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Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience

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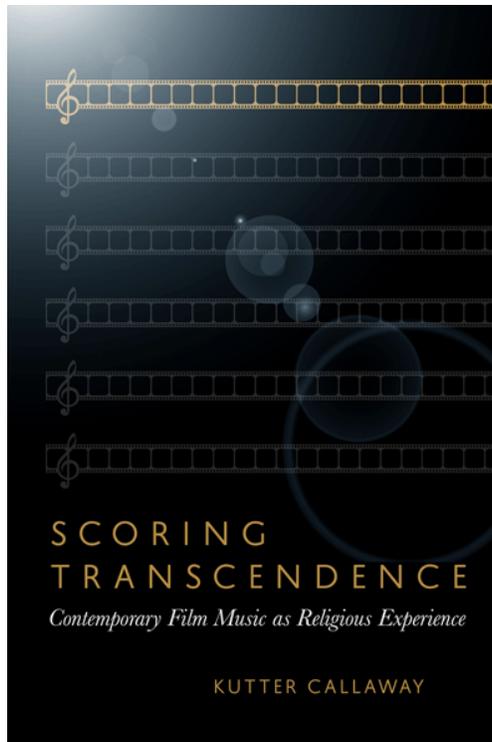
Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience

Abstract

An earlier version of this book review appeared in *Film International*, Nov. 13, 2013 (<http://filmint.nu/?p=10038>). It appears here by permission.

Author Notes

Brandon Konecny recently graduated from the Film Studies program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He is a two-time scholarship recipient of the Fluor Scholarship Foundation, winner of the UNCW Award for Excellence in Film Studies, and received the Excellence in Scholarship Award at the 2013 Visions Film Festival and Conference. He is currently an 'In the Field' Writer for *Film International*, and frequently researches such topics as postwar American avant-garde film, Eastern European cinemas, theological film criticism, Žižekian film theory, Cinema Novo, twentieth-century popular music, and fandom studies. His work has appeared in the *Monroe Enquirer Journal*, *Film International*, *Film Matters*, and *Intellect's Journal of Fandom Studies* (forthcoming).



“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).

In recent years, theology has taken a growing interest in cinema, viewing it as both an effective exegetic tool and an intriguing cultural form worthy of the field’s attention, and this has brought with it the appearance of a number of stimulating works. However, the size of the burgeoning interdisciplinary’s bibliography remains, at best, modest, and even smaller is its engagement with film music. In fact, besides Barry Taylor’s lackluster essay “The Color of Sound: Music and Meaning Making in Film” from *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, the topic remains well-nigh untouched. But with his impressive new book, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience*, Kutter

Callaway, thankfully, steps in to fill this unfortunate void. Combining his extensive knowledge of cinema, music, and theology, Callaway explores the affective nature of film music and its potentialities to provide viewers a way to experience God's presence in their filmgoing experience, that perhaps He's as close to us as our theater seat's proximity to the big screen.

Among the literature on film that programmatically announces its religious orientation—André Bazin and Robert K. Johnston, most notably—Callaway's book shows itself to be an impressive piece of scholarship. His topic is ambitious, to say the least, and one that, if it's to prove convincing, requires the tight weaving of research from both film studies and theology. But it's a task of which he proves himself more than capable, and throughout the book's pages he skillfully stitches together his vast amount of interdisciplinary data into a vibrant and coherent tapestry.

This tight construction is observable in the impressive dialogue he facilitates between the emotive power of film music and its theological significance. In the beginning (no pun intended), Callaway primarily concerns himself with the former issue, devoting the first four chapters to a number of textual analyses and the occasional peppering in of theological insights. He's selective with his choice of case studies; the ones that interest him are those which have ignited a sizable amount of viewer discourse on their musical scores and their purportedly "spiritual" or "revelatory" nature. But couldn't these claims from empirical viewers, most of which he cites from IMDB.com, simply be hyperbole or pre-inscribed responses to well-known cultural codes? It's a reasonable question, and one he addresses by localizing his concerns to his case studies' musical scores, and examines their function within their respective narratives as well as their role in the film-to-viewer experience.

His choices in films are broad. From *Magnolia* (1999) to *Up* (2009) to *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), he goes through their unique use of music and addresses his examinations to viewers' particular responses to them. Ultimately, he roots these scores' affective ability to music's power as a nonlinguistic, nonrepresentational medium and its supplementarity to the cinematographic image. As Callaway points out, this coupling can, indeed, be powerful. If we think about the meaning making activity involved in our viewing of cinema, its function as root metaphors to which we compare our lives, the employment of film music can offer a spiritual voice amid the literality of the filmic image, the vocality of some transcendental Other, which furthers our conceptualizations of these texts.

Consider a general example. In a particularly cathartic point in a given film's plot—perhaps a long awaited kiss, sacrificial death, or some redemptive action—the sudden entrance of nondiegetic orchestral music, the soaring of its string section, can bring about the materialization of a lump in our throat, tears streaming down our cheeks, or make our hair stand on end. This peculiar resultant feeling is one that's beyond signification: it's a sensation of eternity, something limitless, unbounded—oceanic, as it were. It's as if our finitude as humans, in just this one magnificent moment, has been overcome. This emotionality, in a sense, implicates us in the pathos of the dramatic action, and it allows us to see the cinematographic image anew. As Callaway sees it, it's this intersection of the representational and the nonrepresentational, the linguistic and the nonlinguistic, that can induce this sublime feeling; it allows us to “feel” with the images—or, as he addresses later, feel “beyond” them.

The later chapters of the book are more theologically dense than those preceding it. Here, Callaway comes to the pressing question of whether this emotion is simply artifice, some physiological trickery in response to certain audiovisual stimuli, or is it—can it be—a legitimate

means by which we encounter the presence of some transcendental Other? Callaway's choice is the latter, obviously, and he frames film music's induction of spiritual sensations in terms of the theological notion of "general revelation," whereby one comes to conceive of "God's active involvement in the world outside of the covenant community" (155). He devotes a number of pages to this idea's scriptural basis (Psalms 19, Luke 19:37-40, and Romans 1:19-20, for example) and its lineage in the theological tradition. Perhaps the most interesting (and important) of these is his analysis of the modes of God's presence through *ruach* (the divine breath that gives life to the world) and *shekinah* (the actual presence of the Spirit of God in our lives) and, in doing so, he presents the scripturally convincing case for God's working in and through our lives.

Importantly, his implementation of this concept enables us to consider the spiritual capacity of our interaction with the "created order," among which is film music, whose spiritual capacity can serve as a mediatory tool by which viewers can come to experience God at work in their lives. Callaway argues that, living within the created order, our phenomenal experience of cultural forms, here films, can indeed provide an affective space in which we can come to experience God's presence. And why couldn't it? The existence of art is, after all, a manifestation of this world or, as philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy puts it, a "phenomenon-of-the-world."¹ This is not to say that Callaway claims that God intentionally resides within these films like some telos embedded in the celluloid itself, but that cinemagoing itself can provide viewers a means with which we can experience a general revelation, allowing us to get a sense of the deeper underpinnings of human experience.

In light of my praise, though, there are minor aspects of Callaway's book that I find a bit disappointing. For the extensive amount of theologians he references—Graham Ward, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, etc.—he does not engage any of those who've put forth much in the way of aesthetics, except for his brief consideration of Saint Augustine and his baroque conception of music's problematic sensuality. This neglect is particularly unfortunate, since it limits the scope of his theological engagement with cinema as an artistic medium, not just a mediatory tool for revelation. And it's not that there aren't any fitting examples of aesthetically astute theologians available for his program—far from it, in fact. For instance, Callaway's analyses of texts' capacity for nonlinguistic revelation finds its precise parallel in the writings of existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, a figure whose thoughts on art have sparked—and continue to spark, probably—lively interjournal discourse on their relevance to contemporary works.

Admittedly, Tillich, to my knowledge, made no mention of cinema and wasn't especially fond of music, at least until later in life. But his aesthetics, indeed, have great relevance to Callaway's examination of film music and its revelation-inducing potentialities. As Tillich writes in "Protestantism and Artistic Style," there's an inherent religious dimension in all artworks, be they programmatically religious in content or not, and that, entrenched in their artistic style, is the conveyance of "the ultimate"—i.e., that which shows reality not as it is, but the encounter of reality itself and as such gives the artwork a peculiar depth of meaning.²

In a like manner, Callaway argues that film music can suggest that there's something more in the cinematographic image than itself, revealing a surplus of sorts "in the images we see—a surplus in need of interpretation" (106). We can see this at work in films that underscore particularly plaintive images (perhaps those of death or that convey the frailty of life) with music

that, rather than allowing ourselves to fall prey to surface readings of life's meaninglessness or pervasive nihilism, invites us to search for something more. The music assures us that no matter how bleak the textual action of such films, the nondiegetic music, as if speaking from some transcendental realm beyond the camera's limited frame of reference, suggests that not all is lost, that there's still some light to be found in even the darkest moments of human existence.

Now, if we consider this commentative function of film music in relation to Tillich's notion of the "the ultimate" which gives presence to a greater depth of meaning within the artwork itself, we can see that the German theologian's aesthetics would be much in evidence to Callaway's program. In fact, it would allow him to forge a dialogue not just between theology and the film-to-viewer experience, but also with the filmic text itself, showing the causative agent of these spiritual encounters to be always-already inscribed in its materiality. To be sure, it's not that Callaway's book isn't cogent enough as it is; it's that such an oversight, I claim, can only be seen as a missed opportunity.

It must also be said that this book is not a beach read. *Scoring Transcendence* isn't just another simplistic effort to subsume secular cultural forms into Christian thought by your typical "hip" youth group leader, sporting a dated Relient K tour t-shirt and shabby hair that's just long enough in length to be considered "edgy." Callaway is after a theologically sound approach to film music and the possibility of God's indwelling presence in our cinemagoing, and with all that this topic promises, it places a good bit of demands on the part of the reader. Although written with concision, the reader still must endure a number of highly abstract concepts, multifaceted arguments, and barrages of ghastly Hebrew and German theological jargon if they hope to get to the core of his argument. However, this shouldn't dissuade someone from picking up this book.

While reading it can prove to be an arduous undertaking, the reader's persistence is well worth the struggle, as it is rewarded with new perspectives on film music and theological thought.

What we ultimately get with Callaway's book is a singular work in its interdiscipline, maybe even a gem. *Scoring Transcendence* stands as a benchmark for theology's involvement with cinema. It's spirited, and every page evokes an enthusiasm for cinema and theological criticism that readers are sure to find stimulating. Whether you're of the Judeo-Christian faith or not, this book has something to offer: it gives a novel and insightful dissection of film music's tremendous emotional power, how this one filmic element among many others can bring people to deeper understanding of the phenomenal world. Callaway's work could very well be the decisive text that brings theological film criticism into the fold of contemporary film scholarship.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Why Are There Several Arts?" *The Muses*. Ed. Jean-Luc Nancy. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-39.

² Paul Tillich, "Protestantism and Artistic Style." *Theology of Culture*. Ed. Robert C. Kimball. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 68-75.

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