

Music in Film: Film as Music

Peter Mettler

Volume 3, Number 1, Fall 1992

Cinéma et Musicalité

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001178ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001178ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mettler, P. (1992). Music in Film: Film as Music. *Cinémas*, 3(1), 34–42.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1001178ar>

Article abstract

Film and music have the same communicative capacity, according to Toronto filmmaker Peter Mettler. By adopting the musical rhythms and procedures as creative vectors, the filmmaker, who is also the cameraman and the editor, acquires the means to produce a cinema of the unconscious, of the intuitive, either with or without a narrative structure. Mettler describes his musical approach to film and its application in three of his features: *Scissere* (1982), *Eastern Avenue* (1985), and *The Top of His Head* (1990).



Photo de tournage de *Scissere* de Peter Mettler (1982)
Photo : Peter Mettler

Music in Film: Film as Music

Peter Mettler

RÉSUMÉ

Le film a la même capacité de communication que la musique, soutient le cinéaste torontois Peter Mettler. En adoptant les rythmes et les procédés musicaux comme vecteurs créatifs d'images et de sons, le cinéaste, qui est aussi caméraman et monteur, se donne les moyens de produire un cinéma de l'inconscient, de l'intuitif, que ce soit dans une structure narrative ou non. Mettler décrit son approche filmique musicale et ses applications dans trois de ses longs métrages : *Scissere* (1982), *Eastern Avenue* (1985) et *The Top of His Head* (1990).

ABSTRACT

Film and music have the same communicative capacity, according to Toronto filmmaker Peter Mettler. By adopting the musical rhythms and procedures as creative vectors, the filmmaker, who is also the cameraman and the editor, acquires the means to produce a cinema of the unconscious, of the intuitive, either with or without a narrative structure. Mettler describes his musical approach to film and its application in three of his features : *Scissere* (1982), *Eastern Avenue* (1985), and *The Top of His Head* (1990).

Film has the same potential immediacy as music. What I mean by this is that film has many aspects in common with music, especially in its ability to tap into an unconscious or subconscious mode of experience, and in its ability to create meaning through rhythms and emotional colours and tones. This potential of cinema is intrinsic to the message I try to convey through my work as well as to the means used to express this message. It is central to my

methods of production as well as to the response I try to elicit from an audience, where they are enabled to function on a level that is not intellectual, but emotional, a level of "gut responses." Film can be configured in the same way as a piece of music and, like music, it could be that the essential element of a film is its rhythm. If a film does not have rhythmic resonance a viewer can tune out of the experience, even if it is a narrative-based work, because he has not absorbing thoughts or emotions of the film at the right time, the right pace.

...the dialogue of elements in *Scissere*...

Although two of my earlier films, *Scissere* (1982) and *Eastern Avenue* (1985), may both be termed audio-visual scores or pieces, the method used to create each film was very different. *Scissere* had a kind of loose narrative but it used an audio-visual composition to reinforce that narrative. Simply put, the "story" follows three characters through a set of circumstances, where nothing significant happens in a traditional formulaic, narrative sense. Instead, *Scissere* tries to evoke the psychological and physical situation of each character. Take, for example, the heroin addict. One sequence occurs in a huge decrepit flour mill containing a lot of old machinery with fungus growing over it, surrounded by broken windows and walls, etc. This sequence was constructed to represent the body of the character, a physical body, the interior of the heroin addict through which the drug was actually passing. The editing of these images tried to depict an injection, using rhythms of sound and image to create an impression of a body receiving a toxin — without ever showing a needle or the addict himself.

Each character in *Scissere* has a set of associated images. The scientist, the entomologist, was characterized by analyzing, by devoting his life to the identification of species, by the picking apart of particular little insects and giving them names, categorizing and sorting through them. Accordingly, there is a set of images throughout the film which correspond to concepts of ordering. Another character is a woman leaving her child for a day to go out to try and find some kind of thrill, escape or perhaps even enlightenment. Corresponding to her search are archetypal religious images such as bleeding light and passageways. There are, as well, specific images of ritual prayer, chanting and so forth.

As each image has a purpose, configuring into a thematic or abstract scheme relating to the characters, so too does sound. In relation to the heroin addict there are many different kinds of machine sounds — gears turning, clocks ticking, pulses, cycles, things in momentum — contrasted with real human sounds, where

the addict's breaths, pulse and heartbeat are often featured very clearly. The "mechanics" of his body are highlighted. The mother has associated sounds which are almost religious in nature. There are choral sounds, open sounds, ethereal searching kinds of sounds — musics we associate with a religious quest, or meditation, sometimes playful as her child occupies her mind.

The editing of these images and sounds took place simultaneously. In this working method, the processes and elements of filmmaking usually develop simultaneously — script ideas, sound ideas, image ideas, all working together. During *Scissere*, elaborate mixes of sections of the film were done before returning to picture editing and re-editing picture to the soundscape. Later I would go back into the mixing theatre again and re-work the mix. The process of making the film truly became a dialogue between music and film. It is the way I like to work most, and it was possible in *Scissere* because I mixed at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, with a mixing theatre to myself. The sound board was set up with fifteen dubbers. There was a lot of time, loops were used on many of the dubbers and other sounds on cut synchronized tracks. The mixing board became a kind of musical instrument. Without cue sheets I did not know where I was going, but knew what sound was on what channel. As the film played back, I would literally perform with the mixing board. It is a very exciting way to work, but it is not something that can be afforded very easily in the commercial world. As you move deeper into the industrial schemes typical of Canadian filmmaking it becomes more and more difficult to use methods such as these. Instead you are under the pressures of limited time and money to mix, trying to translate your intuition through a mixer who must try and interpret and execute what are, really, very personal responses. It is a whole different process.

...the purity of process in *Eastern Avenue*...

Eastern Avenue is almost a reaction to *Scissere* although it too adopts the rhythms and processes of music to create an intuitively-based film. The final result of *Scissere* works very musically and has a quality that taps into the unconscious, despite the fact that it was rigorously constructed by the rational mind. By the end of *Scissere*, I was tired of intellectualization and wanted to work as a musician would, improvising on an instrument, but using a camera as the vehicle of interpretation. *Eastern Avenue* was set up as a journey in which places were re-visited that had influenced my sensibility in some profound way, filming anything that attracted my attention or spoke to me, trying to be quite impulsive with the camera moment by moment. I did not work out the shots ahead of

time, but just said, "OK, there's something interesting or impressionable, now turn the camera on and react to and with it through the camera." The material was then edited chronologically. The shooting ratio is about 1.3 to 1, not very much was shot that is not in the film.

Sound was approached in a similar manner. I collected sounds along my travels and then tried to work them in without great intellectual consideration. My decisions were based on feeling, not rationalization. "Does this work here? Does this work there? Yes. I do not need to know why but..." In *Eastern Avenue* a recording of a bicycle ride I took with a young boy in India runs for about fifteen minutes. It was a rickshaw-type bicycle with a variety of interesting clicking and rhythmic sounds. We drove through a town very late at night and you can hear him teaching me how to count, you can hear different musics and cars and people passing by in the atmosphere around us. It forms a soundscape that is also an actual scenario. It accompanies a visual sequence of a highway car ride through East Germany into Berlin.

Making *Eastern Avenue* was the first time I worked with live musicians. We used a method that attempted to stay true to the intuitive system of the film. The film was screened and a cellist and a violin player improvised directly to picture playback, without stopping, without going back and forth. We did three or four passes and then I made only a few cuts of the sections that worked best, blending them together. This then formed one layer of the finished sound track. Although the conceptualization and execution of both the visual images and the soundscape of *Eastern Avenue* were simple, the end result still really pleases me — it is both rich and subtle. Of all my films, it is my favourite, because of the purity of the process. The risk inherent in filmmaking is that the creator can get tired of the work by the time it is finished. It has been worked over so much that the filmmaker cannot even see it any more. Because *Eastern Avenue* was not mastered by the intellect, I can watch it again and again over the years and see a completely different work each time. It is a mysterious film because it was not made by my conscious mind. I find it very provocative.

...the weaving of narrative in *The Top of His Head*...

The Top of His Head (1990) is a rather self-conscious exploration of the dialectic between two worlds. It experimented in trying to combine the world of audio-visual evocation of the subconscious found in *Scissere* and *Eastern Avenue*, with the world governed by the dictates of story, of narrative. If *The Top of His Head* was to be reduced to one idea, it must be said that it concerns

the tension between intuition and intellect. This tension exists not only in what occurs in the story, with the characters, but also to the form and process of the film itself. The film sets up a narrative that can be followed linearly, but at the same time tries to break that narrative and take the viewer into other more emotional, unconscious directions. It tries to both construct and deconstruct its own narrative simultaneously. Some viewers believe they are watching a conventional, straight film story, so when the narrative starts disintegrating they become confused and concern themselves with questions such as "Why isn't he here?" or "Why isn't this logic working out anymore?" Other viewers can embrace the disintegrating logic and enter the other realm I try to offer — a musical realm.



The Top of His Head de Peter Mettler (1990)
Photo : Peter Mettler

The process of collecting sounds and images for *The Top of His Head* was quite similar to the technique used in *Scissere*. Throughout production, sounds and images were collected and

grouped according to theme or character, without knowing exactly how they would be used in the final film. Over the course of editing these collected pieces were woven into the fabric, the narrative structure of *The Top of His Head*, until they found their place and began to make some sense, not a narrative sense but a musical sense. Working with other people when using these methods can become difficult as the decisions are made intuitively. On *The Top of His Head*, therefore, I did most of this type of picture editing which I call "the weave" of the film, and Margaret Van Eerdewijk, my co-editor, did most of the more traditional editing. She began cutting the film and I took over for the second half. Margaret came back near the end of the process when we worked together to polish the film to a fine cut.

The musical score for *The Top of His Head* was also integrated and organic in its development. Strangely, even my discovery of the composer, Fred Frith, occurred in an intuitive and spontaneous way. The script for *The Top of His Head* was pretty well finished when I saw a record jacket in a New York store which explained in the credits how sounds of one piece of music were recorded in the streets of New York city, how another sound was recorded elsewhere, how one piece had specific voices in it and another was recorded in a NYC club performance but altered in Switzerland, etc. This reminded me of my methods in *Eastern Avenue* so I bought the record which was, appropriately, called "Speechless." It was by Fred and I was instantly inspired by his work. Very disciplined forms, influences of classical and pop music structures were present, but at the same time there was an incredible looseness, an improvisational quality which was full of unusual sound arrangements and instrumentations. Not only was he able to integrate these disparate elements together successfully, but it created a very evocative style of music that I felt reflected the kind of film I was setting out to make.

Fred came to Montreal and we worked for five weeks scheming and recording music to the *rough cut* of the picture of *The Top of his Head*. The process of constructing the music was similar to the process of constructing the film. We talked about how to explore and extend musical themes to reflect the themes of the film. He tried all sorts of different things out in the studio as I responded to his amazing inventions. Slowly we built the tracks. Twenty-four recorded tracks were mixed down into six tracks, to leave flexibility for the final mix. I cut those pieces into the rough cut of the film and continued to edit the picture. The music therefore influenced the picture cutting. By the time of the final mix some of the music had changed, having found new relationships to picture, and some of it had been dropped altogether. Only when

the music was sculpted with a dense collection of the gathered sound effects and ambiances did the final definition of the soundscape become apparent. Sound effects and ambiances were used to work like music but music also contained sound effects and ambience. Together they fused to become what could be regarded as a final musical score.

The Top of His Head came close to an implementation of music of which I am cautious and critical, where music in film is used to *reinforce* the image. Many movies on the commercial market tend to exploit prominent and dramatic music as emotional triggers, compensating for what was not accomplished, or even attempted cinematically. Music is used as a sole force to create both emotion and rhythm. If the score was taken away the film by itself might very well be dull and lifeless. Trying to avoid this kind of insincerity, I worked to integrate what Fred had done as a musical composer into a fabric of sound that was concordant with the character and emotions of the images belonging to the film. And, for the most part, the level of music in *The Top of His Head* is unusually quiet, enmeshed in the din of the film's own atmosphere. At the end of *The Top of His Head* I came across a book about words or concepts that exist in other languages but do not exist in English, and found the Japanese word "yugen." During *The Top of His Head* I had been trying to articulate the reason behind using images that seemed to have no obvious reference to the narrative. For example, there's a tractor in a suburb, a huge tractor plowing up the earth with seagulls flying around it and the sun setting in the background. It might appear to have nothing to do with the *story* of a satellite dish salesman being chased by the police, however it is an image evocative of the themes of the film and the emotions of the protagonist. I could not, and I did not want to *say* that the earth is being plowed over, developed, technology is controlling everything, and that Gus is at odds with his own mechanization, the plowing under of his soul. It is not that simple. The idea of "yugen" was very exciting as it moves towards articulating how and why images can be used and juxtaposed to create meaning. It means "an awareness of the universe that triggers feelings too deep and mysterious for words." Japanese Haiku often evokes "yugen" and music can create this feeling with great immediacy. It has always seemed to me that cinema is a fertile ground to do the same. Most people are familiar with the ability of music to function this way. They do not, however, often expect it from film as they are accustomed to following the course of a narrative and its characters.

Music most often comes from, and speaks to, an intuitive center, an emotional center, an unconscious center. This is what I find

attractive about it. Music can defy words, and the accompanying notion of organizing everything into definitions. I don't know if we should call it a disease, but the urge to demystify and control pervades most of our operatives, it overrides the way we perceive the world. Music remains not completely uncontaminated but still quite free of this tendency. It can transcend such limits, and I believe film also shows the same potential.

With music and film it can be so simple to move beyond the constraints of the rational mind to touch something deeper and unspoken, whereas it may take until the end of a book before a similar sense can be evoked through words alone. It is difficult to use words to go beyond words. This is why music, and film, are very powerful mediums.