

From the sound and moving image research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interest and construct a 2,500 essay. Consider primary themes, key writers and relevant practitioners.

Use of Score in Selected Scenes in the film *Interstellar* 2014

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Research in Context ADAD5003

Introduction – 148 words

Main body – 1998 words

Conclusion – 219 words

Lecturer – Rob Jones

Introduction:

The film I have chosen to explore is *Interstellar*, 2014. It is a sci-fi film about interstellar travel, directed by Christopher Nolan with music composed by Hans Zimmer. Both these men have worked together previously. The basic storyline of the film revolves around humans dying because of global warming causing extreme weather events, such as dust storms. Humans need to leave Earth or die. The CGI storm scenarios used in the film are based on real-life events (IMDb, 2012).

I am interested in how sound and image are used together in the film. The music, in some scenes, has an intensity that enhances the seriousness and is essential to the action and ideas in the film. The two themes I would like to explore are the use of music to convey time and religiosity, referring to two particular scenes: the wave scene and the docking scene. (239)

Theme 1: Time

The wave scene occurs approximately one hour into the film. It is after Cooper, the hero, has left his family and Earth, in search of a habitable planet for humanity. The journey will take approximately 2 years; due to the proximity of one of the planets to a black hole, by the time Cooper gets back to earth, his young daughter will be about the same age as he was when he left earth, in his forties.

The spaceship comes into the atmosphere to be confronted by an ocean - there is no land to be seen. They land on the water and everything appears calm and peaceful. The non-diegetic music is very quiet.



Image 1: Clock starts ticking in the wave scene (Jay M, 2015b)

When the spaceship lands, the crew have to retrieve a black box from a ship that contained a scouting party. Cooper tells them that they have to hurry because one hour on this planet is the equivalent of seven years on Earth. As soon as he has made this statement, a non-diegetic ticking clock can be heard playing at 48 bpm, to indicate the need for speed. As we move through the scene, the action and movement by the characters gets faster and louder. We start to hear more instruments within the music and the ticking clock sound speeds up to 60 bpm. As the tension mounts, a church organ is introduced; it is loud and powerful and further increases the intensity and urgency of the film.



Image 2: Approach of the giant wave in the wave scene (Jay M, 2015b)

Sound can convey the idea of time in a scene, convey suspense and give a sense of importance and reality to the story. It can also convey the past. As Chion writes: ‘One of the most important effects of added value relates to the perception of time in the image, upon which sounds can exert considerable influence.’ Chion notes how sound can give a sense of progression, and purpose and how it can ‘dramatize’ the shot. Irregular sound can create tension but regular sound can also do the same, as it puts the listener on alert for irregularities (Chion 1976, pp. 13 – 15). The latter is the case in the wave scene, where a regular ticking sound signifies the idea of time running out and the impact of that, not only on those directly involved in the action but also the characters in the background, the people on Earth. As the ticking speeds up, the tension builds.

A time end point, also known as a ticking clock, is a technique in which you tell the audience up front that the action must be completed by a specific time. A time end point gives you the benefit of the intense narrative drive and great speed. (Entertain the Elk, 2018).

As Elk notes, a ticking clock is used a great deal in film and can be an obvious device to create tension and suspense in a scene. Nolan and Zimmer, however, place the ticking within the musical score, particularly within the organ music, which itself has a very regular pattern at this point, so that the ticking becomes part of the music (Entertain the Elk, 2018).

The same technique is used for the docking scene, where Cooper is trying to dock with the broken space-ship *Endurance*, which is spinning out of control. We hear the non-diegetic ticking again in the background. Brand asks Cooper what he is doing and as soon as he says docking, the organ music kicks in. CASE, the ship's robot, tells Cooper that docking is impossible, but Cooper says "No, it's necessary." This is life or death for them to survive. However, the music stays steady with the ticking in the background, until the ship starts to spin to match the uncontrollable spin of the *Endurance* ship. As he attempts to match the spin, the music becomes more intense, reaching a peak when they start to dock, with then the main engines of their ship slow down the spin of the *Endurance*. The music becomes more intense until they are safely out of orbit. Once the danger is over, for now, the music stops and there is silence.

Although the use of the ticking clock and organ sound in the docking scene is similar to the wave scene, here the booming organ music starts straight away and the ticking is more hidden within the music (Entertain the Elk, 2018).

The use of time in the film runs deeper than just the ticking clock of the score however. For example, *The Endurance* appears to be designed in the shape of an analogue clock, even spinning clockwise as it moves forward in space. One of the main characters, played by Michael Caine, recites the poem by Dylan Thomas *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* on a number of occasions. This emphasises the idea that humanity is running out of time, not just one father (Like Stories of Old, 2017).

Theme 2: Spirituality and love

The Church organ signifies religion, as well as being a powerful instrument. Nolan wanted to harness this power in the film : ‘Power alone from the organ is amazing, primeval, dangerous. An organ is almost human because it needs to breathe’ (*Interstellar*, 2015).



Image 3: Photograph of pipe organ (The Iglesia Ni Cristi, 2014)

The specific Church organ used in *Interstellar* is located at Temple Church Central London and played by Roger Sayer, organ soloist. Much of the orchestral music for the film was also played and recorded within that particular Church, so the orchestra could play along with the organ and maintain the rawness of the instruments. Zimmer also wanted to explore different sounds that could be produced by the orchestral instruments. For example, while the action is on Earth, the orchestral instruments are played conventionally, but as Cooper and his Crew travel further away from Earth, the instruments become distorted. Zimmer asked them to hit the sides of the violins and cellos and to hit the mouthpieces of the wind instruments with their hands and so on. He wanted to experiment with the orchestral sound (rather than using electronic sound) and make the scene more unnatural (*Interstellar*, 2015)

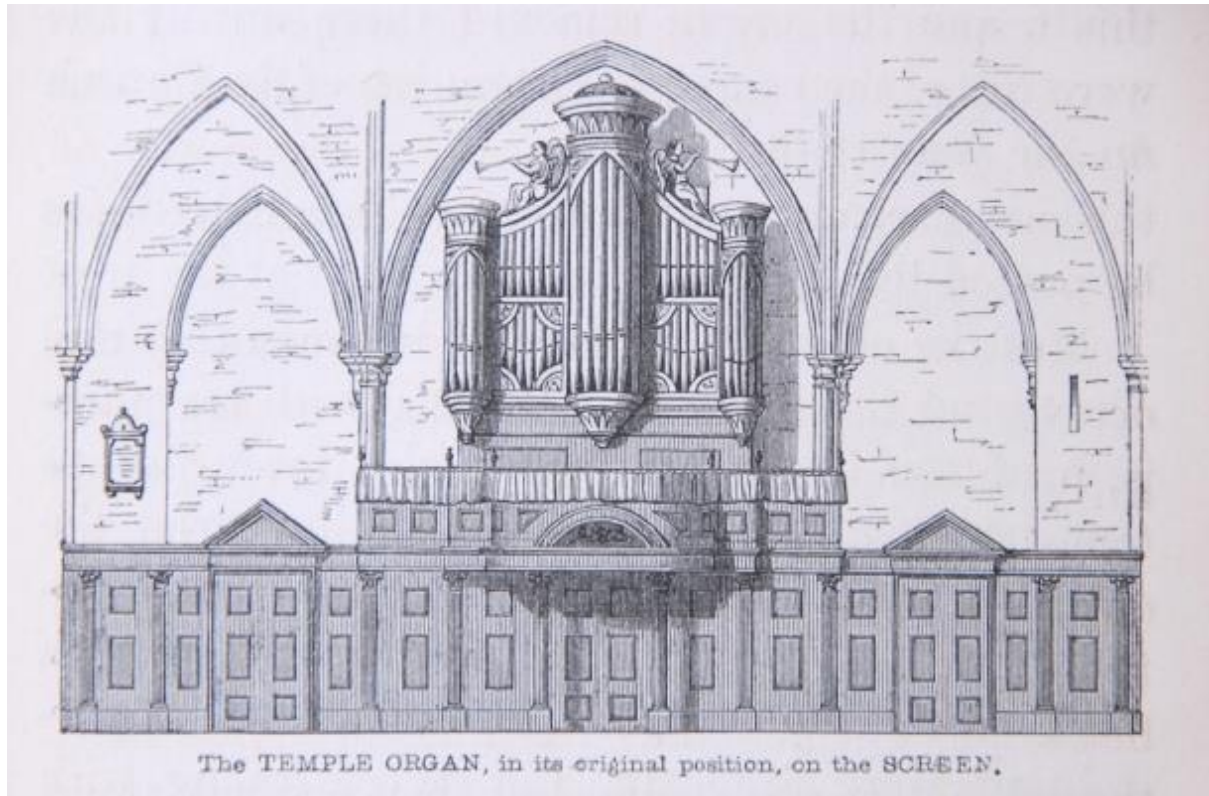


Image 4: Drawing of the original Temple Church, London organ (The Temple Church, London, 2019)

The organ in Temple Church, London (see image 4 above), was played by Rodger Sayer, Organ Soloist. Many of the orchestral parts were also recorded alongside the organ in Temple Church. Zimmer and Nolan used the music to fit the scenes and Nolan wrote the rest of the script while listening to Zimmer's first piece (The Clarion Clavier Blog, 2016)

The sound of the pipe organ is very dramatic. It is loud, hard, final, enduring. It has many associations, with religion, the Bible, destiny, transcendence, humanity. As Kilkenny (2014) explains:

Zimmer recently told the Film Music Society, the organ was chosen for its significance to science: From the 17th century to the time of the telephone exchange, the pipe organ was known as the most complex man-made device ever invented. Its physical appearance reminded him of space-ship afterburners. And the airiness of the sound slipping through pipes replicates the experience of suited astronauts, where every breath is precious (a usual preoccupation with sci-fi movies that is taken very literally in Zimmer's music, which also features the exhalations of his human choir).

According to Christopher Nolan in the ‘The Making of Interstellar Soundtrack’ he chose to use an organ to ‘release some religiosity to the film’. The organ represents not only humanity, but also that which is beyond our comprehension, the mystical or the metaphysical (Interstellar, 2015).

According to Agnes Armstrong, the pipe organ has long been seen as a symbol of the cosmos. An example of this can be found in John Milton’s seventeenth century poem “Ode on the morning of Christ’s Nativity”. (Armstrong, 2017, p. 24). Similar to Nolan’s observation that the organ represents humanity as well as the cosmos, Armstrong also comments on how the organ resembles the structure of the human being: ‘The bellows are the lungs of the instrument. The pipes themselves are referred to in anatomical terms, their components being labelled as body, foot, mouth, and lip.’ (Armstrong, 2017, p. 25). She considers the semiotics of the pipe organ and how it diffuses ‘loud booming tones into vast acoustic spaces... producing palpable vibrations designed to transport the listener beyond everyday indifference into the realms of time and place.’ (Armstrong, 2017, p.26)

Nolan wrote the rest of the script whilst listening to Zimmer’s first written piece of music for the film, which is about Zimmer’s relationship with his son. Initially, Nolan told Zimmer that this was a film about a father and son relationship. Nolan did not want him to know about the sci-fi genre of the film, so as to free him up in his composition; he only wanted Zimmer to create music which related to the heart of the film – the parent/child relationship. Nolan originally wrote the music drawing on his own relationship with his son (*Interstellar*, 2015).

Nolan did not want Zimmer to be overly influenced by the genre of the film “It was very important to me that the music pay no attention to the genre of the film.” Nolan’s reason for this was “To engage Hans in a pure creative process to free him up from genre and scale of the film”. Hans Zimmer was given a day to write something relating to what Nolan had given to him regarding the basic story line. It was only after Zimmer had created more music that Nolan told him that the film was actually about a father-daughter relationship and was a science fiction film. Nolan wanted Zimmer to focus on the central theme, the love between the father and daughter, and not get too caught up in the science fiction aspect. (*Interstellar*, 2015).

In *Interstellar*, the organ is used to create and extend the drama within the film and is linked to certain themes. It is played at intense moments of father-daughter interaction, such as the drone scene and when Murphy comes into Cooper's room because she has had a nightmare and she thinks it is the ghost. We later discover that this is actually Cooper, trapped in the fifth dimension. The sustained organ chord, which gets louder, is also used at moments when Cooper looks out of the window and when he surveys the dying land, as if contemplating his destiny and that of humanity. The organ becomes more substantial and dramatic during some of the most iconic scenes in the film.

The sound of Zimmer's organ was routinely blamed for breaking the speakers in an Imax theatre in San Francisco and causing other sound problems in cinemas. Kilkenny (2014) also makes the link between the organ and human emotions:

In... a movie that embraces the idea that emotions and feeling are the most important dimensions of human experience, the overwhelming nature of the score is all part of the way *Interstellar* works as a cohesive whole (Kilkenny, 2014)

Kilkenny points out that the use of the organ helps develop the narrative and helps the audience understand Cooper's interior life and emotional motivation for leaving his children. Cooper wants to help save humanity, but he is also a risk taker who does not realise the consequence of leaving his children for so long. It becomes a journey he regrets. He realises he has abandoned his children, to take a journey across the universe. It is only after his journey to Millers' Planet, seeing real-time videos of his children, that Cooper truly understands what leaving earth has done to his family. This realisation underscores the idea of love as paramount, something that can "transcend dimensions of time and space" (*Interstellar*, 2015 , 1hr 28 mins into film).



Image 5: The docking scene as music becomes very dramatic (Jay M, 2015a)

Conclusion

This motion picture would not have been as incredibly moving and successful if it was not accompanied by the musical score created by Hans Zimmer. The film is incredible, yes, but accompanied by the soundtrack it is mind blowing. The film is clever and enjoyable but after conducting this research, my own understanding has increased regarding how the score has helped make this film a huge success.

The music has been accused of being a ‘sonic soup’ with the use of realistic sounds mingling with the score. While Nolan does include realistic sounds, he is not interested in ‘realism’. As Kilkenny notes, ‘His score supersedes the nonsensical aspects, conveying a sonic experience so powerful it overwhelms the tiny, logic-based details.’ (Kilkenny 2014).

The sonic soup within this film truly helps the audience to feel and to believe; it pulls them into the action. The music and sound help the audience feel that they too are on a journey of discovery with Cooper and his family. I really do not think this film would have the incredible emotional draw from the audience without the score from Hans Zimmer. It pulls you in, without you even paying that much attention to the music you are truly hearing, and the suspense is cleverly hidden within the score (Entertain the Elk, 2018).

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