection between fear and emotion in music, but we can develop an understanding through association. Music used repeatedly in a specific way, can become known for certain meanings. For example, a rising minor 6th in TV music often denotes nostalgia and melancholy. The repeated experience of specific musical symbols enables the association to be developed.

Music itself does not hold emotion. Signs, such as a major key, are read in a Western culture as happy, but such readings are culturally developed and over generalization can be dangerous, forming only assumptions that are not inclusive. These readings are not necessarily universal but the fact is that anyone can listen and form an understanding pan-culturally. That understanding will vary. The spectator brings together multiple elements to form an interpretation that enables them to read the emotional feelings of the characters. The moment is understood in relation to what has gone before in the narrative. ‘The more complex emotions and moods one seems at times to hear in film music are usually determined relationally, they arise because of the relation between the music to other music and to the general cinematic context’ (Larson 2007: 74). Music has agency within the filmic context. Directors give composers a temp-track, formulated of pre-composed music, to give the composer a sense of what they want. Music is essential to the communication of film, even to the ‘argument in film’ (Green 2010: 82). It is used in communication between director and composer. Music should not rely on parallelism, rather the ‘audience can understand the emotions or qualities that music is portraying even when the music is divorced from the image’ (Green 2010: 82). Such separation can heighten emotion, for example, the horror action of *Joker* (2019) was enacted with wide smiling grins and dance music, gestures associated with pleasant activities.

**Music and the translation of emotion**

The spectator is part of the process of completing the film: they are active as they work to understand the story. Their emotive responses are a result of their own translation process. Their role is one of interpretation. Once the content is understood collectively, one can react to it (empathy). In practice, all this happens in the moment. Recognizing that ‘it is the score that provides added emotional and intellectual weight’ (Deleon 2010, 12) allows a reassessment of music in the context of sci-fi. Music’s role in developing empathy via emotional reaction, and therefore recognition and understanding, seems more important in sci-fi fantasy especially when the alien figure is introduced. Until the filmic content guides the viewer, we do not know how to interpret this figure. Music has capacity to make the alien seem familiar. The music must simultaneously provide a setting, establish context, associate characters to that context, decode friend from foe and illustrate social groupings. To speak on behalf of non-verbal characters (as in *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*) and unknown places the spectator needs their imagination for what cannot be shown on screen, the limited screen cannot encompass the whole of space. Conventions, as Scheurer (2008: 52–61) outlines in relation to early sci-fi horror, can develop negative and positive associations via upward and downward melodic shapes, or using the augmented fourth for instability, and minor intervals for more reflective emotions. He shows that the ascending minor is often used to represent pain, while dissonance and denser orchestral textures are associated with the threat of technology and the unknown. Music can heighten what is disturbing or tone down the fear a situation. Orchestration can give scale, the rhythm/tempo can suggest energy, the tonality might associate the place with a character, while augmented seconds used within otherwise tonal music offers a quasi-feeling of the Other, as used in *Bladerunner* while Decker enters the marketplace (Scene 15). In *Aliens* (1979) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), as just two seminal examples, the music represents the size of the aliens, but, moreover also their confidence, abilities and demeanor through repetition, volume, and dissonance. The musical codes established in Western classical music are often applied in such settings. For example in *Arrival*, the large size of the alien is matched with an exceptional low register drone, constant rhythmic sounds with a lack of regularity, to suggest uncertainty and avoidance of anticipation by the human characters. That uncertainty is projected and shared with the spectator, so that we can empathize with the characters. What is more difficult is the association of human to alien, in which empathy is shared with the alien character. It is however possible. Take for example the friendly nature that is generated toward to the non-human character in *The Shape of Water*. Their response to the LP player, to the music, and to the movement of the lead character dancing, shows a sharing of appreciation for music, and so conveys a human quality (more below). The use of known pre-composed songs also gives us a sense of a safe, friendly character.

To establish a reference point where a spectator can read an association music needs ‘a familiar emotional ring’ (Kalinak 1992: 198). Traditions vary. Much of the American sci-fi film industry works from 1960s onwards uses a classical orchestra, but folk ensembles and styles have been used to represent specific people (see *Star Trek Insurrection* 1999). The very act of translation ‘encourage[s] the search for concepts that cross-cut binary pairs and break open formulaic clusters’ (Bachmann-Medick 2009: 9). Only by crossing binaries are we able to give human characteristics to alien characters.

Translation is not invisible (Venuti 1998) in a filmic context. Translation is ‘poignantly visible and audible’ (Minors 2019: 160). The music in *The Shape of Water* acts as a narrator for the feelings of the characters. It is active on many levels: it enables the spectator to emphasize with them, but it also enables the delivery of the narrative development: as the story changes so does the musical usage (Scene 20). In *Arrival*, recognizing the death of her daughter, Louise is matched with specific music. There is nostalgic music when the daughter is shown, even when the scene shows pregnancy, birth and childhood. Looking back, by using nostalgic minor music, the music is able to support the narrative in showing us that Louise experiences time differently through thinking in an alien language (more below). ‘Of all the arts, music makes the most direct appeal to the emotions’ (Elmer Bernstein in Burt 1994: 10). Burt identities that the emotion is ‘extended by the music’ (Burt 1994: 59). This seemingly ‘direct appeal’ is highly effective in film as it can express information quickly without disrupting the scene. It can issue this information while the characters are speaking: we can digest all the modes simultaneously.

How do we hear the music as contributing to the narrative and therefore our emotional understanding of it? How does music make the alien seem so familiar that we can emphasize with it? ‘Film depends upon music to achieve the illusion of reality’ (Kalinak 1992: 33), music therefore makes the extraordinary and impossible seem feasible. *Metropolis* used noises from the factory: the diegesis of the context is embedded in the soundtrack to give a sense of the city. The recognizable sounds familiarize the spectator with the scene.

Although scientifically, we know that no sound would be heard in the vacuum of space, sci-fi films use sound effects to reinforce the function and action of different activities, such as the phraser fire or blaster weapons in a space battle (see *Star Wars*). Kress’s notion of ‘moving meaning’ in translation (2010: 124) is apt. What a musical feature means is variable depending on the context. Music’s usual role can be amplified in a sci-fi setting as sound design and music offer the back drop to establishing a new place, a new species. The genre can encompass drama, war, love, comedy and sometimes a combination. Historically this has come with various extremes, for example, a stereotypical ‘exotic’ music to amplify the Other and to expose difference and the unknown, or electronic music to establish the future (both heard in *Bladerunner*). The quasi-jazz piano track, accompanied with the diegetic location of the instrument with old photographs (Scene 15), sets the music up as nostalgic and part of Decker’s memory (Scene 13).

Vangelis’s score for *Bladerunner* uses cutting-edge music technology to produce sound as well as special effects therefore integrating the technological advancement of the story forms a nice analogy. Of course, this dates as music advances – there is no way to predict a future’s music and it is created by and for its era. Other films such as *2001 A Space Odyssey* use music that is pre-composed for dramatic effect initially but acts as a perspective on the organic then technological development of mankind. According to Redner (2010: 189) ‘the role of the 2001 cue… is to represent the active translation of Bowman in time, space, and consciousness’. We understand the organic changes of this character and we hear the development of the associated theme in line with the narrative cues. The opening music by Strauss, *Also Sprach* *Zarathustra*, is now seminal. Interestingly too, that the tool the apes use is what starts the human journey through murder. The threat of war (and murder) is a key feature of the language test in *Arrival*. In asking what their purpose is, the humans need to understand the response. As human’s interpret the word ‘weapon’, they panic. Without context is makes little sense. They misinterpret the word as a tool, rather than a way of understanding. Difference sparked fear. Whereas this scenario illustrates that something is often lost in translation, music and multimodal translation often gain a supplementary perspective. The words of Darth Vader’s death scene (*Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* 1983), for example, make lingual sense, but when paired with his leitmotif now in a major key, played in a higher register by flutes and violins, we know he feels remorse. We interpret redemption and therefore a peaceful death.

**Empathy: human and non-human relations**

As a spectator we translate what we see, hear and experience. Music helps anticipate and deal with shock by announcing it and contextualizing it. The sound of the characters breath, movements and steps are integral to the overall soundtrack and add to the emotional layer. The shift from human sound to and from music is often significant, as in the following examples. Moore’s categories (Figures 1 and 2) assist us in considering how music in film can speak of emotions to the spectator, for us to engage with the Other. Distance is inevitable in sci-fi due to the unknown Other, but that also acts an analogy to the spectator, who in their role as translator has a particular position (Kress 2019) in the interpretative process, which is not only that of a spectator, but of a spectator with prior knowledge and experience, in a particular cultural, historical and social context. The non-human character is made to be humanized through the intimate level whereby we hear the alien and human close up. The position of the spectator requires that they empathize with the non-human if they are to have an emotional understanding. Without spectator empathy within the following examples, the emotional impact of the narrative would fall flat.

The *Shape of Water* uses music specifically to enable the spectator to respond empathetically to the non-human character. The soundtrack conveys the unspoken relationship between Elisa (the mute cleaner who saves the non-human character and with whom she develops a romantic partnership). They first meet when Elisa is cleaning the science lab, where the non-human has been kept in a locked vessel full of water (Del Toro 2017: Scene 4). The musical soundtrack uses a solo piano playing a motive (D#, E, C#) illustrated in Figure 3. As Elisa moves to the glass window of the vessel, she and the non-human character touch the glass with their hands, in mirror image. The motive moves to French horns. The association of French horns in classical opera has always been one of the hunt, of strength and of control. It warms the tone of the scene and highlights Elisa’s breath as significant. The closeness of her breath delivers an intimate (Figure 2) scene within this sterile setting. It seems isolating, with only two characters, in a cold, hard surfaced space. The shift from the clarity of the piano notes to the warmth and richness of the horns changes the meaning of the scene. The music tells us that this relationship will grow as the musical motif develops rather than repeating again, and expands its intervals before returning the main motif (D#, E, G, E, D#, C#, D#, E, C#). In the following scene (Scene 5) Elisa returns to the lab, again cleaning. The French horns play an oscillating D-D#, which informs us that the non-human character is present even though they are initially unseen. Elisa moves to the side of the pool and shares an egg with them. The egg as a symbol of life becomes pertinent. The musical motif using only two notes bears affinity to this message as it is the building block of the larger motif.

The connection of these two characters is narrated by music as both characters are mute: music speaks on their behalf. This is consolidated when the main motif moves again from piano to another orchestral instrument, this time the flute (Scene 18): the higher register, softer sound is used as the couple consummate their relationship. The bathroom fills with water and they couple under water. Interestingly, the flute in classical music has often been used to represent water due to the flexibility of the instruments, able to move quickly and smoothly between notes. There is much diegetic music also used in this film, whereby the radio or television is heard in the background. We hear the song *La Javanaise* originally by Serge Gainsbourg (1963) and performed here by Madeleine Peyroux. The lyrics of this song refer to love and dancing, noting the shared love between two people and that it is therefore time for song. Elisa mimes the song, while dancing with her love (non-human character) in a black and white large set, as though they were dancing in a 1950s romance. This is all played out in her imagination, but it is testament to the fact that the music speaks on behalf of Elisa. She experiences her emotions through music, and the spectator pieces together the meaning of the narrative through the combination of the character’s experience and our understanding of it.

*Arrival* likewise uses music to narrate between the characters, but it also uses the overall soundtrack. Moore’s relational categories are highly relevant. We hear Laura’s breath intimately within the space suit (Villeneuve 2016: Scene 6); her sound is at the forefront of the soundtrack as she moves to meet the aliens for the first time. It is notable too as this sound surrounds her introduction of the word ‘human’. The non-verbal sounds of breathing/walking, equate closely to the thrumming of the aliens, whose sound is not that of speech, but of their life force. They communicate through logograms which express sentences in one circular symbol (see Image 1). As such, their language, unlike most human languages, when written does not equate to spoken sound.

Image 1: *Arrival*, Scene 7, 01:06:05.



Photo credit: Filmnation Entertainment and Lava Bear Films - © 2016 XENOLINGUISTICS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The musical accompaniment shares a melodic similarity to *The Shape of Water*. Figure 3 shows the comparison. The motive (C#, C, B) is limited to three notes, echoed and repeated alongside a drone (symbolizing the ship) (Scene 5). It uses the smallest interval of a semi-tone first, but rather than suggesting closure, as at the end of piece (the semitone representing the final close of a musical scale) instead is descend by a minor 3rd. The minor intervals have often been suggestive of sadness, nostalgia. Here I suggest in both cases the minor 3rd offers something which we all recall and recognize as nostalgic, but also incomplete. Might this help us empathize with the non-human characters? They are not set up in the soundtrack as a threat. The music rather introduces them as safe, familiar, yet remaining unknown. The phrase is incomplete, denoting the journey on which these characters will take. As *Shape of Water*, there are mute characters, in this instance, the aliens.

Figure 3: shared motivic melodic shape

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Shape of Water*, Scene 4, introducing the non-human character  | D# – E – C# Semi- minor Tone[st] 3rd[m3] |
| *Shape of Water*, Scene 4, introducing the relationship of Elisa and the non-human character | D# – E – G – E – D# – C# – D# – E – C#  st m3 m3 st tone[t] t st m3 |
| *Arrival*, Scene 5, introducing the Heptopods to Laura | C# – D – B st m3  |

Music in both films is ‘a translation of emotional states’ (Albright 2009: 3), a process Albright notes is relevant to most music. For *Arrival*, in many scenes Laura is alone in the sound track, whereby we hear her breath, and sometimes the melodic motive outlined above, illustrating the intimate connection she has with the aliens when she is on the ship or alone on the base reading and connecting with their language. In three occasions her place in the soundtrack changes. When she experiences the future and becomes aware that this is a side-effect of thinking in the alien language she engages with her future daughter: her breath sound subsides and is replaced by the sound of nature, for example water flowing (Scene 8), which leaves her isolated in the soundtrack. When she first removes her space suit to communicate with the aliens (Scene 7), the soundtrack moves her from an intimate level, where we hear her breath in the foreground, to a move from silence to alien thrumming, to a private sound where her voice and activity is embedded in the wider sound of the ship. Her location in the soundtrack shifts noticeably when she moves to hide to ring the Chinese President. We hear the alien motif while she is outside learning of the end of her mission; her breath and voice are in the foreground in a private setting. Then her sound becomes public as she engages with her colleagues, but as she moves to a hidden location her sound is again intimate, until she engages with the president by phone. We see her experience both the future and the current time, and her location in the soundtrack moves from private to public, as we hear the president speak in her ear during a public celebration event that has yet to happen. These shifts convey how an understanding of the alien language have changed the way she experiences time (Scene 14). The drone, associated with the aliens, returns. The alien motif is used to indicate when she is thinking of them or thinking in their language, and her sonic presence in the soundtrack moves to show the progression of the story. The spectator can engage with her emotional state by identifying where she is within the soundtrack. When her sound is intimate, she feels alone and is acting alone. As soon as her sound is part of the public layer, she is under threat, battling to regain control. ‘Utilizing the familiar to understand the unfamiliar’ is directly akin to the translation process (Deleon 2010: 18). The density of the soundtrack, shifting between the base and the future public party is busy, complex and she is hardly heard; she is battling literally and figuratively not to be silenced. The score and the sound design blend: they are not discreet but work as one.

**Reflections**

‘Such translation of emotions is at the heart of much music’ (Desblache 2019: 304): when we interpret narrative film music the soundtrack is vital parts of the communication process. When director’s use pre-composed music the film borrows the associations of that music. Likewise, when film composers use particular styles, musical gestures and instruments, such meanings can carry through to be embedded into the film text. As shown in the range of examples above, music is not concrete or stable, but an ephemeral art form which adapts throughout the film working as part of the whole sound track. ‘Motion is never far away from emotion’ (Coessens 2019: 63) and the musical shifts within scenes support narrative delivery. In the main examples, the characters are mute, so it is even important to note that ‘communication exceeds verbal language’ (Coessens 2019: 70). This enables us to more clearly chart some of the ways music facilitates a translation of emotion in a particular genre.

This chapter shows that a process of translation can assist us in reconsidering how music is able to express emotions, through the particular example of narrative sci-fi fantasy films. The spectator is dynamic during their experience. As meaning is emergent, they piece the narrative together, but as emotion is suggested across modes, the spectator searches the piece in the moment to recognize and develop empathy with the characters in order to appreciate the emotional journey of the characters. Moore’s relational categories provide a way to reassess the place of the characters within the soundtrack.

Music helps us navigate the emotional aspects of the narrative, connecting with specific characters, setting and object. In sci-fi fantasy is develops spectators empathy with the unknown, particularly with the non-human characters. Sonic cues can tell us whether the situation is dangerous or not, whether the alien is a threat or not: music supports our understanding ‘providing the needed comfort for viewer accessibility and the freedom to present worlds that are fantastic in nature’ (Deleon 2010: 20). The composers’ choices are significant, but the importance is how spectators develop meaning and emotion within this multimodal context.

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