

## Character Vs. Emotion: How Music and Sound define Space in the films *Little Miss Sunshine*, *50 Shades of Grey*, *Twilight* and *Secretary*

### ON DISTINGUISHING CHARACTER REPRESENTATION FROM EMOTIONAL REPRESENTATION

One of the most powerful story moments in the Western classical tradition comes at the start of the tale of Aeneas, the Trojan hero of the *Aeneid*, who will lead his people from the ruins of Troy to search for a new homeland.

His story begins in the fiery night of Troy's destruction when the Greeks have jumped out of the Trojan horse and are fanning out to destroy the sleeping city. The young Trojan warrior Aeneas wakes and runs out from his house to find the city burning and the marauding Greeks killing the sleeping men, women and children all around him. At a certain moment in the battle Aeneas, realizing there is no hope for the Trojans, makes a fateful decision: rather than stay and fight this lost battle, he will instead take his father Anchises onto his shoulders and carry him through the burning streets out of the city to safety.<sup>1</sup> There Aeneas gathers the Trojan survivors and leads them away from the last flickering flames of burning Troy, starting on a long Mediterranean sojourn full of challenges and dangers that ends only when he settles them all on the banks of the Tiber river in Italy and founds the city of Rome.

The tableau of Aeneas's first fateful step—the moment when the son bends, lifts his father onto his shoulders and sets out into the roaring flames of Troy—is often represented in classical iconography: it has repeatedly been painted and sculpted and is invoked by Shakespeare in

*Julius Caesar*.<sup>2</sup> This fascination with Aeneas' action springs from its revelation of his strong, virtue-driven character: foreshadowing his role of gathering, defending and sheltering people, his shouldering of his father reveals how he will then shoulder the fates of the Trojan refugees. As the refugees themselves sense, this first step among the roaring flames will eventually lead Aeneas to found Rome, revealing his wise judgement and devotion to others—character traits that any desperate group will need in a leader as they set out on a dangerous journey into the unknown. Thus the dramatic tableau of Aeneas carrying his father is a moment of revealed character, showing the actions he tends to take even under extreme pressure. It reveals his tendencies and not just his emotions.

Now contrast that image with other iconic images from Western art, such as Munch's *The Scream*, that expressionist image of a figure whose hands clutch cheeks and whose mouth opens in a scream of anguish. Or compare Aeneas's bent form to Rodin's many character-less sculptures such as *The Kiss*. Rodin's sculptures do not show a dramatic moment in a specific character's life: instead they strive to represent a universality of momentary emotional expression. In Munch's scream and Rodin's kiss we know nothing of the story of the figures, nothing of who they are, of what led to this kiss, of what will result from that scream: here figuration is freeing itself from the narrative logic of character expression. These expressionistic figures, purposefully shorn of the conditions of a specific life, embody only the intense emotions of a vivid moment. In short, Aeneas's arched back reveals his character while the arched back of Munch's screamer or Rodin's kissers instead reveal only emotion.

#### THE EMOTIONAL MUSIC OF *LEGO FRIENDS* AND THE CHARACTER MUSIC OF *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*

Now we can extend this distinction between representations of character and of emotions to the elements of cinema. Though it may seem far removed from story space, a brief look at film and television music can help us distinguish the character function from the emotional function in the construction of empathy. After this brief foray we can more clearly see how the same tactics are used to construct character space (and its refined use in Dantean space) as opposed to emotional or psychological space in cinema and television.

We begin by looking at the musical scores of two six-character ensemble stories, starting with the children's television drama *Lego Friends* (Duckling A/S, 2014 -). This show has six main characters and many secondary characters and different episodes will feature different pairs of friends as they have moments of halting confession or painful self-realization or apology. But under disparate scenes in different episodes we hear the same musical sting, the same short refrain. In other words no matter what specific character is experiencing that emotion, the same delicate music cue will play under these scenes to indicate intimacy or sadness or resolution: the music cue indicates a commonly-experienced emotion rather than a specific protagonist's singular character.

Now contrast this *emotional* scoring with the elegant *character* scoring of the opening of *Little Miss Sunshine*, the scene we examined closely in our second chapter. The film's opening theme 'The Winner Is...', playing uninterrupted, introduces each of the film's six characters in turn and gives each a specific leitmotif that informs us about her or his character. Through choice of instrument, quality of attack, nature of melody, style and speed of playing, and number of instruments performing at once, these six variations in characterization inform us of what each character wants, how he or she faces their struggles, and where they sit on the protagonist/antagonist divide in the story that is about to unfold. A short analysis of how this works will help us contrast this kind of character-based scoring with the generic emotional scoring for an ensemble show like *Lego Friends*.

'The Winner Is ...' theme is composed of a repeating synth-based two-tone pulse refrain of 16 beats that each last a bit under 30s before repeating. Over this and falling on the repeats, a new lead instrument comes in exactly as each new character is introduced to grant each character his or her singular leitmotif. For example, as we first meet Olive, the little girl, a piano begins a delicate yet hopeful refrain: we learn from this motif that Olive is innocent, that some sadness will feature in her story but that she has a good chance of triumphing in her struggles.

As the music completes her short scene and begins the next refrain we meet her father Richard, who is musically characterized by a series of plucked strings playing a step-rising melody that mimics his chart (projected just behind him) of how to win in life. His own aspirationalism (a unifying antagonist in the tale) is here characterized by the rising Rossini-like plucked strings: we know this style, inherited in film comedy

from opera buffa, means that this character and what he believes in and embodies is both comic and suspect.

With the next refrain we meet Dwayne the son, doing push-ups. He is characterized by the sharp attack and militant march of a drum-riff which informs us of his character's objective: we will soon learn that Dwayne has a strong drive to become an air force fighter pilot. The drum-riff has a visual analogue: as he adds a last crosshatched mark to a very long record of uniform, crosshatched marks, we see he has been marching steadfastly day-by-day towards that goal.

With the next refrain Edwin the grandfather is introduced. He is characterized by a slow dragging synthesised cello as he does cocaine. Edwin's inner struggle to carry on against age—a conflict that will soon kill him—is heard quite clearly in the sardonic, tired cello, which also seems to express a somber warning.

Next we meet Sheryl, the Mom, as she drives, jittery and frenetic, puffing desperately on a cigarette as she argues hurriedly with husband Richard on the phone. All the musical refrains we have heard now come in together, giving the musical impression that Sheryl, while nervously juggling her driving, smoking and talking on the phone, is also struggling to juggle everyone else's problems and isn't sure she can keep this up.

Completing the film's elegant character overture and rounding out the title sequence, we now meet Cheryl's desolate brother Frank, who sits on the suicide ward with his wrists bandaged: Frank's leitmotif is a sad set of strings, marking both his loss of love and life and his Euro-sophistication as a Proust scholar. As the strings complete their melody the film's title comes up in three ironic punctuated musical beats over Frank's shockingly distraught face.

Now we can see the difference between the music in *Lego Friends* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. *Lego Friends*' gives us glimpses of an emotional experience that, while subjective, is not specific to a particular character, while by contrast the leitmotif approach of *Little Miss Sunshine* reveals not so much the emotional experiences of the characters (though it does of course do this to some extent) so much as a predictive, foreshadowing and long-term set of tendencies being revealed or formed in each particular character. While doubtlessly the two approaches often overlap, still we can see the difference: emotions pass but ingrained character tendencies remain.<sup>3</sup>

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMOTIONAL  
REPRESENTATIONS AND CHARACTER REPRESENTATIONS  
BY APPLYING THE CHARACTEROLOGICAL MANIFOLD

Any element in a story—be it a fluffy pen or a pink outfit, an action like that of Aeneas to hoist his dad on his shoulders, a sting of music or a painted wall or a line of dialogue—can play at any number of levels of meaning. We now introduce the concept of the *Characterological Manifold*, a diagnostic tool for identifying layers of meaning in a dramatic element, be that an action, a line of dialogue, a prop, a location and so forth. In the characterological manifold an element of narrative is meaningful if it<sup>4</sup>:

1. Reveals the past
2. Advances the story in the present, usually by revealing either the objectives of the protagonist(s) or by revealing the obstacle or threat to the protagonist(s)
3. Foreshadows the future of the story
4. Reveals character
5. Reveals relationships
6. Entertains or engages, usually through spectacle or comedy.

The more of these layers present in a dramatic element, the greater the sense of meaning, and generally speaking, the more meaningful elements we grasp, the more our understanding of the characters increases. Analogously, the more complete this manifold, the more our sense of empathy for the character increases. To apply this to some of our examples so far, we can see that the painting *The Scream* by Munch demonstrates categories 2 and 6. Unlike the images of Aeneas, we know nothing of the past, of the future, of the character or of the relationships of this screaming person: its very vagueness lends it openness of interpretation. By contrast, the painting of Aeneas gives us 2–5. If we compare our previous examples of costume elements from *Singin' in the Rain* and *Legally Blonde* (see Introduction) we notice that the pink costumes of *Singin' in the Rain* give us only 2 and 6, while the fluffy pink pen in *Legally Blonde* gives us 2 thru 6.

Similarly, the sad emotional music-cue of *Lego Friends* gives us 2 and 5, while the leitmotif cues of *Little Miss Sunshine* give us 1 thru 6.

The point is simply that a story is a tunnel of signifiers connecting to each other, a web where even time and space are themselves expressing various levels of these six elements. Like emotional detectives we are trained to look for clues, finding them planted in production design,

in lighting, in music, in dialogue, and then we use that information to understand the space's narrative nature and role and depth and what might happen next. Character can but does not always play a big role in this.<sup>5</sup>

In this account, a narrative is a kind of tunnel where sometimes time and space themselves are processed through character. As examples like *Secretary* and *Apocalypse Now* will reveal, even space and time shrink or expand to express a character's memory, fears, hopes, desires and emotions: they can stretch or collapse or migrate towards order or chaos because the character's past or present is bending them. Like the tunnel that Ripley runs into in *Aliens* or the beach Miller storms in *Saving Private Ryan* or the streets Amelie dashes through on her missions of mercy and romance, this tunnel of narrative is laced with and structured by emotions and memories and goals and desires and fears, and this is why we can speak of empathetic space, why these spaces make us cry and then swell with a mirroring empathetic pride or joy. We mirror not just the character's emotions but the characterological aspects of the spaces we have been brought into. Almost always in the process of developing a project, a novel or script or teleplay evolves towards a richer expression of this manifold: the process of rewriting and revision is largely about how these six levels of meaning can be more densely and richly expressed from scene to scene, and scenes that cannot express more than one element are usually cut.<sup>6</sup>

### SPACES OF ROMANTIC TRYST

Let us look at the space of the tryst in romantic films. A tryst space is any space that a couple chooses for their most intimate emotional and vulnerable revelations. This space usually reflects something central about their mutual attraction because it allows them to feel comfortable and intimate, but tryst spaces can also be chosen for other emotional or character reasons and can be a dispassionate, a dramatic or a Dantean space. They are also often specially treated spaces in a film, spaces of heightened cinema power where sound design, music and the shape, materiality and volumes of a space all interpenetrate to create just the kinds of enveloping narrative space we are most interested in examining.

Eroticizing the space of a couple's tryst has its own long history. Think of the lovely purple bruise lining the wall of the apartment in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), a single erotic sign of an otherwise rather

ordinary backdrop: arguably this very ordinariness and the bare quality of this uninhabited, unoccupied place heightens the intensity of the sex, of the need by the two characters for their act to express transgression. Sex, this location seems to say, can happen at any time, between anyone, and to two complete strangers. This aspect of the location quietly expresses 3 and 6, simultaneously foreshadowing the purpose of the space and being mildly spectacular. Not surprisingly, since it expresses nothing about their characters and their relationship, this watermark is memorable but holds no empathetic power.

By contrast, think of the tryst space in Lührman's *The Great Gatsby*, where Gatsby's baroque display of flowers plays as a very in-character offering to his beloved Daisy, softening the place as if it were his own heart he is asking her to enter. Being an intimate gesture that carries some risk of rejection, Gatsby's flowery space expresses 2–6 and very much supports the empathetic machinery of the scene. Gatsby's creation of space here is simultaneously authentic and sincere, yet also a generic and over-the-top use of a cliché, a mis-en-abîme action that defines Gatsby's own prismatic character.

#### THE CHARACTEROLOGICAL MANIFOLD IN LOCATIONS AND MUSIC

Let's compare three different spaces of romantic interplay in three quite different films, *50 Shades of Grey*, *Twilight* and *Secretary*. We use these three films because they have often been connected through their many parallels: in fact *50 Shades* is often thought to be a remake of *Secretary* and, as we've noted, actually began as a piece of fan fiction for *Twilight*.

##### *50 Shades of Grey*

We began to study this film in Chap. 1 where we pointed out the lack of any machinery of empathy in this film. But the film's use of space and character also helps us begin to give a technical definition to the idea of a shallow story, a term often thrown around and sometimes applied to *50 Shades*, itself a clear example of dispassionate space.

Note how in this film the locations are simply either emblems of Anastasia's ordinary middle-class life or of Christian's high level of wealth, but carry no clear personal history: they do not inform us about

either's character (Fig. 4.1). As we can see, Christian's lavish apartment is indistinguishable from the suites of some recently built upscale hotel. There are no signs of personal history, singular tastes or even of habitation: like photos in an architectural magazine, there are also no marks or smudges or scratches anywhere. Even Christian's sex room itself is just a characterless place full of off-the-rack sex toys that all look fresh from the sex shop and right out of the box. The idea seems simply to show that Christian's world is an envelope of his wealth. Taking any element of these spaces, we find nothing with a rich characterological manifold. His bedroom, dull to look at, tells us nothing of his past, nothing new about his present, foreshadows nothing about their future aside from the expected, gives us no character or relationship clues. Even the sex-toy rack in his hidden room, the film's only actual spectacular element, carries little emotional information. Some elements are somewhat spectacular and its presence is a promise that we will see Anastasia laid bare and bound, and its presence shows her growing interest and acceptance of what he wants, but beyond this no real emotional attachment is being created.

One of the problems with these locations is that they do not seem even lived-in. In Chap. 9 we will see this kind of alienating production design, this plethora of unconsumed consumer goods, in other films and TV shows such as *Mad Men*, where this design strategy serves a different



Fig. 4.1 A typical space of Christian's house in *50 Shades of Grey* (2015)

very specific purpose: to throw the characters into relief and reveal their inner conflicts.

But here this is not happening for one reason: the characters in the foreground have no inner depth and no internal conflicts, and so we cannot perceive alienation by contrasting them with the background. Nor were these locations chosen to astonish the audience by their wealth and sweep; even this spectacular impulse was muted. Why might this be? Since the story cannot express any plausible empathetic reason why Anastasia wants to be with Mr. Grey, if the spaces were truly impressive and astonishing expressions of his wealth and lifestyle, *they* would become the reason Anastasia wants to stay with him—a hunger after wealth then that would have made her very unsympathetic. Because the filmmakers have not given her any real reason to love him, his wealth now becomes a quandary: somehow she has to love him despite his billions and despite their obvious inequalities in the master–slave relationship he wants and which the money reinforces, while at all times Anastasia has to somehow be seeing beyond all his emblems of power and see some other more equitable bond, one that he simply does not want.

The strange shallowness of character in *50 Shades* is not produced by the actors nor really by the director. As a glance at the novel shows, there is no backstory to play here (giving some weight to the criticism that this story might be a rewrite of other films). Certainly the novel's rather famous lack of characterization has carried over into the film, crippling the work of the production design team as well as stymying the genius of the film's composer Danny Elfman.<sup>7</sup> Elfman's soundtrack functions only to express emotional beats and genre tropes, becoming perhaps the most generic and least specific work he has produced to date.

However dull, the film is a very useful object of study because it helps us understand what character and the characterological manifold is by showing us a well-crafted film with a clear plot that is yet bleached of nearly all character and thus has nothing to express in its locations or its music. As a result of the emptiness of this characterological manifold, this is a dispassionate use of space engendered by dispassionate characters, and dispassionate characters sit uncomfortably with romance, which tends to be about emotional intelligence and issues of trust, power-balance and solving problems of intimacy, which are all missing here. There is one odd result of bringing such a high level of talent to realize such a low level of story: in the end



Fig. 4.2 The tryst space in *Twilight* (2008)

it is unclear if this undramatic drama is a film with two very under-characterized characters, or if this is a decently-drawn but undramatic portrait of two incomplete people.

Now we can move from a dispassionate to a dramatic tryst space (Fig. 4.2).

### *Twilight*

Midway through the teen romance *Twilight* (2008) the vampire Edward takes Bella to the woods to convince her he is too dangerous for her to love. The scene is shrouded in mountain mist and set among redwoods and great moss-covered stones. The lovely and rather unique location, with its eerie light and its wild mix of living and dead elements, serves the story on many dramatic levels. The different elevations and branching tree-limbs allow Edward to spring from tree to tree while the great big tree-roots which he yanks out with his bare hands showcase his strength. The mist manages to give them the privacy they need, isolating their small grove while softening both light and sound, granting another excuse to maintain the film's commitment to a preponderance of reflected and diffused light that makes their faces moon-like and softened. Meanwhile the grey granite rocks are largely covered by great patches of green moss that soften their hard texture and outlines, hinting at the suppressed erotic impulses of our couple.

And so this location is not just a pretty backdrop: it serves clear dramatic purposes. Though it undoubtedly has some understated elements

of spectacle, the grove is also a practical use for blocking, an excuse for shows of strength and agility (revealing Edward's beast-like killer's side, the antagonist to their love) while also granting a physical explanation for a romantic lighting scheme. This tryst space expresses categories 2, 4, 5 and 6, offering a far richer space than those of our last example. However, though the soft moss covering of the rocks grants a faint and almost erotic romanticism, by and large this scene does not express character: this location, perhaps the most entangling of any in the film, cannot echo with the deep character needs or struggles of these two characters in the resonant and Dantean way our next example does.

### *Secretary*

We can contrast *Twilight*'s mountain grove with a different location where yet another troubled romantic pair struggles to work out issues of power and love: the office in the BDSM romance *Secretary* (2002). The director Steven Shainberg and the film's production designer, Amy Danger, faced a problem: they knew their budget would be minuscule (\$4 million, with a star like James Spader attached). Realizing something like the sentiment of famed producer and theorist James Schamus (the former head of Focus Features) that in low-budget productions "the budget is the aesthetic", the two planned a low-budget solution to crafting the office itself, starting their planning two years before production began.<sup>8</sup> Knowing they would need to shoot largely in one space, the film makers opted to construct an unrealistic, heightened character space which, by holding different but complementary character longings for each of the two romantic characters, further draws them together while separating them from the film's other characters. The opposing characters, who all share a conventional antagonism to BDSM relationships, are also linked by being associated with dull, conventional spaces, heightening their antagonism to our struggling couple.

The result is a dual character space, a tryst space that expresses the wants and needs of both characters in the romance. *This* Edward's office is full of plants to emphasize his love of watering plants (an attribute of gardening which helps humanize his otherwise highly unsympathetic need to dominate). More interestingly, this office also resembles the home that Lee aspires to live in with her boss. Thirdly, through its earth tones, friendly volumes and softened surfaces it contrasts sharply with the harshness and artificiality of the world beyond the office, a contrast

designed to make clear that Lee would rather be here than anywhere else in her life. Through all of these and other craft-choices, the character needs and objectives of our pair have become clearly elaborated in the space and the sound design of the film: in fact this space is deeply shaped by both sound design and music. This overall design helps convey the sense that these two characters belong nowhere else but here, together.

For example, the physically nest-like, private nature of this office-space is also heightened by the acoustic design, carefully justified by the lush yet homey production design. Consider the dramatic effects of the remarkable deadness of sound in the office, a deadening effect lacking all echoes that is explained visually by a lush carpet, thick velvet curtains and cotton drapes over the windows, and the large plush furniture. This allows for an odd and intimate sound mixing that lacks any added room tone (i.e., a quiet background hum or buzz). Not only does this create the heightened sense of every brush of clothing: it also eliminates any background tone that might mask the small excited quavers of the aroused protagonists' voices (Fig. 4.3).

The acoustic intimacy this allows permits a very specific kind of performance by our couple, a style that lets them reveal their longings for erotic power-relations. Thanks to this dead hush Edward can utter commands to Lee in an intimate near-whisper even from across a long room.



Fig. 4.3 The office, the tryst space in *Secretary* (2002)

Moreover, soon their conversations take on the low quiet of bedroom talk, spoken quietly in fear. This fear is of their desires and each other, and not simply of being overheard by other employees beyond the long hallway. In later scenes they often speak at very low volume, implying that they are standing much closer to each other than in fact they often are, again giving us the sense that they are psychologically linked.

This space's oddness is also not just a reflection of Edward (though since we never see him in any other space we do wonder if he can survive in a space that he doesn't rigorously control). It also becomes a space that Lee loves, an emblem of homeyness that she cannot find anywhere else in her life. And so here the ordinary gendered spatial definitions in which the exterior is a male domain and the interior a female one<sup>9</sup> (Shonfield 2000a, b; Wallace 2011) has been somewhat short-circuited by a careful overlay of the spatial distinction between work spaces and home spaces. The breaking of that boundary allows the space to leave realism and cease to be a dramatic backdrop and becomes a Dantean space of joint trust and daring, a space of relationship growing increasingly pregnant with the shared, divulged, intimate disjunctions of our two main characters.

### THE CHARACTER MUSIC OF *SECRETARY*

Moreover, the way we are to understand this peculiar space is given to us by another element: the opening theme and much of the later music are also crucial for bridging character and space in this film. The music informs us of the couple's sense of this office, becoming a roadmap of the couple's dance, taking us into the game they are playing and their own sense of its lushness and forbidden qualities.

We hear this character information from the first furtive beats of the opening theme, in its teasing tense percussion, which is soon joined by a quickly-plucked violin that reminds us of a tango. The song then turns comic when a repeating pock-pock, with a faint hint of rubber suction as in opening the stopper of a bottle, both remind us of Edward's repeated butt-slapping of Lee while also dramatizing that something has been stoppered up and is being released. Now a sardonic rubber-banding bass begins to plod its way through the growing chorus of percussive stings, followed by a rattle-snaking maraca that takes us on a kind of careful step of a jungle hunt. This cartoony, comic sound effect then happily introduces some musical tropes of maze-running (the exoticized balalaika-like

strings and the Ventures-like guitar clashes that remind us of the themes of 1960s spy-films). Meanwhile the hissing echoes of the tics set against the softened attack of the synthesizer keyboards and other returning instruments all build to a more urgent chorus. And now all of the fade-ins and fade-outs of passing exotic percussive instruments reminds us of walking slowly and carefully, and then<sup>10</sup> with increasing urgency, as if on a journey through some dark funhouse.

This long suspenseful rising run finally<sup>11</sup> relaxes into a tender, languid stretch released from musical time. Now a new element is introduced as some synth ghost-voices join in, connoting something tender and perhaps sexual taking place. These breathy beds of synth never grow strong enough to imply actual orgasm (note that Lee and Edward never fully complete their dance by consummating their desires), a musical trope which has many cinema-music references. And with the rising synth ghost-voices the theme changes completely. Just as sexual overtures in a relationship tend to eventually lead to emotional terrain, the song completes its tense build-up and releases us into the sad tender musical tropes associated with intimate scenes of longing and memory: now airy notes hang in the style of delicate new age soundscapes where each element is granted a different layer of echo, giving us a sense of an opening-out, layered space of relaxation and release reminiscent of sad, tender, poignant moments.

This theme is a window on the emotional lives of our main characters: when in each other's company in this office they feel they are in an exciting game together, a game of flirtation and sexual hints, a dance. It also informs us that neither is dangerous or intends harm to the other and that the entire thing should be regarded with comedy and indulgent irony, an adult game that just might lead to tender emotional connection as well as to sexual release. This character music transforms the office, showing that when character is revealed through score this information can fundamentally change our grasp of the space the character is in. Character music and empathetic space, we argue, are often inextricably combined.

### THE CHARACTEROLOGICAL MANIFOLD AND DISPASSIONATE MUSIC SCORES

This difference in narrative music amplifies the difference in space that exists across genres. A dispassionate, spectacle-driven film like *An Unfortunate Series of Events* (2004) depends so deeply on *emotional* scoring for one specific reason: its characters are not deeply drawn

but are instead rather generic, and so character scoring is impossible here. In general, generic characters are lacking in grounded backstories that grant them a sense of uniqueness of place and a complexity of inner conflict. And for now we can state a general heuristic rule: the more deeply-drawn the characters (such as the well-drawn characters of *Little Miss Sunshine*), the more the music can emphasize and comment on character, while the more generic the characters, the more the situations tend to decide the moment-by-moment scoring of the music: if the characters are generic the music tends towards emotional scoring.<sup>12</sup>

### EMOTIONAL SPACE AND CHARACTER SPACE

Now we can describe how this division between emotional expression and character expression is also a spatial division in narratives. We will also suggest that films that use emotional music also tend to use spectacular dispassionate spaces, and for the very same reason: there is little character to express, and so both the space and the music tend to stress only the emotional beats of story.

There are many textbooks and examples on how to create the moment-by-moment experience of emotional space. As we have noted, there are spotting sessions during which through rescoring or editing a music score is used to emphasize certain emotional moments, heightening kisses, or cuts or twists of the head, or shots of the approaching out-of-control explosives-laden truck, or of the monster emerging unscathed from the firebomb. Similar work is done with color-correction and with digital manipulations of backgrounds, focus and even atmosphere. We often find that an author or director or game-designer tries to heighten a character's moment of sadness by setting it in the rain, or by creating certain soft lighting, or by framing the character as all alone, or by doing all of these to emphasize loneliness. These devices are a staple of today's media narratives, and the intent is of course to communicate the character's emotional experience to us on a sensory, spatial level. Such examples run the gamut from emphasizing adrenalin to expressing emotions.

Since these devices are of course the very same ones that are used to create Dantean space, the two aesthetic techniques are easily confused. After all, both emotional space and Dantean space involve manipulation of space, color, sounds and musical energies to draw us into the

character's emotional point of view (POV). But there are radical differences between the intent and effects of the two approaches. They differ on a deep structural level in the nature of the screenplay and the fundamentals of the story. *Emotional space* is often a situational and reactive use of space, while the Dantean use of space is a projection of tendencies and engraved aspects of character, and as we have pointed out in the case of Aeneas and of film music, the *moment-by-moment emotional experiences* of a protagonist differs from the *character* of that protagonist. Clearly on some deep level and in many cases, moment-by-moment uses of psychological space are connected to character—they are the push-and-pull that can (but needn't) deepen or change a character's tendencies. But while there is this possible link between the two forms, it's important to tease out the longer-term and character-based nature of Dantean space.

In most contemporary narratives emotional space, like emotional beats of music, takes us temporarily from narration into an emotional moment and then back out again. This jump can often interrupt our enjoyment, when it is used by an inelegant storyteller, desperate editor or sound designer whenever it is convenient or necessary to heighten and signal the emotional beats of a character's arc.<sup>13</sup>

Using Dantean space to inform us of the lifelong effects of a Dantean moment is a distinctly different enterprise on three levels. First, Dantean space permeates a tale and is thus a more rigorous use of POV simply because a Dantean moment is both an experience itself *and* the frame for later experiences. The filmmaker can then decide when to stand outside of the character's Dantean POV and when to enter into it, when to bring the singular aesthetic of a character in to dominate the overall shape and aesthetic of a story. In our examples in the following chapters, *The Third Man* overtly enters space imbued with character in its sewer sequence and its extraordinarily-long final shot, *Aliens* does this intermittently in the first two acts and for a long continuous stretch in the third when Ripley fights her way through the lair of the aliens, and *Amelie* never leaves the main character's own childhood Dantean moment. A quick glimpse of the stills from *Amelie* shows this (see Figs. 1.1 & 10.10): her childhood, her adult apartment, her workplace, and all of Paris are aesthetically united. When the continuities within a person's POV are dramatized over different stages of a story, a certain specific and unifying aesthetic effect is achieved: now POV begins to become a film's artistic form. Thus Dantean space can often bring an overall visual and sensory unity to a story.

Secondly, this continuous form is not adopted to create a unified *visual* aesthetic—the way for example noir tropes unify the dispassionate *Sin City*, or grotesques, drought and bricolaged costumes and cars unify the spaces of *Mad Max* by expressing the external, commonly-shared antagonistic precariousness of that world. Because a tale with Dantean space is grounded inside the protagonist's point of view and relates to her core conflict, the visual and sensory envelope links the core inner *dramatic* contrasts, obstacles and antagonisms of the story to the protagonist, bringing a further level of *dramatic* unity to the narrative. The stills from *Aliens* shows this dramatic aspect of the visual and sensory. *Amelie* also expresses this clearly: the continuous enveloping spectacle of innocence, child-toy colors, and delicate nostalgia has a deep and unifying emotional dimension, a strong role in the storytelling, because it is grounded in the opening montage of Amelie's childhood. The fact of her mother's death and her father's emotional abandonment shows us that the adult Amelie's sensibility is stuck in her childhood because that is also where her heart and hopes are stuck. Amelie's sensibility is thus a direct expression of the film's core antagonist conflict, expressing in fact the very spine of the tale, and this makes these uses of cinematography and production design and music all work more significantly than if they were simply creating eye-candy; i.e., creating isolated moments of emotional space. The marriage in Dantean space of these two aspects—the visual/sensory and the dramatic—is a marriage of the objectives of the character and the memories and sensibility that shapes a character's point of view. Thus it is a bridge between the visual, spatial and sound elements of a story and the core drama of the characters. This synthesis is another aspect of this marriage of content and form in Dantean space.

Thirdly, there is simply the multiplying nature of our emotional identification with a character that can come from our *continual* re-occupation of his point of view. Moving from a traditionally realist narrative to step momentarily into the experience of the world through a character's eyes is a fascinating and sometimes shocking experience: most filmmakers and storytellers heighten emotional beats to create just this effect. But note that *Amelie* presents a very different experience. Once we recognize that the overall tone of the film is continually informing us of how Amelie experiences life, we realize the film never leaves her *Dantean* point of view even for a moment. In a sense we feel we become Amelie, an intense form of empathy. The importance of this will be explored in later chapters.

So far we have argued that space in cinema is inflected by character and emotions, and so whenever the musical score expresses these, it is also inflecting the space of the film. In fact, we will argue soundtrack music not only functions differently when it is harnessed to dispassionate, dramatic or Dantean space but that there are certain codified forms of music that tend to be found in dispassionate space that do not really support Dantean space.

As we move from dispassionate, dramatic and Dantean narratives across the gamut of empathy, we generally find an increasing level of personal characterization in the music. In dispassionate films—take for example the standard Marvel superhero film—the music tends towards a more generic, codified quality, while dramatic and Dantean films tend to a much more heterogeneous and multi-layered, and often a quite singular use of music, as the examples of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Secretary* reveal.<sup>14</sup>

We might assume that because music in dispassionate films often exhibits a placeless, nonspecific and generic quality, this simply results from using lower-paid uninspired composers (who perhaps have learned their craft in TV). But in fact this dispassionate musical form is necessarily imposed onto such narratives for two reasons. First, the audiences tend to be younger and so their acoustic vocabulary is simpler, often coming from television shows and thus based on the codified musical cues of clear emotional expression prevalent in children's and teen narratives, which are themselves often dispassionate and plot-based and lacking deeply-drawn characters.

The second, more complex reason for this form of generic music in dispassionate narrative is simply that the dispassionate characters of these films tend to lack inner struggle and vulnerabilities and complex personal histories. Any music that expresses the world of a dispassionate character cannot express inner objectives and struggles, simply because there are none to express. This means that these characters also lack the developed backstories that would grant them not only personal histories but also the distinct musical tastes, references and codes that can only grow out of a complex, rooted identity.

We sketch this out at such length to once again use dispassionate form as a negative example that helps us understand dramatic and Dantean forms. By contrast to, for example, the dispassionate, shallowly-emotional music of *Thor*, in dramatic and Dantean films we tend to hear music that takes us into the hidden character tendencies, goals and struggles of the characters. It also can express and take us emotionally into

the layered history, experiences and social and economic identity of the characters. It can inform us of their backstory and of their own sense of values, place, allegiances and acoustic heritage. We have seen this in both *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Secretary* and will find further examples, particularly in our later look at the film *Apocalypse Now* in Chap. 7. And by expressing character, music choices can also characterize the space, often giving it another dimension of meaning. Arguably this kind of music, which tends to be rich in the characterological manifold, is for that reason also more empathetic.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. The Aeneid, Bk 2, lines 710–725.
2. Act 1, Scene 2, lines 114–116.
3. We cannot ignore the fact that as a film *Little Miss Sunshine* has had months if not years of work in the scoring, while an episode of a TV show like *Lego Friends* is typically made in a matter of weeks. Unlike composers who work for television, a film's composer usually has far more time to focus on characters as opposed to only on emotions. In fact, on many TV shows there is no final pass by a composer: instead the editor or sound designer simply grabs a cue from a list of pre-made musical cues and then fits and shapes it into the emotional moments in the edit.

It is also worth mentioning that music has long been at the center of the work of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, the husband-and-wife team that made this film.

Another aspect of production intrudes here to emphasize which form can be deployed: while *character* scoring in the form of leitmotif can often take place before the film is shot, most *emotional* musical spotting is done in post-production. Though composers have usually seen the script well before shooting began and have usually already scored key scenes, the emotional spotting of the film is a process that usually comes late in the edit when the picture is largely locked. Now the director, producer and composer will sit down as the cut unfolds and try to mark emotional moments where score music can be slid in to heighten the emotional experiences of the scenes. Still, while there are a number of reasons for these different uses of music, neither the length of the production nor the moment of the music's creation can by themselves explain the overall tendencies we find in musical scoring between these two roles. Genre, demographics, film tone, and the level of development of the characters themselves are also all factors that help determine whether a score will depict character or not.

4. Thought he roots of the concept go back to Stanislavski, some of this list can be found in Cohen & Sherman, 2016.
5. We can compare this manifold with the concept of the Kantian space-time manifold that underlies the concept of the chronotope. In Bakhtin's day this concept was perhaps the best available to understand the nature of the human processing of time, and a narrative seemed also a kind of tunnel of processed time, and so the two were equated, or at least the Kantian manifold was taken to be something between a foundation and a metaphor. We don't suggest this research is foundationally flawed: instead we stay out of these fierce debates (which lie at the heart of phenomenology) and simply start from a very different practice-based foundation. Instead of the categories associated with the concept of manifold, we start with those we use in revision workshops for analysing scenes. Drawn largely from Stanislavski's advice for actors who are trying to grasp their character's relation to a scene, this characterological manifold can be applied with clarity to any element of drama to reveal characterological lines of causality and emotion, of motivation and memories.
6. And yet, as we will see in our chapter on alienation, an element or series of elements can also be purposefully denuded of these layers of meaning to convey a sense of alienation around the character.
7. His title for "A Spanking", for example, has no particular acoustic reference to anything about either of the characters, and arguably this generic result is not his fault: with no character to work with, no sense of place and no emotional specificity, or backstory to work with the music, like the location, has very little to express or expand upon and so it is rather clearly limited to genre expression and to marking emotional beats.
8. John Calhoun (2002, October). "Spank You Very Much", *Entertainment Design*, 36:10, pp. 8–10. Retrieved April 1, 2011, from Research Library Core. (Document ID: 204894041)
9. A division elaborated by Katherine Shonfield (2000b)
10. At minute 1:40.
11. At 2:30.
12. At the same time, sometimes emotional scoring seems to be determined by the age, relative sophistication, and emotional demands of a film's demographic. For example, we might consider the scoring for a film with a similar demographic to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them* (2016). Like *A Series ...*, the score of *Fantastic Beasts ...* is similarly emotional, constantly underlining beats, antagonists and situations without very clear character-work. Arguably, this is done not because the characters are shallowly drawn (they are more deeply-drawn than Rowling's *Potter* series, for example). Instead the score is emotional for both genre reasons and because of the relative

musical sophistication of its young audience. Its intended demographic of children and young adults, which is not very attuned to the tropes of the musical canon and thus not very capable of hearing subtle comments of character, also depends on the score to always reassure the viewer by constantly placing her in a clear emotional position regarding the plot.

13. When clumsily done, these shifts in forms of representation only signal the emotions of the scene without moving us: in such cases we often feel manipulated by the author, filmmakers or game designers.
14. When we speak of a generic quality of dispassionate film music, we mean a number of related characteristics. First, there is that quality of clear underlining of oppositions: the music first divides the world into the good and the bad. Second, it tends to underline the emotional moment-by-moment beats of the story: it informs the viewer that the character feels scared right now, and feels sad now, and feel reassured now, and so the viewer should too. This role has come to define the music of classical Hollywood films: think of E.W. Korngold or Max Steiner, two exemplary Hollywood composers from the 1930s and '40s who both helped formalized and codified classical strains into a kind of dictionary of emotional messages. Today John Williams is perhaps the most famous practitioner of this form of narrative music, but Howard Shore and others also work in this vein.

Finally, such music often uses a large orchestra of studio musicians to create an enveloping “epic sweep” that we have come to associate with certain big-budget Hollywood films filled with spectacular locations and set-pieces.

This grand theme music is closer in form to the theme music used in television in one specific way. In general TV theme music eschews musical originality: such theme songs are intentionally associative and thus purposefully not ‘unique’ in the same way as other forms like traditional classical music or contemporary experimental music. As Rodman explains, typically the TV theme consciously “draws upon musical styles that persist in the audience’s collective memory and perhaps even borrows material from many other musical sources that preceded it” (2010: 15). Rodman acknowledges that this stylistic legacy has often left critics under-impressed with the form: “scholars may perceive this lack of uniqueness as a weakness in music”. But, as he points out, this musical intertextuality is actually crafted very purposefully. “Television producers and directors consider [such derivative forms of music] a strength because this lack of uniqueness taps into a cultural familiarity with viewers” (ibid).

This could easily describe the dispassionate theme music of *Thor* or *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Arguably, these particular styles in fact created a sense of escapism around their narratives in part by not referring

to any actual place, tradition or cultural conflict and instead connote only other films or TV shows. Heard this way, their derivative connotations are not necessarily a reflection of a composer's lack of talent but in fact are a purposeful promise: they announce that these shows will safely grant the viewer a familiar escape from daily concerns and strife that will not leave her with any lingering discomfoting, memorable conflicts.

15. Dedicated to Gabrielle Kelly.

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