

Reinventing Sound

Reinventing Sound:

Music and Audiovisual Culture

Edited by

Enrique Encabo

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8105-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8105-0

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVIL BACH*

VALENTÍN BENAVIDES

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Cinema is—and has always been—a powerful means to manipulate reality, create new meanings, and assign these to pre-existent elements. Image and music coexist in a symbiotic way: the image takes from the music its extraordinary ability to express emotions, and the music acquires from the image some meaning that it inherently does not possess. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach is not an exception to this rule. The works by the German composer have been repeatedly used for cinematic purposes,¹ sometimes to illustrate the evil side of human nature: crime, murder, oppression, genocide, etc. The where, when, and more interestingly, the how and why the music of Bach has become a convincing vehicle used to transmit all these dreadful acts. These are the key questions that this article aims to answer. But firstly, it is necessary to determine what Bach's music generally means to us...

The Good Bach

The art of J. S. Bach is considered to be the zenith of sacred music in Western culture. This is, most likely, why he is known as “the Fifth Evangelist” in many circles. Notwithstanding that Bach was Lutheran, even Catholics concede his probable connection with the divine—after all, only God could inspire such music. Furthermore, some have requested—clearly in a more romantic than well-founded manner—his canonization.² Saint Johann Sebastian? It would be, indeed, an unprecedented ecumenical gesture from the Vatican. But, could it be possible?

It is often said that truth is stranger than fiction, but sometimes fiction really is stranger than truth. This is the case of the film *The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones* (dir. Harald Zwart, 2013), in which a fictional reality is portrayed: a lot of demons live among us all over the world,

hidden beneath a human form and, therefore, undetectable to ordinary people. Only a small group of *Nephilim*, a race of half-human half-angelic beings also named the Shadowhunters, have the means to unmask and destroy them. In one scene from the film, the two protagonists, a Shadowhunter named Jace Wayland and a teenage girl called Clary Fray, are talking. Jace is seated at a piano and makes a surprising disclosure: “Demons react to certain frequencies when two tones cross. It drives them crazy. See, Bach discovered this and put it into a system... using a mathematical progression of tonal combinations. It allows us to expose demons.” In the meantime, he plays some chords to exemplify what he is saying, and immediately a non-diegetic music emerges. It is the first few bars of Prelude No. 1 in C major (BWV 846) from the First Book of Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Clary asks him if Bach was a Shadowhunter, and he answers “yes.” Then, she concludes with a hilarious simile: “So Bach is to demons... what garlic is to vampires.” Of course it is not long before the theory is put to the test: in a later scene we can see how Jace is able to unmask a demon by playing the *Aria* from *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988). No more evidence is needed to answer the aforementioned question: if reality were like fiction and Bach’s music actually had supernatural powers against evil forces, the Catholic Church would have the conditions required for his beatification.

What I have discussed so far may appear bizarre. Nevertheless, it serves to show the extent to which cinema has contributed to fix a highly positive image of Bach in the public’s mind. Beyond religious connotations, many examples can be found where Bach’s music is used to illustrate concepts such as goodness, piety, and transcendence. Even in dramatic or tragic contexts, even when pictures are sad and depressing, or even when the screen is tinged with violence and the images are painful to watch, his music functions as a kind of consolation, a time for reflection, or a means for redemption. Many filmmakers, including Ingmar Bergman or Andrei Tarkovsky, have approached Bach’s work from some of these perspectives.

Bach’s music seems to be especially suitable for the representation of the good side of human nature. One more example of this—and again, taken to the extreme—can be found in the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2008), a remake of the 1951 sci-fi film of the same name. Klaatu, a humanoid alien (played by Keanu Reeves) is sent to Earth as the representative of a group made up of extraterrestrial races. His mission is to evaluate whether or not the human race must be exterminated in order to preserve the rest of the planet. The Universe cannot afford to lose such a precious planet, a planet able to support life. It is not long

before Klaatu becomes aware of humanity's destructive tendencies, so he decides upon its annihilation. It is at this critical point that Dr. Helen Benson (played by Jennifer Connelly) and Nobel Prize-winning Professor Karl Barnhardt (played by John Cleese) try to convince him that humans can change, and they ask him for a chance to improve the world. The three are at Barnhardt's house when something catches Klaatu's attention: the music playing on the Hi-Fi. Helen notices the situation and without being asked, answers: "It's Bach" (more specifically, it is the first variation from *Goldberg Variations*). Klaatu says: "It's beautiful." Karl then takes the opportunity to state: "So we're not so different after all", to which Klaatu replies: "I wish that were true." This scene presents the turning point in Klaatu's mind and, consequently, the fate of mankind. Bach reveals himself as the link between humans and aliens.³ Moreover, Bach's music provides the first piece of evidence that mankind is worth saving.

What I have shown, up to now, is the cinematic use of Bach in accordance with the benevolent vision we have of him. However, I am more interested in the dark side of his music rather than the good. Obviously, music cannot be *good* or *evil* per se, but music is a tremendously efficient instrument to increase the power of the image in its representation of good and evil. So, the main goal of this text is to analyse how cinema has used the music of Bach to illustrate evil.

The Sinister Bach

If there is a paradigmatic piece by Bach—in fact, by any classical composer—linked to the dark side, it is undoubtedly the *Toccatà and Fugue* in D minor (BWV 565).⁴ It is likely that no other piece of Bach's work has been so overused in the audio-visual media, most often to illustrate mysterious characters.⁵ First appearing in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (dir. Rouben Mamoulian, 1931), this organ piece has become cliché for horror movies⁶ because of its use in films like *The Black Cat* (dir. Edgar G. Ulmer, 1934) or *The Raven* (dir. Lew Landers). Even films that do not fall into the horror genre have used this piece to illustrate sinister characters like Captain Nemo from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (dir. Richard Fleisher, 1954).⁷ The best proof that something is becoming cliché is its reiterated and effective use for parody. And, in this respect, the *Toccatà and Fugue* in D minor is a prime example, with some hilarious appearances in films like *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (dir. Joe Dante, 1990) and the cartoon *SpongeBob SquaredPants* (Season 1, Episode 13: "Scaredy Pants", 1999). So let's examine the key to the success of this organ piece.

The beginning of the *Tocatta* in particular has some musical elements that make it—as I will discuss below—very suited to creating the typical uncanny atmosphere depicted in Gothic fiction. But there are also some cultural elements that connect this work with the Gothic aesthetic. Isabella van Elferen has specifically studied the latter in her article “The Gothic Bach.”⁸ What are these cultural associations?

a) The organ—more specifically the pipe organ—is a musical instrument that fits in very well with Gothic imaginary: its natural *habitat* is generally made up of vast, cold (often provoking shivers), gloomy, and ultimately impressive spaces, such as churches and cathedrals, and allude directly to the spaces in Gothic novels.⁹ Actually, it is not only the spaces that hold the organ, but the instrument itself is also very impressive, in part due to its enormous size and the complexity of its mechanisms which connect thousands of pieces to produce its sound.

It is precisely the sound production that is the most intriguing aspect about the organ. In the vast majority of cases, one can intuitively understand—at least basically—the relationship between an instrument and the sound it emits, just by watching a musician play it. There is a visual connection between the movements and effort of the performer, and the sound produced. Moreover, the sound originates close to the musician. But this is quite different in regards to the case of the organ. An organist can be seated at the console playing the keys without any apparent physical effort, and a group of pipes begin to sound at a distance. So, what kind of magic allows a distant pipe sound to be so loud by just pressing one ridiculous key? What shadowy power controls something as elusive as the wind to activate the desired pipes?¹⁰ All these questions nourish the aura of mystery that surrounds the instrument.

Regardless of how the sound is produced, what is certain is that “the immensity of the sound of a pipe organ seems well suited to a horror film’s sense of monumentality, and its desire both to scare and to create larger-than-life characters.”¹¹ And, it is also certain that “the sound of the organ evokes Bach” even to listeners who are less well versed in classical music. To put it into Gothic terms, each time an organ is played, “the spectre of Bach himself is present.”¹²

b) From a romantic perspective, Bach’s name inspires a sense of eternity. Like a ghostly presence, his shadow is projected through his work: “Bach the undead master haunting generations of musicians.”¹³

c) Bach himself has developed a certain Gothic identity given his cultural and religious background, which is mostly strange to modern audiences.¹⁴ Some of the Lutheran texts referenced by Bach in his cantatas and passions are very explicit in their depictions of blood, flesh, and

bones. Just like in a gore film.¹⁵ In fact, “what baroque theology endorsed as the “healing shock” of sacred tragedy appears as plain shock to audiences who are less familiar with Lutheran devotional practice and the baroque aesthetic of cruelty.”¹⁶ Richard Taruskin has approached this issue, which he calls “Bach’s Dark Vision.”¹⁷ The author argues that the *essential* Bach is precisely that of the dark cantatas, the raw texts, and the merciless dissonances:

Anyone exposed to Bach’s full range [...] knows that the hearty, genial, lyrical Bach of the concert hall is not the essential Bach. The essential Bach was an avatar of a pre-Enlightened—and when push came to shove, a violently anti-Enlightened—temper. His music was a medium of truth, not beauty. And the truth he served was bitter. His works persuade us—no, *reveal* to us—that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain, that reason is a snare.

The sounds Bach combined in church were often anything but agreeable, [...] for Bach’s purpose there was never just to please. If he pleased, it was only to cajole. When his sounds were agreeable, it was only to point out an escape from worldly woe in heavenly submission. Just as often he aimed to torture the ear: when the world was his subject, he wrote music that for sheer deliberate ugliness has perhaps been approached [...] but never equalled. [...]

Such music cannot be prettified in performance without essential loss.¹⁸

Thus, according to this “dark vision”, Bach is shown as a sort of doomsayer whose message—like a curse—builds upon beliefs not based in reason. Certainly, this seems very Gothic, since the Gothic genre is a manifestation of counter-Enlightenment: it is a return to concepts that the Enlightened movement struggled to remove, a return to a superstitious past, a revival of myths, religious beliefs, and supernatural phenomena, which cannot be explain by Reason. Therefore, the conception of Bach as essentially anti-Enlightened puts him in an aesthetical context shared with the Gothic.

d) Bach’s nationality adds another factor to his Gothic side. As van Elferen points out:

Bach’s music and person also connote Germany, the country with perhaps the darkest of histories. In popular culture, a certain inherent Gothicism is often attributed to Germany, an association that has evolved from a combination of factors. The German *Schauerroman* was an important precursor of the Gothic novel [...] The link between Germany and the Gothic was further consolidated in the twentieth century. German expressionism has had a lasting influence on international horror cinema

[...] Finally, with two wars, an internal separation and a not immediately successful reunification, the events of the twentieth century have completed Germany's embodiment of Gothic trauma, excess and uncanniness.¹⁹

Thus, it can be concluded that "Bach's Gothic potential is embedded in the simple fact of his German nationality."²⁰

Even admitting the plausibility of all the arguments listed above, I find them insufficient in establishing why the *Toccatà and Fugue* in D minor—and not any other piece by Bach—has succeeded in acquiring such sinister connotations. If it were accepted that the Gothic Bach is a cultural construction only due to the Gothic connotations of the instrument (the organ), his religion (Lutheran), and his nationality (German), this would lead to the erroneous conclusion that any of Bach's organ pieces—furthermore, any organ work by any German, Lutheran composer—could be used to generate the spooky feeling that the *Toccatà* does. Indeed, such a generalization would be nonsensical. Could anyone imagine the chorale prelude *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (BWV 645) as the opening credits music for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or Captain Nemo playing *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (from cantata BWV 147) in the *Nautilus*, or horror icons like Bela Lugosi or Boris Karloff performing the *Piece d'Orgue* in G major (BWV 572), without completely losing their aura of mystery? Of course not!

Interestingly, Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* still gives us two more excerpts from Bach's organ catalogue as a musical antithesis to the spooky *Toccatà*.²¹ The first one occurs at the very beginning of the film. The first few images on screen, immediately following the opening credits, show Dr. Jekyll playing the chorale prelude *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* (BWV 639) on his own organ at home. A remarkable musical contrast is produced, and consequently, a profound change of mood. After the impetuous—almost violent—title credits, the opening shot creates an oddly serene atmosphere. *Serene* because of the music, and *odd* as a result of the camera movements and the subjective point of view. Actually, the audience does not see Jekyll but what Jekyll himself sees: the organ tubes, his shadow cast on the sheet music, his hands on the keys... In this way Mamoulian keeps Jekyll's identity a secret from the audience until his face is finally revealed in the reflection in a mirror. But, in spite of the slight suspense created by the subjective camera work, the music remains peaceful. Jekyll seems relaxed while he is playing the organ. When he is interrupted by Poole, the butler, reminding him of an important appointment, Jekyll becomes upset but retains a friendly tone, saying: "You know, Poole? You're a nuisance. But I don't know what I should do

without you. Your sense of duty is as impregnable as Gibraltar. Even Bach can't move it." What it is interesting here is that, in this case, Bach's music is treated as a paradigm of inner calm—which later in the film contrasts, with Mr. Hyde's brutality—and a sign of sensitivity and humanity.²² It is also Hyde's lack of any musical impulse that reflects another symptom of his inhumanity.²³

The second occasion that the film employs Bach's organ music in a different function from the opening *Tocatta* occurs in the scene after Jekyll has been given permission to marry Muriel. Jekyll enters his home absolutely exultant and announces the good news to Poole. He immediately sits at the organ and begins to play some measures of the fugue from *Tocatta and Fugue* in D minor. There is no trace of mystery or Gothic reminiscence, just pure joy. I agree with Neil Lerner when he says that "Jekyll here feeds his romantic impulse with the organ music, allowing himself an unmeasured moment of emotional exuberance."²⁴ Indeed, the selected music seems well suited for this extroverted moment. It is the last episode of the fugue, before the recapitulation of the toccata, characterised for its great virtuosity and complex counterpoint. A sequential passage leads the music back to the original key, D minor, followed by a coda over the tonic pedal in which the fugue subject (or theme) is stated one last time. A final element breaks the joyful atmosphere, an interrupted cadence, coinciding with an interruption by the butler that brings Jekyll back to his more worrying reality.

These two cases demonstrate something expected: even when cultural factors may be prone to the dark side, Bach's organ music has not always to be necessarily sinister. To put it in medical terms: even if one is genetically predisposed to a pathology, it might not develop. The key then is to uncover which external factors have been crucial to the ultimate result. So, turning to the matter at hand, what extra-musical elements in a film could make a peaceful piece of music turn into an eerie one? Definitively, image has the ability to change the perception—and the meaning—of music. A childish song, for example, can become truly sinister just by adding a disturbing image.²⁵ But the *Tocatta*, as it appears in the opening credits of the film, is not accompanied by any disquieting images—just the characteristic Paramount Pictures Logo and the plain title credits—, and nevertheless its presence is threatening. Thus, if there are no external factors, then internal ones must be at play. If cultural associations cannot fully explain the dark side of this piece, and cinematic (visual) factors do not contribute here, there must be some purely musical elements that testify as to why this, and not another, piece by Bach sounds so sinister. Let's examine them:

a) The impressive start, with the impetuous initial trill and the incandescent melodic descending scale that follows.

b) The Minor mode, which immediately sets up a serious mood.

c) The recurrent minor 2nd motive (fig.11.1).

Fig. 11.1: Minor 2nd motive

The minor 2nd is the interval that better represents the essential duality of tension-resolution in music. So, when insistently repeated, this interval creates a tense atmosphere.²⁶

d) The diminished 7th chord (fig. 11.2).

Fig. 11.2: Diminished 7th chord

The diminished 7th chord is very unstable, provoking great tension. Moreover, it is a chord formed by two superimposed tritones. And, it is also well known that the tritone has historically been called *Diabolus in musica*, i.e. the devil in music, and prohibited by music theorists due to the strong dissonance that produces.²⁷

e) The mighty orchestration. At the opening credits of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the *Toccat*a does not appear in its original organ version,

but is cleverly orchestrated. The power of the sound of a full symphonic orchestra is clearly greater—and consequently more impressive—than that of a solo organ. On top of this, the brass section is truly outstanding, emphasising the grave tone.

All these musical elements, albeit obvious, are the keys to explaining the sinister side of the work. And for this reason it is worth analysing them. Only now, with both cultural and musical elements exposed, we can truly understand why Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue* in D minor has achieved such a prominent status in horror, thriller and suspense films.

The Elitist Bach

As Mervyn Cooke rightly points out, “one of the most common and least creative uses of classical music in film is as an agent for establishing the appropriate period, national or cultural associations.”²⁸ In this section I am particularly interested in the latter. Historically, classical music has been associated with the social, economic or intellectual elite. So, its cinematic use to depict characters that fit within these categories seems obvious. Indeed, this association between classical music and elitism has been widely exploited by film directors and producers. But this has not always been the case. It is not so of the origin of cinema, the silent era. The film industry soon realised that music was an essential element in attracting audiences. Production companies began “to take a keen interest in the nature of the music that might accompany exhibitions of their products”, and consequently “started publishing cue sheets [...] to encourage the selection of appropriate musical numbers from both classical and popular sources to accompany screenings of its films.”²⁹ In his autobiography, Max Winkler, an American pioneer of these publications, confessed:

In desperation we turned to crime. We began to dismember the great masters. We began to murder ruthlessly the works of Beethoven, Mozart, Grieg, J. S. Bach, Verdi, Bizet, Tchaikowsky and Wagner—everything that wasn't protected from our pilfering by copyright. The immortal chorales of J. S. Bach became an “Adagio Lamentoso” (“for sad scenes”).³⁰

Certainly, this use of the classics appears not to have any elitist connotations. Quite simply, classical music provided high quality material at a low cost to act as the soundtrack to silent movies.³¹ But this situation gradually changed during the sound era, and classical music acquired more complex meanings. For example, “leading film makers of the 1950s,

including Fellini, Bergman, Visconti and Buñuel, utilized classical eighteenth-century music as something of a hallmark of quality and a very adult maturity.”³² The elitism here is not just applied to the characters in the film, but to the film itself and, hence, to its authors. So, the music of Bach, among other classical composers, may function as a means for distinction, i.e. a recognisable element that serves to discriminate between commercial films and auteur cinema.

Intellectual or artistic elitism need not be a bad thing necessarily. I mean elitist attitudes may appear unfriendly, even disagreeable, but not perverse. However, the truth is that elitism is easily associated with evil. The cinema has shown us many evildoers who absolutely love classical music, notably pieces by Bach.³³ In particular, their passion for music—actually, for any high-level artistic expression—is proof of their superior intelligence. They belong to an intellectual/cultural elite and, fully aware of their superiority, they apply all their intelligence to obtain what they want, regardless of the harm inflicted on others. The end justifies the means. As with all elitists, they show contempt for those who do not appreciate culture as they do.

The film *Unbreakable* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 2000) approaches a typical comic book story of heroes and villains from an original perspective, adapting the characters into a more realistic context than usual, far from the outlandish scenarios of classic superhero movies. The protagonist, David Dunn (played by Bruce Willis), is an ordinary man, so humble that he does not even recognise his extraordinary qualities. On the contrary, the wicked antagonist, a comic book specialist named Elijah Price (played by Samuel L. Jackson), is an extravagant and arrogant character. He uses his supreme intelligence to compensate for—and try to understand—his extreme physical weakness. In a scene from the film, Elijah is at his art gallery showing an original comic drawing to a potential buyer. Immediately after the purchase agreement is reached, the client admits that the drawing is to be a gift for his four-year-old son, Jeb. Elijah then gets mad at him and says: “you must think this is a toy store, cause you’re in here shopping for an infant named Jeb. One of us has made a gross error and wasted the other person’s valuable time...”, and concludes: “This is an art gallery, my friend, and this is a piece of art.” During the entire scene, music can be heard in the background. It is the *Allemande* from the English Suite in A minor (BWV 807) by Bach. The last scenes of the film also take place at the gallery, where Bach’s music is ever present. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Bach is Elijah’s favourite composer. And it seems logical to assume that no one who loves Bach would degrade a piece of art to the rank of a mere toy. It is possible that in

this case some may agree with Elijah's angry reaction. Elitism here appears to be fully justified: it is indeed a fair attack against the trivialization of art. However, besides being a comic art and Bach lover, Elijah Price ultimately reveals himself as a heartless man, a psychopath able to provoke terrible accidents—and consequently the loss of hundreds of human lives—in order to find a survivor, a superhero immune to disaster (David). Just to prove his theories correct, just to demonstrate his superior intellect, he has killed people—or, like he euphemistically says: “made so many sacrifices.” Although it is not shown in the film, one can easily imagine Elijah planning his terrible attacks seated in his office at the art gallery listening to Bach. The last words of Elijah in the original script by Shyamalan—which were deleted in the final version and therefore do not appear in the film—are absolutely fundamental in the revealing of his extreme and perverse elitism: “There are millions and millions of mediocre people in the world, David. Isn't it great that we aren't one of them?”³⁴

Cultural or intellectual elitism may not necessarily entail social or economic elitism. The protagonist in *The talented Mr. Ripley* (dir. Anthony Minghella, 1999) is a penniless young man who earns his living as a restroom attendant at a New York theatre in the 1950s. Notwithstanding his current low-class status, Tom Ripley (played by Matt Damon) is well mannered and cultivated. When the theatre is empty, he grabs the opportunity to come on stage and play Bach's *Concerto Italiano* (BWV 971) on the beautiful grand piano. In truth, Ripley's social status does not match his intellectual capabilities. Indeed, as the film's title states, Ripley is a talented boy. Talented in music and in lies. And it is precisely these two talents that allow him to enter the high-class circle of the wealthy Herbert Greenleaf (played by James Redborn) and his wayward son Dickie (played by Jude Law), who spends his time in Italy. Ripley approaches Dickie pretending to be a former Princeton student and a lover of jazz, just as Dickie himself is. Quite soon, Ripley is seduced by his lifestyle, and falls in love with him, but Dickie ultimately rejects him. Ripley, as a jilted lover, attacks Dickie and accidentally kills him. Then, to hide the deed, Ripley impersonates him, which triggers a new spiral of deceit and murder. His cold mind soon deletes any sense of guilt or regret. Quite the contrary, he seems entirely comfortable with his new status—“better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody”, he says at the end of the film. Some time after Dickie's death, we can see Ripley at what it is supposed to be Dickie's apartment in Rome. As at the theatre, Ripley plays Bach's *Concerto Italiano*, but now at his own grand piano and at his own place. Indeed, it is his own place, not Dickie's. When Greenleaf's old friend

Freddie Miles (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) enters the apartment, he is immediately suspicious of Ripley. He cannot believe that this could be Dickie's apartment: "Did this place come furnished? It doesn't look like Dickie. Horrible isn't it?—so bourgeois", he says to Ripley, "in fact, the only thing that looks like Dickie is you." Freddie is completely right—not knowing that his fine insight will cost him his life. There is nothing that is reminiscent of Dickie, not the decoration or the music.

Let us pay closer attention to the music. Throughout the film, music plays a key role in defining the personality of the characters. There is a duality between Dickie and Ripley that is represented by the duality between jazz and classical music—namely, Bach. Ripley plays the piano and Dickie, the saxophone.³⁵ In the film, the piano appears to be a cold and mechanical instrument, while the sax is regarded as warm and spontaneous. The associations seem obvious: jazz represents Dickie's carefree lifestyle, while Bach's music illustrates Ripley's cold calculating mind. But there are also some significant social associations. At the beginning of the film, Herbert Greenleaf says: "Dickie's idea of music is Jazz. He has a saxophone. To my ear Jazz is just noise, just an insolent noise." It is not difficult to suppose that, to Dickie's father, jazz music is something vulgar, related to those of a lower class. Thus, to Dickie, jazz is not only a hobby but also a sign of his independence from his father's constrained mind and life. Despite his social origins, Dickie likes to mingle with common people. In fact, he loves going to bustling nightclubs and interacting with the locals. On the contrary, Ripley prefers the elitist environment of the opera. Certainly, it seems like Ripley is the son that Herbert would have liked to have. Classical music is the best representation of the upper class society that Ripley aspires to belong to. To him, cultural and social status should match. And, certainly thanks to his talent—both musical and criminal—Ripley achieves his objective, albeit at a very high price: utter solitude.

One of the most emblematic cases of intellectual and cultural elitism is that of Dr. Hannibal Lecter, the infamous character from the novels by Thomas Harris who has been brought to the screen several times. What Lecter most detests is a lack of good taste, and mediocrity.³⁶ The latter may, in fact, have fatal consequences. At the beginning of *Red Dragon* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2002) a flutist is killed—and eaten—by Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) for his awful performance at a concert. An extreme measure indeed. But, what makes Dr. Lecter a singular case is the fact that he is not just limited to murder but he aims to do something *artistic* with his victims: from a sophisticated culinary dish—like in the case of the poor flutist—to a complex and provocative Installation Art piece—like the

crucified policeman in *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991). And he certainly appears to enjoy the entire process. As Thomas Fahy argues, Hannibal Lecter is an “aesthete serial killer [...] whose savagery is inextricably linked with high culture.”³⁷ In fact, he represents a major antithesis to Matthew Arnold’s idea that culture gives us our humanity.³⁸ But, how is it possible that culture does not humanize us? On this matter, George Steiner argued:

Unlike Matthew Arnold [...] I find myself unable to assert confidently that the humanities humanize. Indeed, I would go further: it is at least conceivable that the focusing of consciousness on a written text [...] diminishes the sharpness and readiness of our actual moral response. Because we are trained to give psychological and moral credence to the imaginary [...] we may find it more difficult to identify with the real world [...] The capacity for imaginative reflex, for moral risk in any human being is not limitless; on the contrary, it can be rapidly absorbed by fictions, and thus the cry in [a] poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside. The death in [a] novel may move us more potently than the death in the next room. Thus there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity.³⁹

Undoubtedly, this thesis could explain the case of Hannibal Lecter. Dr Lecter’s high culture is expressed by his good manners and his love of art. Throughout all of the Hannibal Lecter films—with the exception of *Manhunter*—there are many occasions where we see him enjoying classical music, mostly music by Bach. But among them, without a doubt, there is a particularly shocking scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*. While listening to *Goldberg Variations*, Lecter kills and mutilates two police officers to escape from prison. This scene simultaneously shows Lecter’s fine education and brutal nature. In fact, as Fahy rightly points out: “this is the only moment [...] where the audience witnesses Lecter’s physical violence. Our assumptions about civility are shattered as Lecter casts aside his gentlemanly pose and becomes a monstrous killer.”⁴⁰

Elijah Price, Tom Ripley, and Hannibal Lecter are elitists and criminals—and all adore Bach—but the results of their acts, albeit horrible, are quantitatively limited. There is, however, a type of elitism whose consequences are absolutely devastating. In fact, when taken to the extreme, socioeconomic elitism is probably the most pernicious, since it ultimately results in class discrimination and oppression. Aristocracy versus people, upper class versus middle and low classes, First versus Third World, in short, the rich versus the poor. The amount of injustice, misery, hunger, disease, and death caused by class struggle is incalculable.

History is repeated over and over again: a group of humans—although a minority, very powerful—dominate an entire society (even the world) by oppressing and depriving the rest of their rights. There is no *one* villain here—such as Elijah, Ripley or Lecter—but a group of people who exert evil upon others. Sometimes, the oppressed rebel against their oppressors. Sometimes, they are even victorious. And sometimes, the formerly oppressed then become the new oppressors. It is certainly a grim landscape, but class conflict has always existed and, probably, always will. It appears to be part of human nature. This is why so many futuristic films base their plots in a class-warfare context, such as *Elysium* and *Snowpiercer*. And in both films, Bach's music serves to function as a distinguishing mark of the ruling class.

Elysium (dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2013) sets its action in a future where the Earth is diseased, polluted and vastly overpopulated. The wealthiest inhabitants have fled the planet to preserve their way of life on a hi-tech space station named Elysium. In contrast to the ruined Earth, Elysium is a clean and beautiful place with all the comforts imaginable, but principally, with the technology to heal any disease or damage. Evidently, only Elysium citizens have the privilege to use it. Any citizen of Earth who intends to enter the station will be arrested, or even killed. Because of such perverse class discrimination, a rebellion starts, and finally all citizens will be equal. Besides the evident visible differences between the Earth and Elysium, there are some invisible differences, but nonetheless interesting. I am referring to the soundscape. While the Earth is unpleasantly noisy, Elysium is a symphony to the ears. The luxury of its buildings, the beauty of its gardens, and the elegance of its citizens all fit with the relaxing and quiet sound atmosphere, composed by a mild breeze and light birdsong... and one more thing: Bach of course. The scene where the full splendour of Elysium is first shown in detail is accompanied by the *Prelude* from Bach's Cello Suite No.1 in G major (BWV 1007). In a non-diegetic manner, Bach's music functions empathetically with the environment and, moreover, adds another element to illustrate the fancy and elitist lifestyle of Elysium citizens.

Though narratively and aesthetically different to *Elysium*, the film *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2013) shares the vision of a dystopian world divided into two social classes. In this case, Earth has been devastated by a failed scientific experiment that has frozen the entire planet. All life has been destroyed, except for the group of people aboard the *Snowpiercer*, a super high-tech and self-sufficient train that travels around the globe without stopping. For the last seventeen years, the survivors have developed a new society with its own economy and class

system. Lower-class citizens are in the overcrowded wagons at the back, living in squalor and prohibited to enter the rest of the train. Like *Elysium*, a group of oppressed people starts a rebellion, determined to reach the front wagon. As they move forward, the contents and occupants of each section of the train are revealed. There is a particular wagon that clearly marks the separation between the low and high classes. Upon entering, the rebels are astonished to discover a precious greenhouse full of plants, flowers, and fruits. The visual contrast with the preceding sections of the train is drastic. Accordingly, beautiful music can be heard: it is Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in a harpsichord version. Once again, Bach's music works with the image to describe an exclusive and elitist world, unreachable for the majority.

Bach in Auschwitz

I have left a complex and sensitive subject to end on: the relationship between Bach's music and the society that committed the Holocaust atrocities, and how this has been portrayed in the films. The link between high culture and genocide is a thorny issue, one that has been discussed by many writers and philosophers. Here, Bach appears to be the representative of that *high culture*—or better said: what Nazis regarded as *high culture* and that, in a captious and perverse manner, ascribed to the Aryan race. In 1939, the German Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels planned the making of the definitive anti-Semitic film, which he himself qualified as “a masterpiece of propaganda.”⁴¹ *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, dir. Fritz Hippler, 1940) was the result: a shameful documentary whose ultimate purpose was “to prepare viewers for the Final Solution, [...] [to] turn honest citizens into indulgent mass murderers”,⁴² by depicting Jews as filthy, deceitful, corrupt, degenerate, and greedy for power. In a scene from the film, where many artworks are on display—not only German art, but also Greek and Roman sculptures, and Italian Renaissance paintings—the narrator states:

Jews are most dangerous when they meddle in a people's culture, religion and art, and pass judgement on it. The Nordic concept of beauty is completely incomprehensible to the Jew and always will be. The rootless Jew has no feeling for the purity and neatness of the German idea of art. What he calls art must titillate his degenerate nerves. A smell of fungus and disease must pervade it; art must be unnatural, grotesque, perverted, or pathological.⁴³

Curiously, the most recognisable German artwork in this scene cannot be seen but is heard: it is Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue* in D minor.

For this part of the article, I have borrowed the title of another film documentary, which is the polar opposite of *Der Ewige Jude*. As a matter of fact, *Bach in Auschwitz* is the English title of the French-Belgian-Dutch co-production *La chaconne d'Auschwitz* (dir. Michel Daeron, 1999), which tells the story of the women's orchestra in Auschwitz through the testimony of twelve female survivors of the concentration camp. Two of these women, "Zosia and Helena [...] literally return to Auschwitz. There, surrounded by silence, Zosia describes how terrible it was to play during selections, deceiving the prisoners with reassuring music."⁴⁴ In fact, this was the orchestra's purpose. For the Nazis, "the music simply rendered the prisoners more manageable until they were selected for the gas chamber."⁴⁵ A cinematic example illustrating such a perverse use of music can be found in the Polish film *Pasażerka* (*Passenger*, dir. Andrzej Munk and Witold Lesiewicz, 1963). A scene shows all the occupants of a concentration camp (both Nazis and Jews) at the entrance door, waiting for the arrival of a train carrying more prisoners. Meanwhile, an orchestra—in this instance made up of male prisoners—plays *Adagio* from Bach's Violin Concert in E major (BWV 1042).

Sylvia Levine Ginsparg affirms that "Bach in Auschwitz, as a film title, is actually an oxymoron. It combines a representation of the highest level of human culture with that which is most debased."⁴⁶ But, is it really an *oxymoron*? The answer is *yes* if we think that high culture is—or at least must be—incompatible with inhumanity. But, if that were the case, how could what has been called "the *Schindler's List* problem"⁴⁷ be explained? Both in *La chaconne d'Auschwitz* and *Pasażerka*, those playing the music were the victims. But in *Schindler's List* there is one scene where an SS soldier plays the piano at an apartment in the Krakow ghetto, while his comrades are shooting Jews hidden in the building. When the music is heard, two of the comrades enter the room and begin a discussion: "*Was ist das? Ist das Bach?*", one asks; "*Nein. Mozart*", the other answers. The soldier is actually playing Bach's English Suite in A minor (BWV 807). The most disturbing thing in this scene—"the *Schindler's List* problem"—is the coincidence of two antagonistic concepts: the good *with* the evil, the beautiful *with* the ugly, exemplified at the same time in the same person (the SS soldier). It is then that the oxymoron exists. But, let us observe it more carefully. Surely we all consider Nazis and their acts as evil, but are they or their acts *ugly*? We may agree that Bach's music is beautiful, but is it *good*? The problem is that we often use the same language to make both ethical and aesthetical

judgments. But, we should not. Something beautiful does not have to be good; something evil does not have to be ugly. So, the real problem, as Peter Kivy rightly points out, is that ‘we *do* want to be told—*want* to believe—that great music such as that of Bach, Mozart, and Chopin has power for the good.’⁴⁸ But, what is certain is that the ‘love of Bach does not engender love of humanity, or of the good. Or, put another way, the music of Bach is not a moral force in the world.’⁴⁹ Therefore, finally the title “Bach in Auschwitz”, is not an oxymoron, because the two implied parts cannot be judged in the same terms.

The piano scene from *Schindler’s List* has been marked by Michael André Bernstein as a “clumsy literalization of George Steiner’s meditations on Nazism.”⁵⁰ Maybe due to this alleged clumsiness, some have noticed only the *irony* of the scene. For instance, Cooke points out: “it is the singular inability of the soldier’s comrades to identify the composer [...] that creates an ironic conjunction of sophistication and brute ignorance.”⁵¹ However, I do not really think that that is the point. Even if the comrades cannot specify whether it is Mozart or Bach, the soldier playing the piano can obviously differentiate between the two. In any case, it does not seem to me that this is “brute ignorance.” This type of argument is, in fact, an oversimplification—probably for our mind’s sake—to try to justify the disturbing coincidence of high culture and brutality. Nevertheless, Steiner prevents us from this erroneous thinking: “We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding or that his ear is gross, is cant.”⁵² Thus, regardless of whether the piano scene is clumsy or not, the certainty is that there is no irony possible. But then, if there is no oxymoron, nor irony, what is there?

Notwithstanding his anti-Enlightened vision of Bach, even Taruskin admits that “the Enlightened, secularized view of Bach is the one advanced by most modern scholarship.”⁵³ So, it could be said that Bach is a *metonymy* of the age of Reason, and his music a *metonymy* of enlightened thinking. A thinking that, as Horkheimer and Adorno had observed in 1944, “contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today.” So, it is the Enlightenment itself that if it “does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate,” namely, self-destruction.⁵⁴ That is indeed the context where “the *Schindler’s List* problem” must be understood. So, “Bach in Auschwitz” is not an oxymoron, nor an irony, since Bach is a metonymy of an intellectual movement—Enlightenment—whose failure led to the Holocaust.

And finally, the *Beautiful* Bach

The main conclusion of this article is that no general conclusions can be established about how Bach's music has been—and will continue to be—used by films whose purpose is to illustrate evil. Several cinematic examples have been discussed to conclude that there are no formulae. Indeed, the point is that it is not as simple as “playing a chorale for sad scenes” or “playing the *Tocatta* in D minor for mystery scenes”—like the antiquated and scantily imaginative musical cues for silent films. On the contrary, it is quite complex. And, with *complex*, I do not mean *difficult* for us to understand how a particular piece by Bach operates within a particular scene or film, but being *polyhedral* in the nature of the relationship between this particular piece and this particular scene. In some cases, Bach's music adds a new meaning to the image—like the *Tocatta* in the opening credits of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In other cases, it simply cooperates with the meaning of the image, without adding anything new—like the decorative musical pieces in *Elysium* or *Snowpiercer*. And finally, there are those cases where Bach's music provides a contrary—or apparently contrary—meaning to the image—like in Hannibal Lecter's escape scene in *The Silence of the Lambs* or the piano scene from *Schindler's List*.

Thus, the only general conclusion possible is—as we already suspected—that the music by J. S. Bach has an extraordinary ability to adapt itself to any cinematic situation, even when the characters or the film's contexts are evil. But, there is nothing inherently perverse in Bach's music. We are the ones who have assigned many different—and at times, even contradictory—meanings to it. And cinema, not exclusively, but largely, has been responsible for these new associations. So, the reader can put their mind at ease: Bach *is not* evil, nor induces anyone to be *evil*. We can safely listen to him. After all, it is not Bach's fault that evildoers also like his music... Well, actually it is. It is his fault for having composed music so *good*... I mean, so *beautiful*.

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Notes

* This chapter has been written thanks to a Research Scholarship from Spain's Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports. (*Programa FPU del Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte de España*).

¹ Mervyn Cooke says that Bach's "music is the most inherently abstract in conception of any classical style to have featured prominently in the movies, and thus perhaps the most susceptible to contrasting interpretations." See: Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 448.

² The dilemma about the sainthood of non-Catholics has occasionally been discussed. In 1998 the Ecumenical Commission of the Central Committee of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 sent a letter to the National Committees entitled "The Holy Spirit and the Ecumenism". Item number 5.3, titled "Communion of Saints", reads as follows:

All Christians agree that the Holy Spirit is the sanctifying spirit.

In many places Christians have acknowledged in their midst martyrs and exemplary confessors of faith, hope and charity - both men and women. Some of these, such as Francis of Assisi, Roublev, Johann Sebastian Bach, Monsignor Romero, Elizabeth Seton, the martyr Anuarite of Zaire, and Martin Luther King, have been for various reasons recognised beyond confessional boundaries. Ecumenical groups could look at the example of some of these witnesses with a view to identifying how the work of the Holy Spirit can be distinguished in them and what their role might be in the promotion of full communion.

The whole document can be read at:

http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01091997_p-49_en.html

³ This question has not only been addressed by cinema. Some scientists have discussed the possibility of making contact with intelligent aliens, and concluded that, in most cases, "they might be more interested in learning about Van Gogh and Bach than Einstein or Newton." See: Moskowitz, "If Aliens Exist, They Will Probably Love Bach", *Space.com* (August 14, 2010), available at:

<http://www.space.com/8951-aliens-exist-love-bach.html>

⁴ Some scholars have denied that this is actually a Bach's work. Nevertheless, the discussion about the authorship of the piece is not relevant here. From a reception point of view, it is unquestionably ascribed to J. S. Bach.

⁵ There is a large list of films and TV series featuring this piece. The list can be easily accessed on the Internet Movie Database website (www.imdb.com).

⁶ Actually, it's not only this piece, but organ music itself that is strongly linked to horror films. This has been addressed in Brown, "*Carnival of Souls...*", 1-20.

⁷ More precisely, it is Jules Verne's 1870 novel by the same name that inspired this film, where the "idea of making the organist an eccentric, dangerous genius probably originates". See: Brown, "*Carnival of Souls...*", 5-6.

⁸ Van Elferen, "The Gothic Bach", 9-20.

⁹ Brown, "*Carnival of Souls...*", 5.

¹⁰ It is enchanting that the heart of the organ, called a wind chest—that is, the box on which the pipes sit and from which the compressed air (the wind) is admitted into them—is called *secreto* in Spanish (literally, “secret” in English). A very poetic word indeed for a very fascinating and intriguing device.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Van Elferen, “The Gothic Bach”, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ This may appear to be an exaggerated comparison, but a film like *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004) has shown the extent to which Christian narrative and gore aesthetics, characteristic of the splatter subgenre, can be combined. Yet far from being outraged, the Catholic Church hierarchy reacted very positively to the film.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ Taruskin, “Facing Up, Finally, to Bach’s Dark Vision”, 307-315.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁹ Van Elferen, “The Gothic Bach”, 12-13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ For an overview of the music used in this film see: Lerner, “The Strange Case of Rouben Mamoulian’s Sound Stew”, 55-79.

²² Van Elferen, “The Gothic Bach”, 10.

²³ Lerner, “The Strange Case of...”, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ Many examples spring to mind, such as the *naive* skipping rope song from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (dir. Wes Craven, 1984) announcing Freddy Krueger’s arrival, or the *funny* ditty (“Naughty little fly, why does it cry? Caught in a web! Soon you’ll be...eaten.”) sung by Smeagol/Gollum while poor Frodo is stuck in Shelob’s web in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2003).

²⁶ For instance, this is the case of the celebrated main theme music from *Jaws* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975) composed by John Williams, and also of the second piece from *Musica Ricercata* by György Ligeti, used in the film *Eyes Wide Shut* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1999).

²⁷ This *diabolic* quality has been widely exploited in cinema. In *L’assassinat du duc de Guise* (dir. André Calmette and Charles Le Bargy, 1908)—one of the first original film scores in history—the music composed by Camille Saint-Saëns for the central scene (the Duke’s assassination) is based on the tritone. Another example is the famous initial motive of the main theme from *Cape Fear* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1964) composed by Bernard Herrmann, which is also based on the tritone.

²⁸ Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 437.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ Winkler, *A Penny from Heaven*, 237.

³¹ Actually, these days classical music continues to be a major source of inexpensive soundtracks for producers who cannot afford to hire a competent musical composer, nor to pay for the copyright for the use of some modern music.

³² Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under*, 298.

³³ The film *Dogboys* (dir. Ken Russell, 1998) tells the story of a secret society formed by prison guards who use prison dogs to hunt down escapee inmates as a sport. One of these *dogboys* listens to Bach on his Walkman while hunting. The director of the film commented on this issue: “as every filmgoer knows, if a character plays classical music in movieland, he is inherently evil and beyond redemption [...] So I supposed the baddie's love of Bach was just a cinematic cliché, a sort of last straw at an attempt at characterisation.” Quoted from: Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 439.

³⁴ The whole script is available at:

<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Unbreakable.html>

³⁵ Obviously, the piano is also used in jazz, and the saxophone—less frequently—in classical music, but in these cases, the piano assumes the role of the classical instrument and the sax represents modern music, like jazz.

³⁶ When FBI cadet Clarice Starling first meets Dr. Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991), he initially treats her with respect, but shortly afterwards he launches a violent verbal attack on her: “Do you know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. A well-scrubbed, hustling rube with a little taste [...] But you're not more than one generation from poor white trash.” Despite her questionable taste and her poor origins, Clarice is not mediocre, and this saves her from becoming another of Lecter's victim (“I have no plans to call on you, Clarice, the world being more interesting with you in it”, Hannibal says to her once he has escaped from prison). However, Dr. Chilton, the arrogant and incompetent director of the sanatorium where Lecter is jailed, will suffer quite a different fate at the hands of his famous prisoner. Mediocrity is unforgivable.

³⁷ Fahy, “Killer Culture...”, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁹ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 51.

⁴⁰ Fahy, “Killer Culture...”, 31.

⁴¹ Hornshøj-Møller and Culbert, “Der Ewige Jude (1940)”, 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Translation taken from Hornshøj-Møller and Culbert, “Der Ewige Jude (1940)”, 63.

⁴⁴ Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 303.

⁴⁵ Ginsparg, *Never Again: Echoes of the Holocaust*, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See: Loewy, “The Role of Reason...”, 220.

⁴⁸ Kivy, *Antithetical arts...*, 218.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁰ Bernstein, “The Schindler's List Effect”, 430.

⁵¹ Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 448.

⁵² Steiner, *Language and Silence...*, ix.

⁵³ Taruskin, "Facing Up, Finally, to Bach's Dark Vision", 309.

⁵⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvi.