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The Soundtrack of a Leader: Scoring a Psychological Portrait of Megalomania

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The Soundtrack of a Leader: Scoring a Psychological Portrait of Megalomania

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the original score for the 2015 film *The Childhood of a Leader*, which was composed by the enigmatic and reclusive popstar-turned-avant-garde-experimentalist Scott Walker. In particular, the analysis here considers that important function that Walker's score plays in illuminating the central protagonist's evolving megalomaniacal state. The film's narration of a would-be Fascist leader's childhood is punctuated and enhanced by Walker's challenging and aggressive composition, which aurally complements and symbolises the growing disquiet in the youngster's mind. Focussing firstly on the significant influence of European art and culture on Walker's musical style and the role of European cinema and aesthetics in Brady Corbet's direction of the film, the understanding of Walker's sonic techniques and their use in the film become contextualised with a specific grounding in 'European Imagination'. The article also explores the combination of sound and images through conceptual and theoretical notions such as Gilles Deleuze's 'any-space-whatever'; the use of avant-garde sound techniques such as cacophony and distortion in the composition and sound mixing; before concluding with a textual analysis of the film's primary creative mode of aligning music to the characterisation of a megalomaniacal mind.

Keywords

Scott Walker, Soundtrack, European Imagination, *The Childhood of a Leader*, Fascism, Brady Corbet, Gilles Deleuze

Introduction

Brady Corbet's debut feature film, *The Childhood of a Leader* (2015) was particularly notable for its striking and imposing score; composed by the enigmatic, experimental and avant-garde Scott Walker. This marked the first of two film/music collaborations between self-confessed Scott Walker superfan Corbet and his idol. The film concerns a short period in the life of ten-year-old Prescott (Tom Sweet), whose parents have temporarily relocated the family to France whilst Prescott's father, a US Diplomat, helps negotiate the Treaty of Versailles in the aftermath of the First World War. In his observations of the environment and atmosphere of post-war Europe, Prescott begins to test the boundaries of power and control within his strict family dynamic. Structured largely through three acts – labelled as 'tantrums', referring to specific episodes where Prescott acts out to undermine and challenge his authoritarian parents – the film shows the increasing megalomania that is developing within the young boy's mind, ultimately leading to his maturation into a despotic and tyrannical fascist leader akin to Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and other 20th Century European dictators.

In the director's commentary of the Blu Ray release, Corbet states that 'I think [Scott Walker's] music is one of the most identifiable and iconic things about this movie'. Indeed, one of the most prominent techniques used to the elucidate and characterise Prescott's growing self-grandeur is the use of Walker's score as a means of illustrating the growing disquiet within the youngster's mind. To that end, this article focusses upon the interplay between sound and image in the construction and articulation of Prescott's slow-burning pathological tendencies. Particularly, the importance not only of Walker's score and its relationship to the film's themes and images, but also the importance of Walker himself as a creative figure and aural presence within the film will frame this critical analysis. Drawing on interviews and comments from Corbet's commentary of the film, excerpts from television,

film and press interviews with Walker, and close textual analysis of the film itself, this article will illuminate the vital role of European avant-garde artistic culture in influencing both Corbet's direction and Walker's composition; the significance of Gilles Deleuze's notion of the 'any-space-whatever' as a means to explore the combination of score and images and their effect on Prescott's characterisation; and the use of the score as a structural and perceptive device that encourages viewers to follow the leader.

Walker, Brady and 'European Imagination'

In a talking-head segment for the BBC's *The Late Show* (tx.1989-1995) in 1995, former music journalist for *Disc and Music Echo* Penny Valentine described Scott Walker's solo career as 'much more European-looking than anybody else of [his] period.' In highlighting the heavy influence of European music, film, art and popular culture on Walker's own musical style as a solo artist, Valentine's comment touches upon a significant factor that also inflects the style and tone of *Childhood of a Leader* (referred to hereon as *Leader*). In his efforts to secure funding for the production of *Leader*, one of the central challenges facing Corbet, a first-time American director, was his unwavering insistence that the film be shot on location in Europe. As he recalled in a video interview for *Vice* (2016) 'it took years to find the right partners […] it was a strange proposal, and not necessarily a very enticing one because [*Leader*'s] commercial prospects were limited. They were like "you're a young American director, making a European movie with European content" […] and we needed to film it in Europe'. This distinction between Corbet as a non-European filmmaker focussing on content distinctly European in character highlights the transnational aspects of the film and its narrative, which itself features an American diplomat trying to mediate negotiations and agreements between European nations and adversaries in the Paris Peace Conference preceding the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. In some of the first dialogue in

the film, Prescott's father, who is never named in the film and only credited as "The Father" (Liam Cunningham), discusses with Charles Marker (Robert Pattinson) his irritation that the French statesmen he is working with do not find the USA's proposals for German reparations to be suitably severe. Marker responds, 'well no European would', reminding The Father that 'the war was fought on their soil'. One may interpret this as a scripted acknowledgement from co-writers Corbet and Mona Fastvold of the outsider status of their voices on the issue of historical European fascism, which Corbet has stated, both in interviews and the Blu Ray commentary for the film, he feels has deep allegorical parallels to the rise of Trumpism in the contemporary USA.

Indeed, the film may well be categorised in a variety of ways according to the international collaborations underpinning its conceptualisation and production. That the film was eventually able to secure funding from a variety of production companies based in locations such as the USA, UK, France, Belgium and Hungary may well conform to what Mike Wayne (2002: 73) refers to as 'pan-European cinema,' meaning that 'the films are multi-national in terms of funding and usually talent and that they articulate in their subject matter and theme, a shared (if often conflictual) European history, culture and politics.' This would certainly seem applicable to *Leader*, insofar as funding and casting for the film is noticeably international and that the film primarily deals with the vicissitudes of the negotiations between European and American allies about the future direction of Europe in the aftermath of World War I as a backdrop for the growing resentment of authority and entitlement to preferential treatment that emerges from Prescott's observations of these. However, given that key creative input comes from the writing and direction of Corbet and Fastvold and factoring in the grandiose score of Scott Walker shows the influence of American creativity also, no matter how closely aligned and sentimental to European sensibilities these figures may be, perhaps aligning the film more to a theoretical perspective

of transnational cinema rather than pan-European; that being a cinematic mode of film production and interpretation that cannot be located or explained by a single national context (see Rawle, 2018: 2).

However, to become drawn into the minutiae of nomenclature regarding the film's international collaborations and influences is not the intention of this article, nor is it pertinent to the overall discussion. Instead the ambiguity of where the film fits within wider (inter)national discourse attests to the important dynamics that characterise the film's properties and content. In particular, Mark Betz (2009: 57) claims that a particularly noticeable trope of coproduced European art films is that the soundscape of these films becomes especially significant as 'a terrain upon which…trans/national growth and tension may be mapped.' This therefore illustrates the importance of the film's pan-European/transnational conventions and influences as a site for interpreting the function of Walker's score, as well as the film's overall soundscape, to articulate the thematic tensions of the film, especially in relation to Prescott's psychological characterisation.

As previously noted, Walker, like Corbet, also had a well-established affinity with and influence from British and European culture, including the film soundtrack work and music of Michel Legrand, Jacques Brel, and Piere Paolo Passolini, among others. In his own words, Walker, also on *The Late Show* (1995), described British and European films such as *The Rocking Horse Winner* (Pelissier: 1949) and *Lola Montès* (Ophuls: 1955) as having 'a dreamlike quality that the American things didn't have for me' that led to the development of what Walker termed his 'European imagination'. In reflecting on British and European cinema in this way it is perhaps unsurprising that Walker agreed to compose the score for Corbet's Eurocentric project. That the film focusses upon the son of an American man and a Frenchwoman negotiating the liminality of the small European village that he and his family temporarily reside in echoes the manner in which Walker conceptualised his own solo career

and also the motivation driving Corbet's own insistence on shooting the film in Europe. Whilst this may at first appear somewhat coincidental, Corbet makes explicit reference to Walker's Europhilia in *Leader*'s Blu Ray commentary, particularly his admiration for European cinema and fascination with dictatorships in his music (typified by *Clara [Benito's Dream]* from *The Drift* [2006]), and states that it was this knowledge that made him confident in approaching his famously reclusive hero to ask him to write the score. This is suggestive of something of a shared status between the two, positioning both Walker and Corbet perhaps as kindred spirits, or nomadic outliers somewhat, in their fascination with European culture, history and traditions over more conventional or mainstream popular American culture.

In his discussion of politics within European cinema, Mike Wayne (2002: 73-74) outlines the notion of 'translation' as a key mode of European cinema engaging in dialogue with Hollywood. Wayne explains that '[translation] seeks some engagement with popular culture as defined by Hollywood, but here emulation gives way to a reworking of such cultural materials, making them "other" to what they once were and thus claiming them as in some way distinctly European' (ibid). This idea of translation has particular pertinence for considering Corbet's vision for the film. As an American actor-turned-director, some of whose most prominent roles came in films directed by European auteurs with a reputation for transnational outputs such as Michael Haneke (*Funny Games*: 2007) and Lars von Trier (*Melancholia*: 2011), adapting a short story written by Jean-Paul Sartre whilst making allegorical allusions to Trumpism in the USA speaks to this idea of cultural translation. In this manner, one can interpret *Leader* as a reworking of the rise of Trumpism in America into a distinctly European historical narrative about the rise of Fascism in Europe using the cultural materials familiar to Corbet from his experiences of and affinities to European cinema and culture.

In a *Late Show* (1995) interview, music journalist Stuart Maconie explains that:

> It's quite common in rock music and pop music for English, British, or even European artists to ape the mannerisms and culture of American rock. Scott Walker is perhaps a unique example of someone who has gone the other way. He is American, but his concerns as a [solo] artist seemed to have always looked towards Europe, he's got European sensibilities...I think what's striking about him, he's someone who's turned away from his own culture that I think he's always seen as quite frothy, materialistic, and not very deep. There's a sort of darkness about those solo records that is very European…and that's what makes them striking; particularly from someone who'd come from a US pop tradition.

This is a further indication of the similarities between Corbet and Walker as Europhilic creative figures. Where Walker is seen by many, including himself, as someone who turned away from the materialistic culture of American popular culture to instead explore the creative potential of European avant-garde artistic movements, Corbet has been particularly outspoken about how the story of *Leader* is conceptualised as having distinct translative elements that are evocative of Trumpism and the current U.S. political climate, with its rhetorical and ideological alignments to facets of Fascism. Fruela Fernández (2015: 270-278) comments upon the way that Walker, as a solo artist, covered a number of songs from the catalogue of Belgian musician Jacques Brel, translating and performing the lyrics in English, as a way to construct a distinctly European artistic persona to articulate his personal disavowal of U.S culture and celebrity. Fernández views this stylistic shift as a direct challenge to the 'homology expected of a male, mainstream singer' expected in the 1960s pop music scene (ibid: 278). Therefore, there are cogent parallels between the ways that both Corbet and Walker have explored and made use of the ways that European artistic traditions

and movements can simultaneously critique and create distance from the sanitised consumerist ideologies of American popular culture. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that after *Leader* Corbet and Walker collaborated once more for Corbet's second film *Vox Lux* (2018), which presents a much more explicit and direct critique of the American star system through a narrative centred upon Natalie Portman as an unhinged pop star struggling to cope with the demands of fame.

The influence of the European avant-garde on *Leader* is particularly significant not just in its permeating impact on director and composer from a thematic or conceptual standpoint, but also in the textual application and manipulation of the film's score and its relationship to the images. Walker's score is used as a cacophonous presence, and whilst there are numerous lengthy sequences whereby there is no discernible score at all (both Corbet and Walker have independently attested to the huge sonic value of silence in composition), when Walker's music is present it is to grandiose and at times uncomfortable effect. This is evident both in the sonic properties of the music, using an array of discordant and clashing instrumental sections that feature extremes of high and low pitch notes colliding, as well as in the sheer volume of the score's mixing in postproduction. In an interview with *The Guardian*'s Alex Godfrey Corbet explained that his instruction to the sound crew, including Production Sound Mixer Tamás Csaba and Supervising Sound Editor David Vranken, was to intentionally mix the film's score 5% above the Dolby-standard volume level (2016). The effect is therefore that the score becomes an imposing presence with the potential to overload the viewer/listener through its cacophonous composition and sound mixing.

The imposition of the unusually loud mixing of the score connects to the notion of haptic music, that being musical composition that impacts and intrudes upon the body beyond the ears (see Lisa Coulthard [2013] or Miguel Mera [2016]). In short, one is able to *feel*

music due to its sonic and tonal characteristics, including its loudness, allowing composers and musicians to 'deliberately exploit the boundaries between hearing and feeling.' (Mera, ibid: 160-161). The mixing of Walker's score therefore plays on the haptics of music, capitalising on the ability of certain sound effects and musical passages to induce sensations of anxiety, unease and discomfort in the interpretation of narrative (Coulthard, 2013: 118). As Michael C. Heller (2015: 42-43) explains, loudness has a particularly important role in the creation of sound and music that has affective capabilities. For Heller, the creation of affective experiences, such as the sense of anxiety, intrusion or dread created by Walker's ominous score, occur in the interstices between the aural and the haptic, and the fundamental role of loudness in this process occurs at the upper reaches of listeners' ability to withstand the discomfort of sound that approaches the 'near threshold of [physical] pain'.

In particular, the intentional approach to work outside the Dolby standard in the mixing showcases yet another European sensibility. As Coulthard (ibid) explains, a common feature of the European New Extreme cinema has been to defy the sonically crisp and digital purity of Dolby's capabilities for mixing and producing sound by re-inserting sonic "imperfections", such as ambient low-droning noises, back into the mix after the initial Dolby mix is completed. Whilst *Leader* may not specifically qualify as part of the New Extremist movement, owing to its noticeably more restrained tone and less taboo subject matter, this again attests to the importance and influence of approaches taken by filmmakers within that movement whom Corbet has worked with as a performer, such as Haneke and von Trier (who Coulthard specifically discusses within her analysis of this technique). To purposely experiment with a soundtrack not conforming to Dolby recommendations is to further place *Leader* within a European cinematic tradition.

Corbet has explained that, although the mixing of the film's score was deliberately loud, he was keen not to overuse or become too reliant on this sonic tactic. He explains:

> There was an assumption that because the score was quite grandiose, quite gargantuan, that it would be all over the movie. But we had decided early on that there would be an overture and there would be a few key moments where we would remind the audience that the orchestra was present. (2016)

This balance and restraint in deploying Walker's gargantuan score, as Corbet explains, mostly takes the form of including a dedicated overture. The film begins with driving high-tempo low-register strings overlaid on archival shots of the destroyed European landscapes in the immediate postwar environment as well as footage of international diplomats and statesmen arriving in Paris to begin the Peace Conference. The juxtaposition of these segments of footage serves to suggest that the current destruction visible in Europe in the wake of the First World War foreshadows the doomed nature of the Peace Conference, owing to its establishing of the roots in which European Fascism would emerge and take hold in the lead up to the Second World War. Walker's score here adds an ominous presence whereby the driving low bass notes in the strings (with an especially noticeable cello piece) is blended with almost discordant pieces of sinister staccato high-register string interruptions (violins, violas etc.). Corbet has explained in commentary that Walker's early solo material before his more avant-garde later works featured a number of ballads that, in his view, may have been somewhat optimistic or hopeful in their lyrics but were rendered ambiguous by atonal bass lines or searing strings. This is reminiscent of Walker's blend of bass and string sections in the film's overture, using the atonal and sinister musical passages to undermine the potentially optimistic and celebratory nature of the Paris Peace Conference as in fact a catalyst for the rise of 20th Century fascism.

Indeed, the concept of musical atonality is one with historical antecedents connected to the era of Modern Europe and Fascism. For instance, as noted by Ben Earle (2013: 135),

the Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola, an initial supporter of Mussolini and Fascism before later becoming disillusioned with the racial politics of the movement, had noticeable musical influence from the works of Alban Berg. Berg was a protégé of Arnold Schoenberg, the instigator of the 2nd Viennese School and the twelve-tone technique – who inspired Dallapiccola's own compositions, which often made use of the twelve-tone technique and atonality. The 2nd Viennese School is often seen as the birthplace for experiments in atonal composition. Whilst this style of music would, by the late 1930s, be dismissed by Nazi Germany as "degenerate" and harmful – largely down to Schoenberg's Jewish heritage (Rabinbach & Gilman. [2013]: 548) – its impressions on many other European composers of Modernist persuasion in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Dallapiccola and composers belonging to the Italian Futurist movement (itself an artistic movement with many ideological links to Fascism), did indeed indicate the cultural impact of the atonal music movement in wider artistic discourses that were intractably connected to fascist politics. This influence on modes of expression linked to European fascism in fact led to some suggesting Schoenberg himself was a sympathiser of Fascism (see Feisst, [2011]: 7). Therefore, Walker's inclusion of atonal elements and underscores within the film's musical overture offers a befitting accompaniment to the film's wider themes by alluding to a sonic and musical technique with longstanding historical intertexts to fascist ideology within Modernist Europe of the 1920s and 1930s.

As the film's overture progresses, the camera cuts from the archival footage to a high angle shot focussed on train tracks that begins to hurtle along, as if from the very front of a rapidly accelerating train. Again, this motion, that offers very little in narrative terms, seems to complement the ferocity of the score's tempo and continues the sense of an acceleration towards disaster that was established in the archival sections. The movement of the scene culminates in a slow-dollied shot away from the train and in through the window of a church,

in which a series of children dressed as angels descend from a staircase. The last of the children is Prescott, whose head becomes framed neatly by the church window as he waits to go on stage during his nativity rehearsal. As the score comes to its cacophonous crescendo, punctuated now by loud brass sections, the camera continues to dolly in towards Prescott's head, presented in profile, as if honing in on the source of the disquiet created by the music, looking from the outside into the disquieted mind of the young boy who is the film's subject, creating an ironic juxtaposition between Walker's sinister and looming score and the image of the would-be fascist dressed in an angelic costume.

Corbet's claim in the Blu-Ray commentary that 'there would be a few key moments where we reminded the audience that the orchestra was present' was a strategy implemented in a series of ways. Firstly, as Corbet alludes to, the score is reintroduced at key narrative moments in the film after lengthy sequences in which there is nothing but diegetic sound. However, there are also some more unusual applications of sound that also meet this end. Firstly, at the very beginning of the film's overture the sound of the orchestra tuning their instruments and warming up by playing small excerpts of the score over and over kick off the film. The conductor can then be heard interrupting this "fly-on-the-wall" moment and instructing the orchestra to begin playing for the recording, exclaiming 'let's give this a try, shall we?'

The use of meta-textual recorded nondiegetic sounds of the orchestra also became a favoured inclusion of Corbet and the film's sound crew in a more subtle manner. Corbet explains that 'we even did things with the sound design where we slowed down the ambience of the orchestra tuning their instruments and chatting amongst themselves. It's unrecognisable but there is this presence where you feel the orchestra even though you aren't hearing the orchestra playing.' This is a technique akin to that described by Coulthard (2013), in which European filmmakers of the New Extremist movement would insert low-droning

sounds, which in some cases are not always consciously perceptible, into the mix of their films to create an ominous atmosphere. The technique also has similarities to those historically used in European avant-garde radio. Carolyn Birdsall and Senta Siewert (2013) have outlined the use and application of the radio technique known as 'distortion', noting its common use in European avant-garde radio of the 1950s and 1960s but also having more recently found popular use in contemporary film culture. The distortion technique in radio, as explained by Martin Shingler (2000: 206), 'is to make the nonverbal codes (particularly noise or sound effects) more important than speech or to make speech sound more like a sound effect than a human voice.' In this case, the technique of slowing down the ambient murmurings of the orchestra renders their speech distorted, modulated into a sound effect reminiscent of the New Extremist's use of subtle but uneasy sound effects to create tension and unease throughout various key scenes. In the case of *Leader*, this technique adds emphasis to otherwise sedate and seemingly mundane sequences as Prescott observes the goings on around him, ranging from the household activities of the servants, French lessons with his tutor to more important matters such as observing his father's negotiations with other statesmen. Prescott's synthesising and processing of all these events is thus also distorted, elucidating his growing despotic and pathological worldview in his psyche, marking a common application for the distortion technique in film, deployed as a means of representing and characterising pathology and mental illness (for an account of the historical origins of this technique shifting from radio to film see Birdsall and Siewert [2013], and for a contemporary case study interpreting this technique in relation to of mental health representation (specifically, schizophrenia) see Selway [2019]).

'Any-Space-Whatever': Sound and Vision

One of the key moments in which Walker's score inflects the characterisation of Prescott's psychological profile comes in the film's only dream sequence. Here, the sleeping Prescott is presented with visions, shown to viewers through a series of slow-dollied shots exclusively from Prescott's point of view (POV), of a grandiose but dilapidated empty building. The building is later revealed in the film's denouement to be the headquarters of Prescott's fascist movement in his adulthood, but in this early dream sequence this is unknown, and the building is presented in a significant state of disrepair. Whereas the majority of Walker's score throughout the rest of the film is high-tempo, frenetic and at times intentionally discordant, here Prescott's first visions of what seems to be his destiny to mature into a dictatorial political leader are accompanied by much more andante music, with ethereal and dulcet tones reflecting the almost hallucinatory and mystical aspects of the dream. Whilst still discordant and at times atonal, the music largely consists of slowly modulated synthesised electronic notes, creating a gradual warbling effect. Given Walker's own statements about the 'dreamlike quality' of European cinema and its role in the construction of his own personal 'European imagination', it is fitting that Walker here changes the dynamics and characteristics of the score to be reflective of what is Prescott's own vision of Europe post World War 1, his own European imagination.

The images of the dilapidated future headquarters of Prescott's fascist movement illustrates that which Gilles Deleuze, in both his *Cinema* volumes (originally published in 1983 and 1985), calls an 'any-space-whatever' (also referred to as 'any-space-whatsoever' or 'whatever-space'); that being a 'space that does not yet appear as a real setting' (2013: 33). As Betz explains, Deleuze particularly conceived of the any-space-whatever in relation to cinematic locations, seen vividly in representations of post-World War II Europe:

> Deleuze suggests that after the war, a proliferation of … [deconnected or emptied] spaces could be seen both in film sets [décors] and in exteriors, under various

> influences … the ruins, derelict buildings and deserted streets of postwar European cityscapes created what Deleuze calls "any-space-whatevers", a milieu that lent itself to disruption of the organic unities of narrative and setting, sound and vision that characterise classical cinema. (2009: 37)

As such, then, the darkness and dinginess of the building as seen from Prescott's dream-view presents the viewer with a disruptive space. The specific location of the building is never revealed, and, in the first instance, viewers are unable to link the building to any sense of narrative purpose beyond that of a dreamlike abstraction. Therefore, the building 'does not yet appear as a setting' (ibid). It is not until the film's finale, which takes place in the same building, where one is able to make full sense of the building's significance. In this scene the adult Prescott, in full military regalia, is driven to the courtyard of the building to meet his closest advisors and emerges from the car to great fanfare. Until this denouement the derelict vision of the space is entirely disruptive in that it removes the film's sense of setting from the village in which the story takes place and offers little in terms of discernible character development until the very last moments of the film. However, in the finale, the building is shown a fully renovated and revived form, evocative of the type of stabilisation and reinvigoration that many quasi-nationalist/fascist movements proclaimed to offer to many across war-torn Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. As such, in the second encounter with the now pristine building the sense of any-space-whatever is lost, as instead the revived space cements Prescott's characterisation as a despotic leader.

Admittedly, Deleuze conceptualises the 'any-space-whatever' as an important feature of post-World War II cinema because 'the fact is, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces we no longer know how to describe.' (2013: x). As such, my interpretation here of the derelict headquarters as an any-space-whatever may be contentious in that, within the temporal parameters of the

film, Prescott's vision is inflected by a post-war culture from the First World War, therefore lacking the wider historical impetus and anchorage that led Deleuze to conceptualise the wider textual changes in imagery that are focal to his notion of 'any-space-whatever'. However, as a contemporary film that traverses the inter-war period between both World Wars, it is not beyond comparison that such an ambiguous representation of derelict space is inflected itself by intertextual cinematic imagery of destruction and annihilation from both Wars. That is to say, one may argue that Corbet's direction, the scene's set design, and perhaps even Walker's score are likely to have been influenced by a great number of cinematic visions of the Second World War and its aftermath as much as the First World War.

Deleuze argues that the 'any-space-whatever', as a form of disconnected space, emerges from the subjective perspective of a character who in some way is absent (2013: 8). This absenteeism is not just simply being out of frame – though in the instance of Prescott's visions in the dream, that everything is presented through POV shots does indeed render him visually absent, if not conceptually absent – but, in Deleuze's own words has also 'passed into the void'. Thus, having transcended into a dreamscape for this moment (and only this moment, as there are no other dream sequences in the film), Prescott enters the void and embodies here what Deleuze calls the 'imaginary gaze', which 'makes the real something imaginary, at the same time as it in turn becomes real and gives us back some reality.' (2013: 9). Therefore, Walker's score serves an important function here in stylising and demarcating the scene as dissonant with the other locations and settings of the film. That the score is so noticeably different in its use of electronica-style synthesiser effects (when the remainder of the score, however experimental, is still almost entirely orchestra-led), its slower tempo and 'dreamlike' quality all function to contextualise the scene and the location as being qualitatively different from those set within the film's diegetic reality.

To quantify this further, both Walker and some of his frequent collaborators have noted the significance and poignance of dreamscapes and their textual potentialities for Walker's musical style. For instance, in Stephen Kijak's documentary *Scott Walker: 30th Century Man* (2006), Mark Warman, the orchestra conductor for Walker's solo record *The Drift* (2006) as well as each of his scores for *Leader* and *Vox Lux* remarked '[Walker] is a poet and composer of the unconscious, and if one wants to look for logic in his work it would be more […] the logic of a dreamworld.' This is congruent with Walker's own comments on his work in the documentary, whereby he states 'ultimately, your work is yourself. Everything in my world, because I have a very nightmarish imagination – I've had very bad dreams all my life – everything in my world is big, it's out of proportion'. Given that Walker's 'nightmarish imagination' permeates so much of the personality of his work it can be seen that the dream sequence here is particularly reliant on the score to enhance and embellish the pivotal role it plays in Prescott's characterisation. That Walker has particularly contextualised his creative imagination(s) as both 'European' and 'nightmarish' is ultimately fitting in this scene, as the dramatic and ethereal music serves to render the any-space-whatever in this scene, itself a concept borne of European terrain, as one that is imbued with a sense of dread from Walker's nightmarish score, thus becoming a location that is nightmarishly European.

Where Deleuze refers to characters who pass 'into the void', Jeffrey A. Bell (1997: no page number) contends that the any-space-whatever functions within cinema largely through disrupting or problematising the relationship between time and space, placing the identity of characters into crisis. This would certainly seem to be the case with *Leader*, which in its essence explores the formative experiences of the boy Prescott that precede his becoming a leader. Indeed, Prescott's identity is obfuscated in a number of ways throughout the film, illustrating that it isn't until he matures into the Leader in adulthood that he comes to possess

or embody a coherent identity. One of the frequent tropes of the narrative is that Prescott, who has long golden locks of hair is continually mistaken by other characters for being a little girl, often to the dismay of his father. Prescott is presented as agitated at being misgendered but also protective of his hair, scorning his language teacher Adelaide (Stacy Martin) when she suggests he cut his hair to look more handsome. As well as the persistent misgendering of the boy, Prescott has no conception of citizenship or nationality, as the son of an American man and nomadic French-German woman he explains to Adelaide that "mother says we're citizens of the world", reminiscent of the discourse and rhetoric recently disavowed by former UK Prime Minister Theresa May in the lead up to Britain's exit from the European Union (Brexit). Significantly, it isn't even until the penultimate scene that Prescott's name is even revealed and throughout the film it is suggested that his mother and Charles Marker had either had or were continuing to have an affair. This is ultimately confirmed in the finale when the adult Prescott arrives at his now grandiose headquarters (no longer an any-space-whatever, as Prescott has realised his fantasy and brought the setting into reality) and is shown in close up in the car. Although he has now shaven his precious golden locks to a bald cut (accompanied by large facial hair that now makes him visually reminiscent of Lenin), the adult Prescott is also performed by Robert Pattinson, thus confirming that his biological father was Marker all along. As such, with frequent misgendering, being largely unnamed throughout the film and having uncertainty about his citizenship and parentage, Prescott is inherently a character in crisis whose identity is only solidified and made coherent by transcending the any-space-whatever in his dream and bringing it into existence in his adulthood, thus confirming his ascension to the status of leader, which appears to be perhaps the only marker of identity that offers any stability or coherence in his characterisation.

Niels Niessen (2012: 130) explains this notion of identity crisis further, writing that '[the] whatever-space is a place of wandering and aimless travelling that is inseparable from

the protagonists' indecisive state of mind, their loss or their feeling of being lost.' Indeed, this sense of being lost is particularly meaningful in this dream sequence. The scene superimposes the diegetic sounds of Prescott's restlessness as he sleeps; his tossing and turning and stunted whimpers of discomfort serving as accompaniment to Walker's slow and nightmarish score, which is replete with deep bass tones on a synthesiser that warble and fluctuate, punctuated by short high pitch electronic passages that almost imitate a shrieking sound – a sonic technique not unlike those found in the scores for classic horror and slasher-horror films such as *Halloween* (Carpenter: 1978) and *The Shining* (Kubrick: 1980), or even more recent horrors such as *It Follows* (Mitchell: 2014), *It* (Muschietti: 2017) and *It: Chapter Two* (Muschietti: 2019).

Upon waking, the boy finds that he has wet the bed and faces the ignominy of having to tell his parents. That he wets the bed is perhaps reflective of the still nascent pathology emergent within Prescott's outlook and psyche, as he is overwhelmed by the weight and severity of his dream's content, thus occupying the 'indecisive state of mind' that Niessen refers to. Prescott tells his mother (Bérénice Bejo) that he wet the bed out of distress because he 'had a dream you weren't there…wherever I was', thus connecting his discomfort and anxiety to a sense of being lost and being in a space he doesn't have the capacity to fully describe. Niessen further contextualises the any-space-whatever in psychoanalytic terms, suggesting that such spaces 'represent [the] incongruity between the subject's desire on the one hand and the existing social order on the other.' In this way of thinking, Prescott's dream isolates him in the any-space-whatever, suspended between a vision of his future as a leader and the discomfort and contradiction of being subordinate to and reliant on his parents as a child. From this moment on, after Prescott awakes, the remainder of the film shows his attempts to become less dependent on his parents, challenging their authority and emotionally manipulating them to exert power over them, ultimately culminating in his attempt to kill his

mother in his final tantrum (the film never confirms whether Prescott was successful in his attempt, but that he tries to bludgeon her to death with rocks in front of a group of guests at his parents' house is horrific enough to show the extent to which he is determined to extricate himself from the social and emotional family unit that exerts so much authority upon him). The increasing efforts to free himself from family and social ties and instead develop independence and autonomy ultimately engenders Prescott's hubris and desire for leadership and instigates what will become indicative of his cult of personality as an adult.

Follow the Leader

Aside from Prescott's dream, the use of archival footage of demolished post-War European landscapes in the film's overture may also constitute the form of imagery akin to that which initially led to Deleuze's conception of the any-space-whatever, further highlighting the significance of European history and imagination to the construction of the film's key themes, narrative and sonic techniques. However, the attention paid to the dream sequence in the previous section is significant because it also highlights one of the film's other prominent techniques for partnering imagery to Walker's score as a means of characterising Prescott and his disturbed mind. That the entire dream sequence is presented from Prescott's POV is essential in understanding the vital role of this scene. As well as being the only dream sequence in the film, this is the only moment in the film where the viewer is privileged with any extended form of POV that isn't in some way disrupted or obscured. The final section of this article explores the unusual ways that Prescott's perspective is presented throughout the film, going beyond the common cinematic method of aligning viewers with characters through the use of POV.

In Corbet's commentary, he explains that 'I didn't want to have a film that was quite literally the POV of a young boy, but I was interested in presenting a certain atmosphere

which felt like it occasionally dipped in and out of this young man's perspective.' The sound design and score are instrumental in achieving this effect, combining distinctly with an unusual array of shots that largely substitute for the conventional POV shot, which is usually one of the key cinematographic techniques used to elicit some form of sympathetic alignment between character and viewer (Murray Smith, 1994: 35). *Leader*'s common stand-in for the POV shot is instead a series of slow tracking shots (tracking in the colloquial, rather than technical sense) that follow directly behind Prescott in a number of scenes. Usually presenting the back of Prescott's head in medium-close framing, this cinematography is most often handheld to create a greater sense of immersion and presence to the motion of following the boy as he walks. In each case, despite other lengthy sections of the film having no accompanying score, these moments of following are always accompanied by music from Walker's score. The effect created here is that the loud and uncomfortable composition becomes heavily evocative of the growing disquiet in the boy's mind.

With minimal opportunity to see through the boy's eyes the shots that follow behind Prescott instead rely on the score to evoke and embellish the sense of percolating disquiet in his psyche. This is indicative of what Marilyn Boltz, Matthew Schulkind and Suzanne Kantra (1991: 594) found in their study of background music in film and its impact on audiences' interpretations of characters and their feelings/actions. The study found that sample audiences interpreted characters to be more agitated and aggressive when their presence was accompanied by music that was predominantly loud and active in character. So, in the case of *Leader*, although many of the shots following behind Prescott do not present much in terms of visual markers of emotional character development (after all, all that is visible of the boy is his long blond hair) the loudness of the music – 5% above Dolby levels – and its frequently high tempo play a crucial part in hinting at the boy's evolving warped worldview.

Even in key sections of the film where viewers are able to see Prescott's face, one of the key aspects of Tom Sweet's performance of the boy is his apparent apathy to the majority of his surroundings and the events going on around him. His cold and calculating nature mean he rarely shows any kind of emotion and so again the affective qualities of the music do a lot of heavy lifting in articulating the boy's thoughts and feelings. For instance, during a French lesson with Adelaide Prescott stares salaciously at her breast (presented in a rare POV shot, discussed further below). He then immediately finds his Father with Adelaide in his parents' bedroom at the end of the lesson. Both adults act sheepishly around him, suggesting potential impropriety. Rather than question their actions or react in anyway, Prescott turns from the doorway and begins to walk slowly away. As he does so, Walker's score re-emerges from the tense silence of the scene at the moment that only the back of his head is in shot. The staccato high-pitched strings playfully pierce the uncomfortable silence (though, crucially, not in a melodic way that alleviates or resolves the discomfort of that silence). This becomes evocative of his hatching plan, the boy realising that he can leverage this encounter to his favour in future, which he duly does as he brings it up at the dining table with both his parents at a time when they are trying to force him to eat food he doesn't like. Therefore, the score's timely interjection into the awkward silence becomes pre-emptive of the boy's future actions, providing an audio cue of the boy's intended emotional powerplay congruent with Boltz's findings that film music plays a vital role not just in clarifying and contextualising film moments, but indeed providing an opportunity for viewers to predict and anticipate future actions that characters may take (2001: 445). In a more recent study of the impact of film sound and its emotive and affective value, Siu-Lan Tan et al. (2007: 137-139) explain that whilst the facial expressions of characters were found to be unsurprisingly crucial in viewers' interpretation of the emotional state and motivation of characters, film music was also immensely important in communicating emotional or cognitive states of the characters.

This was especially true – crucially, in the case of *Leader*, given Prescott's facial expressions rarely veer from indifference and apathy – when visual stimuli from facial expressions was ambiguous or mundane, indicating that viewers are likely to interpret character emotion and cognition from the emotional cues of the music and the timing its deployment (ibid: 144). Therefore, Walker's score can actually be said to do the majority of the affective work in the articulation of Prescott's growing pathology, given that his facial expressions are largely apathetic and, indeed, the use of the music in much of the film comes during moments when his face is not visible at all as the camera follows behind him.

That there are so few POV shots throughout the film makes the exclusive use of this style of cinematography in the aforementioned dream sequence so important to interpreting and understanding the relevance of this scene in Prescott's psychic characterisation. This is particularly pronounced when counterpointed with the rest of the film's limited POV moments. In every instance other than the dream, in the handful of times viewers are presented a shot from Prescott's POV it is always blurred or obscured by some form of visual interference or distortion. The use of very soft key lighting or soft focus lenses are used at times in order to blur the boy's vision (particularly noticeable in the aforementioned moment when he stares at Adelaide's breast as she reads to him) or blurred by condensation and/or rain on the windows that he looks through. This obscured POV therefore suggests that Prescott's worldview is inherently distorted and that he sees the world differently to most, in deeply clouded and pessimistic terms. This obscured perspective continues into the finale of the film, showing that the adult Prescott's worldview is harmonious with that of his younger self. It is therefore telling that the dream sequence is the only moment in which viewers are privileged with an insight into Prescott's POV without any distortion or obstruction. Instead, his mystic view of the any-space-whatever that incites his long-term destiny to arise as a fascist leader is the only imagery shown from the boy's view with total clarity and precision,

symbolising the vital importance that this vision plays in the development of his characterisation and maturation.

The film's finale opens with a shot of an industrial printing press churning out documentation emblazoned with a brutalist logo of a wildcat bearing its fangs, the emblem of Prescott's regime. As the propaganda documents are printed the sound of the printer's machinery is actually emulated by Walker's score rather than physically recorded. The machine's grinding and whirring are imitated through a series of low pitch synthesised notes that are composed into a churning rhythm at a now-familiar rapid tempo and increased loudness. Heller (2015: 3) notes that, in common scale diagrams of loudness and its impact on listeners (rather than sounds physical movement of air, which is measured in decibels), a room with an operating printing press would be only a small distance away from the 'near threshold of pain' at the very top of the scale. Therefore, the loudness of the score's imitation of the press has a haptic quality due to its loudness as well an affective impact due to the 'imagined loudness' (ibid: 46) of the machinery itself.

'Imagined loudness' refers to a listener's ability to re-interpret the level of sound to more reasonably meet the expected properties of that sound within its expected context. For instance, Heller notes that events and spaces such as music concerts and sports stadia come with pre-conceived expectations of loudness and atmosphere that the listener must compensate for when encountering those experiences in alternate forms or contexts. For example, during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, UK audiences have at times communally re-watched and live-tweeted recordings of previous Glastonbury headline performances in the festival's absence, and sports broadcasters such as Sky, BT Sport, and the BBC have begun to include simulated crowd noises into Premier League football broadcasts in order to counteract the unusualness of the atmospheric absence in stadiums where only the players and staff are allowed to be physically present. In each of these cases, it is contended that the

simulation of sports crowds or the ability to re-witness music performances recorded in front of an audience can give viewers a sense of 'imagined loudness' that more appropriately fits the context of the event without recreating the sheer ferocity of the actual loudness of a crowd numbering tens-of-thousands or more. In the case of Walker's emulation of the printing press, this 'imagined loudness' of a device right near precipice of the human ear's pain threshold is assisted by the 5% increase in volume above Dolby levels that gives the effect of increased loudness without compromising listeners' physical ability to withstand the actual loudness associated with that technology.

Walker's use of electronica-style music and synthesisers is largely at odds with the orchestra-led score present through most of the film, but in in keeping with the soundscape of the earlier dream sequence. Indeed, after a series of cut edits it becomes clear that the machine is actually inside the realised headquarters building that was initially presented in the dream sequence. Key visual indicators such as the distinctive glass ceiling and rudimentary one-person elevators that were presented in the dream serve to locate the scene in the now pristine version of the building. A silhouetted figure emerges from one of the elevators and, as he walks up a staircase, the camera follows behind him as the music continues. The impression is that this is the adult Prescott, given that the music accompanies the camera's following of this character in the same way that has been noticeable in Prescott's childhood throughout the film. However, it turns out that this is an inconsequential character who is simply delivering some paperwork to a group of statesmen in the grand hall of the building. That this character is playfully hinted to be the adult Prescott but is ultimately just a worker for his political regime suggests that Prescott's warped and pernicious ideological worldview has spread to others within his following, as even inconsequentially silent characters are now followed by the disturbing and harsh musical score that until now had only ever been present as a marker of Prescott's inner disturbances.

Prescott's statesmen are seated around a table in the grand hall signing paperwork and discussing the affairs of the party. The music continues with the added introduction of aggressive and imposing percussion and punctuating cymbal clashes adding further dimension to Walker's frequent motif driving bassline motif. The statesmen stand and then descend a grand and winding staircase leading out to the courtyard of the building to greet Prescott on his arrival. As they descend, again the camera follows behind with a driving and penetrative musical accompaniment. Once more, this is indicative of the now widespread *weltanschauung* that Prescott has managed to instil among the European masses. The statesmen continue to talk as they walk, but their words are indecipherable, overshadowed by the sheer ferocity of the score. Here then the aforementioned distortion technique becomes significant once more, as without knowing the specific contents of their speech, viewers are instead restricted in their interpretation and become increasingly reliant on the chaotic and disquieting score as a means of distinguishing the tone of the conversation. The quotidian conversation of fascist statesmen then is simultaneously a diegetic sound and a nondiegetic addition to the score itself, blending in as an extra sonic component.

As Prescott emerges from the car, Walker's score escalates to an almost unlistenable crescendo, replete with disorientating siren-like droning sounds on top of the score and clashing dissonantly with the ambient diegetic sound of the raucous crowd of Prescott acolytes. As he appears to the crowd the camera begins to spin and rotate at great speed (achieved by building a 360º roll-cage around the camera and then simply tossing it into and among the crowd of extras). The camera, like the crowd of gatherers, barely catches more than a glimpse of the Leader, thrown into a frenzy accentuated by the fierceness of Walker's multi-layered score. The screen then cuts to black and all that remains is Walker's score to play out the credits.

Conclusion

In a letter to composer Francesco Balilla Pratella the Italian Futurist artist Luigi Russolo outlined his sound manifesto, *The Art of Noises* (1913). In this manifesto Russolo referred to a letter written by the godfather of Italian Futurism Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, in which he described the acoustics of trench warfare. From this, Russolo contended that the experience of modern warfare was almost entirely present sonically (see Kahn [2012: 443] and Goodman [2010: 56]). Later motivated by many of their personal experiences of the First World War, Futurist artists such as Marinetti and Russolo sought to intensify the expression of art through the incorporation of sensory overload (Goodman: ibid). Russolo himself had previously argued for the replacement of all music by new compositions performed on instruments that reflected modernity and embraced new technology, and to that end Russolo was a keen exponent of the synthesiser and noise as a musical style.

The Futurist movement in Italy had explicit ideological connections to the emergence of Fascism, spearheaded by Mussolini, proclaiming the value of modernist modes of expression as those that reflected and embraced the accelerating technologisation of modern Europe. With this in mind, it is particularly telling that Walker's score for *Leader* blends and melds together orchestral passages with those that are primarily synthesised and electronic. These synthesised sonic moments align the film's characterisation of Prescott and broader themes to the preferred musical tastes of avant-garde artists who associated themselves with Fascism. Whilst the orchestral passages themselves do not particularly align to such an outlook, that the score itself is so ferocious and sonically imposing reflect this broader attitude that the experience of warfare and its devastation is largely achieved through the affective nature of sound. This article has shown how Walker's score provides the main sense of the impending and ironic disaster created by the Paris Peace Conference, as a historical moment that ultimately opened the door for the emergence of Fascism and the outbreak of the

Second World War. Prescott apathetically observes the fallout of the First World War and the diplomatic chaos that ensues before maturing into a despotic figure akin to those that brought about the devastation of the second global war. For an almost demonically inexpressive child, the growing pathology in his psyche is expressed through the sheer sonic aggression of Walker's grandiose and violent score. As has been outlined in this work, much of Walker's sonic style comes from European influences, as does Corbet's filmmaking, a European imagination constructed through intertextual allusions and admiration for avant-garde technique and style. The use of sound design techniques such as distortion, including diegetic sound and dialogue as embellishments to Walker's nondiegetic score, which itself is predominantly cacophonous and at times dissonant in style is indeed a sensory intensification akin to that as described by the Futurists and plays an essential and leading role in the portrayal of Prescott's intensifying megalomania.

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