

Neo-liberal Transgressions in the Contemporary Film Industry: Classical Music and Dehumanised Musical Bodies in the Films *The Perfection* (2018) and *Nocturne* (2020)¹



Rastko Buljančević

Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
Graduate School "The Future of Democracy: Cultural Analyses of Illiberal Populism in Times
of Crises (FUDEM)", Sweden
Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia
rastko.buljancevic@gmail.com

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine what I call "dehumanised musical bodies" in the psychological horror films *The Perfection* and *Nocturne*. These multi-deficient neo-liberal bodies are exposed to the stereotypical, strikingly negative image of the sophisticated world of art. Particular attention is paid to the provocative treatment of classical music, focusing on the non-normative institutional practices and ethical reconfiguration of their representatives. A strikingly raw form of musical dehumanisation is found in the film *The Perfection*, whose soundtrack combines ambient sounds of terror and popular tunes with great classical works by Handel, Mozart and Casadesus. The film *Nocturne*, on the other hand, offers a more contemplative audio-visual aesthetic with a deceptive hierarchisation of the classical music repertoire. Mozart's music is frivolously devalued, while Saint-Saëns' "Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Minor" is used as a narrative device for a destructive manifestation of power that leads to an avalanche of conflict between the sisters. Such explicit play with the classical music signifiers drastically deviates from conventional musical protocols and leads to alienation and, ultimately, transgressive neo-liberal dehumanisation of contemporary musicians.

Keywords: Dehumanised musical bodies, *The Perfection*, *Nocturne*, neo-liberalism, classical music

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Transgresiones neoliberales en la industria cinematográfica contemporánea: música clásica y cuerpos musicales deshumanizados en las películas *The Perfection* (2018) y *Nocturne* (2020)

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar lo que llamo “cuerpos musicales deshumanizados” en las películas de terror psicológico *The Perfection* y *Nocturne*. Estos cuerpos neoliberales multideficientes están expuestos a la imagen estereotipada y sorprendentemente negativa del sofisticado mundo del arte. Se presta especial atención al tratamiento provocador de la música clásica, centrándose en las prácticas institucionales no normativas y la reconfiguración ética de sus representantes. Una forma sorprendentemente cruda de deshumanización musical se encuentra en la película *The Perfection*, cuya banda sonora combina sonidos ambientales de terror y melodías populares con grandes obras clásicas de Handel, Mozart y Casadesus. La película *Nocturne*, en cambio, ofrece una estética audiovisual más contemplativa con una jerarquización engañosa del repertorio de música clásica. La música de Mozart se devalúa caprichosamente, mientras que el “Concierto para piano No. 2 en sol menor” de Saint-Saëns se utiliza como recurso narrativo para una manifestación destructiva de poder que conduce a una avalancha de conflictos entre las hermanas. Este juego explícito con significantes de la música clásica se desvía drásticamente de los protocolos musicales convencionales y conduce a la alienación y, en última instancia, a la deshumanización neoliberal transgresora de los músicos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: cuerpos musicales deshumanizados, *The Perfection*, *Nocturne*, neoliberalismo, música clásica

Transgressões neoliberais na indústria cinematográfica contemporânea: música clássica e corpos musicais desumanizados nos filmes *The Perfection* (2018) e *Nocturne* (2020)

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é examinar o que chamo “corpos musicais deshumanizados” nos filmes de terror psicológico *The Perfection* e *Nocturne*. Esses corpos neoliberais multideficientes são expostos à imagem estereotipada e surpreendentemente negativa do mundo sofisticado da música artística.

Particular atenção é dada ao tratamento provocativo da música erudita, com foco nas práticas institucionais não normativas e na reconfiguração ética dos seus representantes. Uma forma surpreendentemente crua de desumanização musical é encontrada no filme *The Perfection*, cuja trilha sonora combina sons ambientes de terror e músicas populares com grandes obras clássicas de Handel, Mozart e Casadesus. O filme *Nocturne*, por outro lado, oferece uma estética audiovisual mais contemplativa com uma hierarquização enganosa do repertório da música clássica. A música de Mozart é caprichosamente desvalorizada, enquanto o “Concerto para piano No. 2 em sol menor” de Saint-Saëns é usado como um dispositivo narrativo para uma manifestação destrutiva de poder que leva a uma avalanche de conflito entre as irmãs. Tal jogo explícito com os significantes da música clássica desvia-se drasticamente dos protocolos musicais convencionais e leva à alienação e, em última análise, à desumanização neoliberal transgressora dos músicos contemporâneos.

Palavras-chave: corpos musicais desumanizados, *The Perfection*, *Nocturne*, neoliberalismo, música clássica

The rise of neo-liberalism has profoundly affected the representation of classical music and professional musicians in screen-based media and popular culture in general, giving academic artists a remarkably commercial and consumerist character. Many digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime and Hulu exploit musical resources for their sensory appeal rather than highlighting the specifics of music’s aesthetic, artistic and intellectual values. This process of denaturalisation and destabilisation of the traditional cultural norms of classical music, exposed to the fiercely competitive entertainment market, has led to a drastic metamorphosis of its essence. The main objective of this article is to determine, from a multidisciplinary musicological perspective that draws in part discursively on philosophy, music aesthetics, film studies and critical theory, the specific mechanisms through which calculative neo-liberal transgression leads to dehumanised musical bodies. The discussion delves into detailed musical examples from psychological horror films *The Perfection* and *Nocturne*, as in these very films music undergoes a grossly prosaic artistic, aesthetic and ethical tabooing.

Refiguring classical music through the lens of neo-liberalism: the birth of dehumanised musical bodies

Dehumanisation as a process of eliminating certain human characteristics has manifested itself in various forms throughout human history. David Livingstone Smith, for example, uses the term dehumanisation to emphasise the psychological attitude of viewing other people as sub-human (2014), or simultaneously as subhuman and human (2016). José Ortega y Gasset (1968 [1925]), on the other hand, associates dehumanisation with the modernist movement and so-called non-representational art by highlighting the indifference of avant-garde artists to earlier traditional artistic practices. Nevertheless, the concept of dehumanisation considered in this article is neither due to a psychological essentialism nor to the change of musical perspective from Romanticism to Modernism. Rather, it reflects the bio-political intrusion of neo-liberal governing ethics with its value imperatives into cultural institutions and high art. As neo-liberal dehumanisation enables a cumulative, systematic infiltration of power –more ubiquitous than ever in the contemporary audio-visual landscape– it not only undermines the expressive depth and pathos of classical music, but also vigorously marginalises and trivialises the artist's socio-psychological and emotional profile. Companies (such as Google and Intel among many others) “often use historical ideas and stereotypes of classical music in attempts to smooth over the discrepancies between what they promise and what they deliver” (Ritchey, 2019, p. 2). This helps them appear virtuous to the populations they exploit by associating their products and processes with classical music (Ritchey, 2019, p. 2). The pervasive politicisation of contemporary musicians, therefore, leads to their frivolous and superficial portrayal in media culture and fosters a mediocre relationship with the music itself.

As early as the 1950s, Max Winkler, the inventor of the cue sheet, recognised the inappropriate use of classical music in cinema, which is confirmed in particular by his following vehement speech:

In [our] 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, T[chaiko]v[sky] 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'). Extracts from great symphonies and operas were hacked down to emerge again as 'Sinister Mysterioso' by Beethoven or 'Weird Moderato' by T[chaiko]v[sky]. Wagner's and Mendelssohn's Wedding

Marches were used to portray mock marriages, fights between husbands and wives, and divorce scenes: we just had them played out of tune –a treatment known in the profession as ‘souring up the aisle.’ [...]. Today I look in shame and awe at the printed copies of these mutilated masterpieces and I hope that this belated confession will grant me forgiveness for what I have done (1951, pp. 237-238).

It is fairly certain that even in silent films, classical music underwent to metonymic troping² and often linked to various trivial cinematic associations. Nevertheless, early conventions of filmmaking largely refrained from strategically devaluing music’s universal, holistic and transcendent values. That was possible because market forces at that time were not yet dominated by the neo-liberal reforms that Henry A. Giroux (2010) aptly calls the “theatre of cruelty”. As the capitalist system, or more precisely its “bastard child” neo-liberalism, inherently robs humanity of its sense of being human, the phenomenon of dehumanisation is tacitly rooted as a product of overwhelming consumerism and its free-market orthodoxy. According to Wendy Brown (2015), neo-liberalism is “the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity”, particularly through its form of valuation (p. 44). This pervasive model of global governance has led to an erosion of intellectual freedoms and a broader deterioration of values, as the hegemonic neo-liberal episteme³ produces incoherent musical bodies that strive to embody the dehumanising effect. Although it seems that the neo-liberal order of power enables the great diversity of individual potentials and their freedom, Hannele Harjunen (2017) warns us that emphasising these characteristics does not make people freer in relation to their bodies (p. 8). The neo-liberal approach to the body, Harjunen (2017) continues, is paradoxically not liberal at all, because presenting a controlled body that expresses neo-liberal values requires an enormous effort (p. 8). Due to the effects of corporatisation,

² In this context, metonymic troping is understood as the cinematic transformation of musical meaning. According to Melanie Lowe (2007), this happens when “viewers learn to associate specific types of cinematic situations with certain musical styles” (p. 165).

³ Here I take the concept of the neo-liberal episteme to be a pervasive discursive apparatus of corporate capitalism that, through its bio-political power mechanism, effects a profitable dehumanisation of art and professional artists in both the contemporary film industry and academic institutions. In a sense, it builds on Foucault’s (1980) definition of the episteme as a “strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within” (p. 197). By coining the term sonic episteme, Robin James has shown that the concept of neo-liberal episteme can also be applied to musical art. The sonic episteme “creates qualitative versions of the same relationships that the neoliberal episteme crafts quantitatively” (James, 2019, p. 3). Although James critically decodes various forms of systemic relations of bio-political domination, she has somehow avoided addressing class antagonism as a constitutive feature of neo-liberal capitalism that transcends white-supremacist, patriarchal models.

cultural diversification and commercialisation, classical musical heritage –which is now often lightly referred to as an elitist construct due to its association with cultural, economic and political elites– is threatened with extinction.⁴ The corrosive neo-liberal ethic has even spread to the stage of contemporary classical music, where its emancipatory ideal is obstructed by various subversive performance practices. These practices includes the conspicuous use of erotic capital, expressed in excessive musico-visual eroticism and seductively prosaic performative exhibitionism (cf. Buljančević, 2021). Therefore, the rehumanisation and positive re-empowerment of musicians, especially their moral revitalisation, should be a matter of theoretical and practical urgency. Meanwhile, the contemporary mainstream film industry, in order to ensure the unbroken dominance of questionable ultra-capitalist values, continues to follow the influence of fleeting intellectual trends, resulting in a more decadent representation of Western classical music culture. This is the moment when a distressing visuo-musical anti-humanism leads to the hyper-production of dehumanised musical bodies: a specific embodiment of the intellectually and emotionally denuded human entities co-existing within a hegemonic neo-liberal episteme.

Dehumanised musical bodies are neo-liberal, over-fetishised and de-subjectified individuals with a significant cultural, moral, artistic and aesthetic deficit. As a result, they are inevitably engulfed by the unsustainable global consumption patterns that undermine cultivated musical practices. Dehumanisation is, in fact, a form of radical human alienation and aloofness prevalent in the contemporary global media industry –ironically the very profit-driven industry that deliberately subjects musical bodies to the dehumanising process of Othering. These dominant actors (globalist elites) also aim to trivialise the classical music canon by encouraging mass audience to engage in subversive listening and sensually experience the process of dehumanisation.⁵ Cinematic dehumanisation not only reinforces the global anti-academic image, but also transforms classical music into

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical reflections on high art are partly related to this theme, as his three-zone model of cultural taste is associated with class status. According to Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), legitimate taste, which includes the outstanding works of the classical music repertoire, is "[...] highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital" (p. 16). The French sociologist associates high art exclusively with cultural status, without acknowledging the importance of the Kantian argument of purely aesthetic disinterestedness. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, as Lawrence Kramer (2007) states, classical music in the post-technological age is no longer for the cultural elite, but "belongs to anyone who cares to listen" (p. 34).

⁵ By subversive sensual experience, I refer primarily to the overly prosaic and consumerist enjoyment of sensual pleasures, which goes beyond erotic perception as it involves the synergy of all the senses (cf. Buljančević, 2023, p. 130).

a fetishised object that falls prey to inappropriate conceptualisations and capital gains. Ultimately, dehumanised musical bodies, characterised by a strongly anthropocentric ethic and desecration of the normative ideal body, are a physical embodiment of twisted academic values.

In the psychological horror films *The Perfection* and *Nocturne*, the criteria of academic musical practices are fundamentally reshaped. Above all, the frivolous portrayal of professional musicians robs them of their substantial artistic, spiritual and human quality. It is the insistence on harmful stereotypical clichés of classical musicians as disturbing personalities or psychotic villains that potentiates the lack of musical humanness.⁶ By pushing musical bodies into the realm of radical pathological Otherness through the growing power of neo-liberal values, these films ultimately undermine the accountability and essence of classical musicians: their craft, their highly profiled phenomenal and psychological perception, their holistic musical understanding, and ultimately their emotional, intellectual and intuitive capacities. The progressive weakening of humanising values is particularly evident in *The Perfection*, while in *Nocturne*, despite the explicit psychosexual charge and the questionable hierarchisation of musical values, a more subtle (and rhetorically and aesthetically pleasing) form of dehumanisation is preferred. Dehumanisation then takes place on three different levels, which I will discuss in more detail later:

- 1 controversial portrayal of professional musicians and their musical behaviour
- 2 devaluation and tabooing of institutional musical practices and their representatives
- 3 prosaic de-hierarchisation of the classical musical repertoire

These narrative procedures, deprived of a dialectical interplay, indicate that the dehumanised musical bodies are not the result of a pure transgression, subversion or (de)tabooing of musical and cultural values. Moreover, the contemporary process of bio-political dehumanisation is deeply rooted in the ideology of neo-liberal totality, which directors of provocative

⁶ Interestingly, Janet Halfyard highlights strong cultural differences between Hollywood cinema and European films when it comes to the portrayal of classical music and musicians. One of the most immediate differences, according to Halfyard (2006), is that in European cinema there is no specific connection between classical music and villains or anti-heroes (p. 77). In Hollywood cinema, on the other hand, classical music can supposedly pose a threat to an American character by distracting him or her from American values (Halfyard, 2006, p. 77). Since both the directors and distributors of the films discussed in this paper are affiliated with the US, Halfyard's argument partly explains such a dehumanising inscription of classical musical codes into the film narrative, making classical music part of the neo-liberal organising network.

films such as Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini,⁷ Stanley Kubrick, Pedro Almodóvar, Lars von Trier or Yorgos Lanthimos have successfully avoided. For Almodóvar's carnivalesque treatment of classical music references –despite a shocking and often vulgar cinematic disposition of the Western musical canon– is not based on ultra-capitalist, dehumanising power structures, but on the construction of a specific artistic imprint that transforms elements of trivialisation, kitsch and camp into valuable aesthetic property (see also Buljančević, 2022a). Even though the transgressive element makes music “resistant to totali[s]ation and continually open to possibility and multiplicity” (Fry, 2008, p. 278), classical music loses its revolutionary and emancipatory power and a considerable degree of aesthetic productivity under the pressure of global normalisation. It is about the perverse application of power habitually aimed at violating and simplifying the cultivated artistic sensibility. The production of dehumanised musical bodies is therefore primarily profit-driven and, if not beneficial enough, precludes deeper artistic and intellectual engagement. When Edward Said (1991) advocates for the transgression of classical music, he does so to establish “affiliations between music and society” (p. 70), not to undermine its aesthetic autonomy. For unlike other kinds of transgression, the intrusive neo-liberal musical transgression promotes excessive consumption and prosaic intentionality that increasingly leads to (self-) alienation, emotional apathy or even frenetic sensory overload. Let me now take a look at how the dehumanised musical bodies in *The Perfection* are designated and on which levels their transgression manifests itself.

Between triviality and monstrosity: dehumanising musical practices in the film *The Perfection*

Richard Shepard's film *The Perfection* is a story about two professional cellists, Charlotte (Allison Williams) and Lizzie (Logan Browning), who are trapped in a terrifying post-ideological reality controlled by pathological subjects of an elitist musical institution. Carefully selected, gifted female musicians are sexually abused by Anton (Steven Weber), the director of the Bachoff Academy of Music, with the unconditional support of his wife

⁷ Pasolini did indeed provocatively subvert traditional and classical music, but not for the purpose of operational efficiency. On the contrary, the Italian director cleverly exploited various elements, including Baroque music, to evoke empathy for the lower class (Greig, 2022, p. 143), seamlessly integrated mediaeval masses as a distinct critique of ecclesiastical hegemony (Buljančević, 2022b, p. 146), and turned to classical tunes in his final cinematic endeavour to underscore the extreme polarisation between sexually decadent elites and marginalised subjects. These musical subversions are thus drastically different from those sought in neo-liberal consumer logic, which frivolously aims to undermine classical musical transcendence, sublimity and beauty.

Paloma (Alaina Huffman). These female artists are controlled by a disciplinary power in the Foucauldian sense, as they are subjected to a vicious disciplinary normation that produces submissive and petrified musical bodies.

As Tobias Pontara (2021) explains, classical music culture in this film is driven primarily by dehumanising ideals of perfection, ideals closely associated with “chastisement and retaliatory dominance” (p. 10). In an improvised private concert scene called Chapel, the young female performers, marked by a minuscule musical note tattoo, are subjected to a ferocious sexual ritual when a technical error occurs during a performance. In keeping with the Bachoff Academy’s decades of twisted philosophy, even a single wrong note is considered a major transgression obstructing the path to the divine. Anton’s teaching methods, rooted in sadistic scholastic rigour, serve merely as a façade for sadistic sexual misconduct. The invective pedagogical approach not only dismantles the affective and invigorating joys of music-making, but also leaves permanent marks on musicians’ lives, much like indelible tattoos. Moreover, even minor instances of imposed psychological stress repeatedly lead to profound performance anxiety in musicians. Charlotte’s years of suffering through rape and torture during her formative years led to the development of painful psycho-emotional disorders that eventually led to her institutionalisation. This ordeal transformed her into a vindictive individual who resorts to extreme acts. For instance, she drugged Lizzie and coerced her into amputating her own wrist, all cloaked under the guise of ending Anton’s indoctrination.⁸ These abnormal and utterly absurd means, which could easily be avoided or replaced by significantly less violent procedures, reveal a profound dehumanisation of a wounded musical body bereft of rational systematic thought.

Let me now discuss how music itself is exposed to the processes of cinematic dehumanisation and the constitution of dehumanised bodies. In addition to the original score composed by Paul Haslinger, the film contains stylistically diverse examples of classical and popular music. These include the fragments of cult works such as Mozart’s “Requiem in D Minor”, Handel’s “Water Music Suite No. 2 in D Major” or Casadesus’ “Cello Concerto in C Minor”, but also the electronic instrumental “Let’s Make This a Moment to Remember” (Chromatics) and popular songs “At Least I Still Have You” (Rose Liu), “Ready or Not” (Gizzle), “It’s On” (Deuce Mobb) and “Petals” (Chromatics).

⁸In the course of the film, however, it becomes clear that Lizzie also exercises radical forms of human violence.

Nevertheless, the simplistic desublimation of the classical music repertoire clearly targets a cultural, ethical and aesthetic deficit inherent to the conformist global marketplace. To aptly paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1997 [1968]), in every era one should strive to withdraw tradition from the conformism that threatens it (p. 255). The overwhelming conformism in *The Perfection* mirrors the profound cultural, political, ideological and ethical dislocation of academic institutions. In this context, neo-liberal libidinous power, deprived of a long-term intellectual engagement, aims to destabilise musical bodies and the Western musical canon as a whole.

Using a concrete example, the “Overture” to Handel’s “Water Music Suite No. 2” [00:43:08-00:44:09], for example, functions primarily as a prosaic musical underscore that symbolically conveys the conceptual knowledge of the Bachoff Academy’s class status. The music is sounding to Diego Velázquez’s portrait of Don Luis de Góngora (1622) and framed images of four young female cellists who once attended the Bachoff Academy. But the conceptual framework of this background fragment transcends its ambient mimicry, as it metaphorically veils the very nature of an ominous academic setting. Such a cinematic treatment of music could, to roughly apply Jacques Attali’s concepts, point to the medial musical transformation from *representation* to *repetition*. For the representative power of music, Attali (1985 [1977]) reminds us, wants people to believe in order; whereas repetition, on the contrary, uses its bureaucratic power to silence them (p. 20). In this respect, Handel’s music temporarily conceals an uncanny source of transgressive institutional power by mitigating the monstrosity of the institutional big Other.⁹ Since the insidious institutional practises are not yet revealed in the course of the film, sensually and intellectually appealing music obscures the ideological indoctrination that, in Foucault’s terms, produces, controls and disciplines musical bodies through a diffuse disciplinary power. In this way, the coercive and intrusive bio-political strategies transform Handel’s solemn music into yet another desublimated sonic signifier. Paradoxical as it may seem, the qualitative changes in the neo-liberal hyperproduction and consumption strategy have made the perception of dehumanisation unfathomable, as the artistic, aesthetic and intellectual potential of the “Overture” ultimately overpowers the hidden mechanisms of malign elitist power.

⁹ Here I refer to Lacan’s psychoanalytic notion of the big Other: a ruler of a Symbolic order that structures the subject through language, law and other signifiers.

Apart from the troubling ethical norms and ideals that undermine the abstract purity of classical music,¹⁰ the film also strategically reinforces dehumanisation through simplistic representations of musical understanding. One of the fundamental catalysts for this phenomenon resides in the deliberate rejection of established classical music protocols. In a broader context, Dominic McIver Lopes (2022) states that “traditional thinking about aesthetic value fails to capture the specificities with which empirical art scholars must grapple [with]” (p. 1). However, these traditional protocols not only enable the listening audience to recognise the wide variety of aesthetic objects, but also to distinguish between high and low aesthetic qualities. This is of particular importance as aesthetic consciousness is now more blurred than ever due to the dominance of neo-liberal rationality. The characters’ chaotic listening habits (especially according to traditional aesthetic criteria) reveal a glaring lack of imaginative auditory involvement. It is precisely the capricious shift from sustained to inattentive listening that has led to the erosion of classical music’s expressive and perceptual potential, embedding it in a corrupted, taboo cinematic triviality. Even the brutal institutional environment in *The Perfection* is clumsily portrayed, failing to resonate with the audience due to the prosaic narrative and overemphasis on political correctness as the new normal of governance.¹¹ The result is an unbalanced aesthetic with a reverberating dehumanising effect. In other words, the sensory and conceptual disruption is compounded by the fusion of alienated, digitally processed sound and the cinematic reuse of classical tunes that provocatively taboos the musical identity of a professional cellist. Such audio-visual transgression, a kind of transgression that (to discursively invert Said’s assertion) “reduce[s] music to a subordinate, passively mirroring role” (Said, 1991, p. 70), is particularly evident in examples of diegetic music in which the performative musical act drives the actors to controversial

¹⁰ While this paper is not about reframing the Romantic ideal of classical music’s autonomy, even the slightest possibility of music retaining its purity is at odds with Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociological reflections. Relying on Bourdieu’s concept of distinction, Øivind Varkøy (2016) believes that “art should strive for autonomy, but it neither can nor should be ‘pure’” (p. 149). Preserving the non-referential purity of classical music in a medium such as film proves difficult given its dependence on visual and discursive narrative elements. Nevertheless, musical purity (or at least the ideal of purity) can be partially maintained by retaining various degrees of its autonomy. This would be possible if classical music were to re-acousmaticised, isolated from the ubiquitous social and political transgressions or, more questionably, through a post-ideological restoration within the modern society of exploitation.

¹¹ Contemporary films that strategically adapt to new social movements and identity politics should be distinguished from queer films (e.g., the films of Pedro Almodóvar, among many others) that do not aim to prosaically portray people on the margins of society just to look “correct” in the eyes of the global audience.

promiscuity and trivial hedonism rather than deep emotional or intellectual excitement.

In particular, Casadesus' "Cello Concerto in C minor" [00:08:24-00:11:03] is played simultaneously by three young cellists, while Lizzie and Charlotte, engrossed in their vulgar dialogic exchanges, participate only half-heartedly in the perceptual activity. They are too quick to predict the "results" of the so-called competition and immediately decide not to engage in holistic listening. The two parents, on the other hand, seem to have no interest in their daughters' performance and prefer to focus on their own forbidden romance. Even more intriguing is that they do not try to hide their uncontrollable sexual urges from their spouses who are standing next to them.



Figure 1. Tabooing classical music through trivial sexual transgressions.

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Their flamboyant flirting catches Lizzie's attention in particular, when she openly communicates her sexual arousal to Charlotte by whispering to her: "that gets me wet".



Figure 2. Provocative sexual innuendos in the public musical environment.
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Such a provocative and capricious transgression of cultivated listening makes the entire performance strikingly unempathetic with the film's setting. The simplistic use of classical music can in some ways be explained by Adorno's (1976) bold assertion that: "[...] all of this is flattened as by a steamroller, level[ed] by the need for music as a comfortable distraction" (p. 15). This underlines the role of classical music as a fetishistic decoration and casual distraction peculiar to the inattentive listeners. If Adorno (2002 [1941]) recognised the degradation of serious music even in mass media such as radio, and pessimistically pointed out how this inevitably led to "triviali[s]ation" (pp. 261-263), "quotation listening" (pp. 263-265) and "romantic[i]sation" (pp. 265-267), one can assume that his argument about the progressive (or arguably even total) loss of aesthetic musical autonomy in digital media would be far more strident.¹² For in Adorno's time, the ideal of classical music, while steeped in monetarisation, commodity fetishism and (Marcusean) repressive desublimation, was not yet fully contaminated by bio-political managerial power, pervasive dehumanising triviality and controversial liberal violations of aesthetic integrity. The true progress of technological rationality, which according to Herbert Marcuse (2002 [1964]) "liquidat[ed] the oppositional and transcending elements in the 'higher culture'" (p. 59), thus reaches its climax not in post-war capitalism, but in the actual clash between antagonistic liberal and illiberal democracies,¹³ both of which contaminate (in different ways) the sublime and unique Otherness of high art. It is, of course, unlikely that this opinion is shared by liberally interpellated intellectuals who qualitatively

¹² James Buhler (2022), for example, discusses at length how Adorno and Eisler's approach to film music might look in the age of digital media. However, the author avoids addressing the inherent problems of the ultra-capitalist ethic that has gripped the film industry. Among other things, this ethic helps to establish a hegemonic de-hierarchisation of artistic and aesthetic musical values and significantly potentiates class inequality among contemporary composers.

¹³ Since they represent the interests of ruling elites and operational efficiency, both liberal and illiberal democracies ultimately undermine the intrinsic values of art.

equate high and popular art, especially scholars seduced by the cuteness of an anti-materialist relativism that has reached its peak in postmodern culture. Franco Fabbri (2008), for example, distances himself from the ideas of the Frankfurt School (in particular, Adorno's typology of listeners) by questioning the need for hierarchies and a priori taboos in music listening. He also correctly points out that even in some prominent Italian opera houses, attentive listening was overshadowed by eating, playing cards or having sex (Fabbri, 2008, p. 26). But if creating dehumanised musical bodies and hostile art institutions is another profit-driven strategy, then it is clearly not just about overcoming conventional listening protocols peculiar to cultivated and (supposedly) elite audience. In the age of digital cinema, where high aesthetic and artistic qualities are always subordinated to commercial profitability, there is growing pressure to destabilise the ineffable nature of musical talent. Finally, the subversive listening to Casadesu's concerto is the neo-liberal reflection of a desublimated reality in which classical music, as Marcuse would say, "[...] loses the greater part of its truth" (2002 [1964], p. 61), merging with the trivial sameness of one-dimensional actuality.

The unrealistic performance expectations and unprofessional musical behaviour are another argument for the factual misinterpretation of academic practices. This becomes clear when Lizzie invites Charlotte to play "Cello Duet No. 3" [00:16:55-00:19:12]¹⁴ together on a small stage, knowing that Charlotte has had no contact with the instrument for years. Since it is highly unlikely that Charlotte will automatically regain full technical proficiency after such a long hiatus, her unexpected performance challenges the protocols of systematic academic musicianship. There are exceptions, however, in the case of highly gifted musicians such as Władysław Szpilman (Adrien Brody), whose musical prowess is on display in Polanski's film *The Pianist* (2003 [2002]). While searching for shelter and food in the ruins, the physically exhausted Szpilman is discovered by Wehrmacht officer Wilhelm Adalbert Hosenfeld (Thomas Kretschmann), who invites the pianist to play in front of him despite the long break. Szpilman's suggestive pianistic impulse, based on a sincere musical affection and well-preserved artistic skills, enables him to overcome physical weakness and deep inner conflicts and impress the Nazi officer. Moreover, the contemplative piano sound of Chopin's "Ballade in G Minor" has a very strong dramatic, emotional, aesthetic and, above all, human quality,

¹⁴ This theme is later inserted as a retrospective, non-diegetic underpinning of Charlotte's twisted plan [40:55-42:57], culminating in Lizzie's screams and agonising pain after the manic act of self-amputation.

which is probably why, as Lawrence Kramer suggests, the film facilitates a model for creative listening (2007, p. 28). In *The Perfection*, however, the implementation of creative cinematic listening is aggravated by a prosaic and utterly capricious interpretive act of “Cello Duet No. 3”. The piece itself is steeped in rhythmic tango patterns and is an eclectic mix of present and past, classical and pop. But while this original film tune does not actually conform to any genre of classical music, its tonal designation of Lizzie’s and Charlotte’s dehumanised musical bodies makes it a particularly representative example of subverted pseudo-cultivated music. The intermingling of narrative spaces, from the diegetic performance on stage to the spatially and temporally displaced sound,¹⁵ is deployed as a musical device of the omnipresent sexual drive. What makes the use of music so trivial is its subservience to neo-liberal excess and theatricality: everything about Lizzie’s and Charlotte’s stage presence seems too forced, controversial, clumsy, artificial and unconvincing to spectators familiar with cultivated performance conventions. Their non-linear interpretation ends with muffled applause and Charlotte’s euphoric vocalisation of sexual pleasure, completing the perceptual-aesthetic shock that the ultra-liberal moving image inflicts on the audience by subversively exploiting such a musical taboo.

In the course of the film, Charlotte is once again compelled to confront the traumas of her past when, bound to her legs, she must play a composition perfectly in the Chapel without making the slightest mistake, or “bear the consequences” (see also Pontara, 2021).

¹⁵This non-binary level of musical narration corresponds to a category of displaced diegetic music (for a summary of this concept, see Heldt (2013, pp. 97-106).



Figure 3. The forced performance of the chained Charlotte in the Chapel.
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Particularly disconcerting is the fact that a young Chinese girl is sitting in the audience, whom Anton puts his hand on her shoulder and sensually draws her into his macabre idea of perfection while he seeks eye contact with Charlotte. When the twisted, dehumanising ideal of musical perfection fails to transpire, Charlotte is left to be gang-raped by Anton's butlers (Theis [Mark Kandborg] and Geoffrey [Graeme Duffy]) and Lizzie, who pretends to avenge her chopped-off arm. But the twist in the tale adds momentum to the plot. Lizzie and Charlotte turn out to be allies who have hatched a plan to punish Anton and save all the other future children from his perverse indoctrination.

As the film reaches its climax, bio-political strategies continue to infiltrate classical music and prevent the re-humanisation of musical bodies. Cultivated music is temporarily paired with aesthetics of trash horror and prosaic neo-liberal signifiers. For example, the diegetic sounds of "Introitus" [1:18:54-1:19:42] and "Lacrimosa" [1:19:42-1:20:03] from Mozart's "Requiem in D Minor" are abruptly interrupted by the bizarre act of involuntary urination by the drugged and disoriented Paloma. The rap song "It's on" accompanies Charlotte and Lizzie as they enter Anton's room shortly after stabbing his wife in cold blood. First of all, the dehumanising quality of the scene is reinforced by the fact that the aesthetic and cathartic experience of Paloma's dying is completely omitted. Instead, graphic and bloody cinematic and mental images of the horrific violence between

Anton and the female lovers dominate, culminating finally in Charlotte's fatal injury: her entire forearm is cut open. In such an exaggerated and overly fetishised cinematic space, not even classical music can escape the sustained brutality to which the neo-liberal imagination tends. The requiem is thus capriciously tabooed and robbed of its original intrinsic value: ethical purity, inherent logic and sublime spiritual ecstasy. This reinforces another stereotypical cliché that associates idiosyncratic classical music practices and Anton's cultivated musical taste with highly disturbing behavioural patterns. But such an incongruous mixture of musical signifiers conceptually nullifies the full transgression of the Mozartian piece, reducing it to a desublimated (or perhaps trivially sublimated) neo-liberal musical agency.

In the final scene of the film, the neo-liberal rhetoric highlights extremely inhumane behavioural codes, followed by the ominous visual setting and arbitrary kinaesthetic gestures.¹⁶ Furthermore, the musical "execution" of Charlotte and Lizzie in the Chapel is completely simulated, i.e., inaudible, and acoustically replaced by the electronic song "Petals". Each of the lovers is now missing a hand, while Anton, with his mouth and eyes sewn shut and his limbs amputated, is forced to listen to them.



Figure 4. The attainment of musical perfection through radically dehumanising musical practices.

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¹⁶ By this I mean above all the description of the musical act itself, which exudes a striking apathy towards the actors and disturbing dynamics of the film scene.

Following Foucault's (1975) notion of the internalisation of disciplinary power, Tobias Pontara (2021) links this forced perceptual activity of Anton to a "negative assessment of concentrated listening" (p. 18). Indeed, the systematic relations of power and dominance are now reversed and represented through a crude dehumanised parody. But to sensually reinforce such a deviant perceptual image, the final musical theme must also complement the visual inhumanness. Rather than continuing to use classical music or even digital cello sounds to maximise the impact of the strikingly dissonant environment and soften or enhance the extensive visual stimuli, the director resorts to a more accessible hybrid electronic song. Refined classical sounds and cello tones are suddenly deemed inappropriate to provide narrative closure to the film. This musical inconsistency leads to an amplified disequilibrium or, in other words, a disconcerting perceptual effect inherent to neo-liberal, highly mobilised triviality, which unexpectedly shifts the locus of power in order to profitably stimulate consumer demand. The way these female musical bodies resonate with the disturbing images of radical bodily transgressions evokes a profound discomfort for the spectator. At the same time, their muted performance seems highly implausible or even absurd, suggesting that the irretrievable process of dehumanisation is not complete and continues to spread through the deeply pejorative musical connotations and violence that provoke, trivialise and subvert the cultural and socio-political dynamics of the academic musical environment. The film audience, whose consumption desires have been internalised by the imposed bio-political cultural politics, constantly absorbs the effects of this transgression, resulting in multisensory overload.

One question remains, however: is the portrayal of exclusively female cellists gender-motivated or merely an arbitrary decision by the director? Pontara (2021) suggests that the film intentionally uses the stereotype of young women playing the cello to reinforce a critique of the objectified and sexualised female body (p. 19). This points to another rather outdated patriarchal musical stereotype that somehow manages to persist in global popular culture, and it seems that the film *Nocturne* did not avoid this either.

Dehumanised musical bodies: classical music, competitiveness and diabolical monstrosity in the film *Nocturne*

In Zu Quirke's cinematic work *Nocturne* –the fourth instalment of the anthological film series *Welcome to the Blumhouse*– the narrative revolves

around classical musicians caught up in a supernatural milieu that profoundly distorts their self-perception. These compromised musical figures are burdened with pathological transgressions such as unsettling competitiveness, egoistic ambition and apathy. *Nocturne* combines diabolical monstrosity with ruthless sisterly conflict and corrosive institutional power games. To sustain the contemporary neo-liberal vitality prevalent in the film, classical music undergoes multiple violations that drastically affect its aesthetic, sensual, intellectual, discursive and ethical qualities. At the same time, the ideal of musical ambition undergoes a disconcerting metamorphosis, progressively descending into multi-layered stages of dehumanisation.

The horror film revolves around twin sisters: the introverted Julie (Sydney Sweeney) and the much more professionally and socially accomplished Vivian (Madison Iseman). Both siblings are enrolled at Lindbergh Academy, a prestigious music school known for its competitive environment. Julie, who has been in Vivian's shadow throughout her academic journey, harbours a relentless desire to surpass her sister's achievements at any cost, a motive that drives her into the realm of occult practices. A crucial point occurs when Julie comes across an enigmatic notebook that once belonged to Moira Wilson (Ji Eun Hwang), a tragic figure who took her own life in the film's opening sequence. Julie becomes obsessed with the mysterious symbols, scores and eerie illustrations in this notebook. Her underlying resentment stems from being constantly overlooked and musically invisible, which has transformed her into a dehumanised musical body marked by increasing moral insufficiency and bitterness. While the notebook, as an obscure object of desire and a liminal material signifier, does not directly evoke these emotions, it blurs the boundaries between tangible and imaginary realities, phantasm, reverie and hallucination.



Figure 5. Moira's notebook.

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As for the soundtrack, the film consists of various examples of classical chamber and solo music such as Tartini's "Devil's Trill Sonata", Schubert's

“Moment Musical No. 4 in C sharp minor”, Debussy’s “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” (*Images*, Book II), Brahms’ “Piano Quintet in F minor”, Paganini’s Caprice No. 9 in E major, Mozart’s “Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major” and Saint-Saëns’ “Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor”. And it is the combination of classical music, Elizabeth Bernholz’s electronic score and discordant sound effects that makes the horror-centric cinematic space so disturbingly sensual. The piano, for instance, represents a subversive powerful instrument of dominance and a de-aestheticised prosaic signifier.¹⁷ The pianistic prosaicness functions as a dehumanising tool resulting from the frivolous and unproductive approach to pianism and the lack of intuitive musicality. In the very first minutes of the film, Julie mechanically practises one of the most common preparatory piano exercises from Charles-Louis Hanon’s collection *Le Pianiste virtuose* on the Clavinova [00:04:41-00:04:52] without relying on her musically disciplined ear for phrasing. And although this exercise served more didactic purposes, Julie’s piano sound materialises as inherently flat and dispassionate, a reflection, as it were, of her superficial relationship to music that excludes any traits of deeper artistic and aesthetic sensibility.

Sometimes the subversion of classical music codes, even in contemporary global cinema, goes beyond prosaic tabooing. The treatment of Debussy’s music [00:06:53-00:07:22], for example, points to a more subtle form of neo-liberal dehumanisation. The simulation of a visual slow motion and delayed temporal progression resonates with the images of nature and Julie’s listening body in medium and close-up. But the unexpected, strikingly amplified automotive noise interrupts the audio-visual continuity and deprives the spectator of a pleasurable aesthetic listening experience. What makes these features so subversive is that the music itself, originally intended to evoke the exotic landscape of East Asia, is not subversive at all, unless one understands large, unresolved chords and ambiguous tonality as subversive compositional language according to certain aesthetic criteria. Since this fragment stands primarily for the culturally and geographically “Other”, its sounds of Otherness symbolically inscribe themselves in Julie’s immanent strangeness. Behind these impressionistic sounds, then, lies the inaccessible subjectivity of her dehumanised musical being. “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” is meant to disguise the uncanniness¹⁸ of Julie’s mystical reverie, hinted at in her dissonant facial expression.

¹⁷ David Huckvale (2022) argues that the idea of a piano as a symbol of power might be attractive to a millennial audience, even if they are not necessarily interested in classical music (p. 186). It is precisely the simplistic notion of the piano as a pure instrument of power that is one of the representative indicators of neo-liberal dehumanisation.

¹⁸ Here I refer to the psychological experience that Sigmund Freud defined as *unheimlich*.

Thus, the elusive, seductive sensuality of Debussy's music diverts the audience's attention and transforms this piece into an elusive dehumanising signifier.

Although most of the musical examples in the film reflect Julie's incoherent emotional and mental landscape –including her unsuccessful hiding of envy as she turns the pages for Vivian in a chamber music class [00:09:52-00:10:26]– they do not effectively depict her pathological self-fulfilling. Only the works of Tartini, Mozart and Saint-Saëns are subjected to this explicit cinematic dehumanisation, as a sinister triumvirate of profanation, perversion and ethical unworthiness. The film's diabolical premise is so deeply embedded in the ontological level of cinematic discourse that it could be called, as David Huckvale (2022) suggests, a "*Mephisto Waltz* for the modern world" (p. 186, emphasis in original). The very title of Tartini's "Devil's Trill" elicits explicit supernatural associations, for it was written after the composer awoke from a particularly vivid dream in which the devil played his violin with wild and intense combinatorial virtuosity (cf. Schwarm, 2014, para. 2). Its kaleidoscopic sonority combines extra-musical associations with its aesthetic, affective and rhythmic qualities. Enchanted by the devil's playing, Tartini endeavoured to transcribe the ethereal notes he had heard in his dream. He admitted, however, that his recreation was a pale imitation of the unimaginable celestial tones. In the film's storytelling, the sonata first appears in the opening sequence as an electronic score with synthesised polyphonic female vocalisations that make the spatial and temporal audio-visual plane more tangible, composite and sensually receptive. It then resolves continuously into a diegetic violin solo just before the exceptionally talented student Moira meets her tragic end by jumping off the balcony. The sonata's acoustic version, constrained in part by its medium, cannot fully capture the multi-sensory fullness of an elusive demonic essence. Its electronic adaptation, however, enriched with haptic mysterious synthesiser resonances, admirably approximates the infernal appeal and affective flow, almost resembling a sonic personification of the devil's call. The inclusion of the occult symbol of the sun intensifies the diabolic effect, for the yellow sunlight becomes emblematic of Faustian transcendental diabolism. Significantly, these sinister attributes are transferred to Julie when she inadvertently enters into a Faustian pact reminiscent of that in Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947).¹⁹ The highly intelligent (fictional) composer Adrian Leverkühn makes a bargain with the devil to

¹⁹ Of course, there is a Faustian bargain in many other literary and cinematic works. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), for example, Dorian sells his soul to the devil in order to gain eternal youth and, like Julie, does so spontaneously without first receiving explicit confirmation of the diabolical bargain.

achieve an extraordinary level of compositional creativity, while Julie does so to acquire fascinating pianistic skills. Both unorthodox musicians resort to radical means and share a monstrous demonic power. But only in Julie's case does this fascinating magical transaction lead to a fatalistic process of self-dehumanisation. She ends tragically, though not in a memorable theatrical way typical of the passionate operatic heroine, but as a victim of her own delusion that entangled her in such a pact. Leverkühn's ideal of an imaginative and rhetorical sublimity rooted in a sudden transgressive transcendence (cf. Said, 1991, p. 47) should be distinguished from a prosaic or satirical sublimity interspersed with pompous artificiality, which Alexander Pope (2006 [1728]) defines as bathos.²⁰ Julie, on the other hand, is caught up in a desublimated neo-liberal pianistic splendour imbued with contradictory musical values.

Another conceptual level of dehumanisation lies in the constant undermining of the music teacher's moral authority. Vivian's strict piano teacher, Dr Henry Cask (Ivan Shaw), is considered the best professor at Lindbergh Academy and solely teaches exceptionally gifted artists. In a bizarre turn of events, he engages in an inappropriate sexual relationship with his student Vivian, implying a significant misalignment of his professional and moral compass. But surprisingly, his didactic methods and vaguely quantified sexual transgressions²¹ are not presented as inherently flawed, at least not compared to the infamous practices of musical perfectionist Anton or tyrannical jazz maestro Terence Fletcher (Jonathan Kimble Simmons) from Damien Chazelle's film *Whiplash* (2015 [2014]). Dr Cask's behaviour is an expression of global academic capitalism, patriarchal egotism, disempowered collegiality, adverse elitism and selective pedagogical engagement. Additionally, his musical taste, although not interpreted here as a social weapon in Bourdieu's (1984 [1979]) terms, is also compromised by the lure of trivial hedonism and undifferentiated inner ear. This clearly suggests a complex intersection of distorted ethical and professional dynamics within the academic context and a hyper-fetishistic neo-liberal intentionality. Yet, the fetishistic relationship to music is not a recent phenomenon; its roots extend to an earlier phase of capitalism that preceded the emergence of the culture industry (see, for example, Adorno, 1991 [1938]). Throughout the film, the (post-)Marxist idea of music fetishism is combined with the features of radical trivialisation and moral and institutional transgression,

²⁰ Although Pope was primarily referring to a particular poetic style, his concept is potentially applicable to musical discourse as well.

²¹ The central argument revolves around the fact that Dr Cask's sexual misconduct was not overtly portrayed in the film's narrative, but discursively implied. This subtlety serves to divert attention from the serious problem of gendered institutional abuse of power.

including a dominant, ongoing bio-political vortex of academic and ethical ineffectivity and failure. By contrast, in the highly subversive French erotic psychodrama *La Pianiste* (Haneke, 2002 [2001]), classical music retains a profound aesthetic value despite all its erotic transgressions, which include sexual disequilibrium, physical violence, (sado)masochistic fantasies and a destructive sexual relationship between a female teacher and a male student. In other words, notwithstanding such a non-normative institutional environment and the pedagogical and ethical transgressions of the middle-aged music teacher, music is somehow rescued from neo-liberal domination by being ideologically insulated from the dehumanising process of Othering. And Dr Cask's enormous ambition, expressed in his bold assertion that "music is a blood sport",²² further undermines the reputation of classical music institutions and confirms once again that the professor exhibits all the constitutive characteristics of a dehumanised musical body.

The profitable destabilisation of classical music values and musical intellectuals is continued through the cinematic mediation of Mozart's and Saint-Saëns' piano concertos. Saint-Saëns' composition is conveyed as a transfiguring score tinged with a supernatural power that fuels the unhealthy conflict between the twin sisters. It appears frequently in the shifting narrative structure, at one point even taking shape in hushed tones when Julie observes Vivian during a piano lesson [00:14:41-00:15:13].²³ As a narrative agent, signifier or conceptual metaphor for power, musical status and dominance, it is diametrically opposed to the meaning of Mozart's music subjected to desensitisation and extreme simplification. In this case, a statement from the film such as "Nobody [has] ever won anything with Mozart" (Quirke, 2020, [00:11:46-00:11:48]) is enough to demonstrate such a pejorative treatment of this Viennese classic. One might wonder what this simplification really means, especially considering that there are far more demanding piano concertos than Saint-Saëns'? Given the concerto's tempestuous, picturesque and strongly evocative musicality, one of the reasons for its choice may be the sentimental appeal of Romantic music.

José Ortega y Gasset (1968 [1925]) argued that "[f]rom Beethoven to Wagner all music is melodrama[ti]c" and aimed primarily to express

²² Dr Task: "Music is a blood sport. If you really wanted that spotlight, you wouldn't let anything get in your way. Not even Vivian" (Quirke, 2020, [39:59-40:07]).

²³ This Julie's envious observation of her sister leads to an ever-increasing palpitation. This is deepened by the discontinuous relationship between the music and the sound effects, which form a highly incoherent soundscape.

personal feelings (p. 26). However, when Ortega refers to such a homologous perspective of Romantic ideology, he overlooks the intellectual musical qualities that go beyond emotional and sensual appeal. Such a philosophical perspective is potentially applicable to romanticised use of music in cinema, the stereotypical cliché of which continues to resonate in ultra-liberal contemporary cinema. In the film *Nocturne*, for example, the choice of Saint-Saëns' "Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor" reflects the rivalry between the sisters, whose envy is too hostile to be represented by the refined Mozartian sound. Mozart's concertos are not overly virtuosic, nor do they contain bravura figural passages in a wide dynamic range, but they do require a finer touch than Saint-Saëns' music. Nevertheless, Mozart's pieces are sometimes unjustly underestimated even in professional musical circles, although their beauty, noble simplicity and iconic artistic value belong to the realm of sublime aesthetics and unimaginable spirituality. In such a cinematic climate, Mozart's seemingly subjectless music cannot successfully resist conceptualisation and becomes an abandoned musical signifier or an undesirable work that prevents any possible gain for Julie. By suddenly replacing Saint-Saëns with the piece of Viennese classical music, Julie not only tears open the unbridgeable void in their relationship, but also enters irrevocably into the realm of musical vanity that solidifies her personal deviance.

Obviously affected by Vivian's discouraging words, Julie suffers a panic attack while on stage and runs away from the crowded audience. Her recently acquired piano skills have ultimately proven ineffective, revealing her inability to translate them into practical application. The film viewer, on the other hand, can perceive how distorted electronic fragments of the "Devil's Trill Sonata" sonically underpin her transgressive musical behaviour [1:24:51-1:25:24]. These heterogeneous hybrid sounds, synaesthetically paired with a devilish yellow light, eerily lead Julie to the roof of the auditorium. The shifting narrative perspective resembles a metadiegetic space, or even an internal diegetic space,²⁴ as the audience sees Julie's world accompanied by distorted visual imagery, almost like the blurred cinematic in-between universe of phantasmatic illusion, dream and reality. Particularly striking is the reappearance of the diegetically displaced sounds of Saint-Saëns' concerto [1:25:24-1:26:08, 1:26:18-1:26:44] immediately following the electronic arrangement of Tartini's

²⁴ Guido Heldt (2013, pp. 119-133) discusses how the notion of "internal diegetic music" (Bordwell and Thompson, 2010, pp. 290-291) is in some ways equivalent to "metadiegetic music" (Gorbman, 1987, pp. 22-23) and "imagined sound" (Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer, 2010, pp. 77-79). All three propositions are applicable to this particular film scene, as they take into account the clash of different narrative musical spaces or focal points.

sonata. Immersivity both sonically and visually contemplates the defeated dehumanised entity through the transformative liminal space,²⁵ while this narrative ambiguity highlights Julie's fatalistic self-transgression.

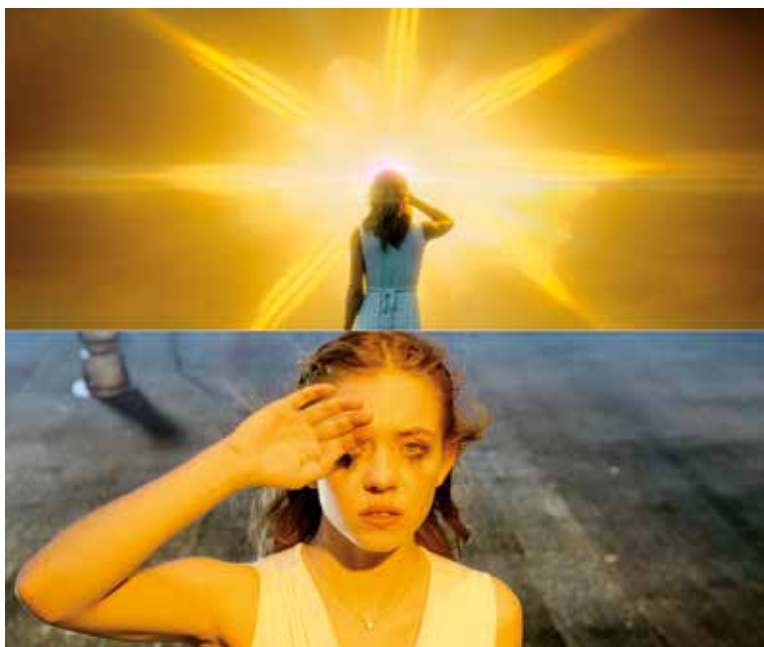


Figure 6. The dark synergy between sound and moving image.
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The director seems to take decisive steps to intensify the abjectness of Julie's being by making the tragic act of her dying in the final scene imperceptible to the other people. For Julie not only dies at the main entrance of the Academy as an ostracised, radically othered entity, but her humanness is permanently disfigured. This unsettling aloofness and (self-)alienation is reinforced above all by grim visual cues, such as Julie's upside-down, bloody face in close-ups and the terrifying smile that emerges as she creates a hallucinated mental image that enables her to re-enact a concert on stage and imagine the piercing applause and unattainable institutional validation.

²⁵ Robynn J. Stillwel (2007) coined the term fantastical gap between diegetic and non-diegetic, which could also explain this narrative crossing. According to her, the fantastical gap is "a place of destabili[s]ation and ambiguity" (p. 186); "a transformative space" that "[...] changes the state, not only of the filmic moment, but also of the observer's relationship to it" (p. 200).



Figure 7. Julie's dehumanisation, alienation and apathetic annihilation.
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Julie sinks into her pathological unreality, missing her last chance to achieve true self-acceptance. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, it is the affectively stimulating, cantabile melody of the electronic arrangement of "Devil's Trill" [1:28:44-1:29:17] that softens the pervasive apathy in the darkness of the visual cues. Although these electronic sounds are informed by an ultra-liberal consumer logic, they are capable of evoking a transgressive artistic and aesthetic appreciation and excellence that in some ways recalls Edmund Burke's (1990 [1759]) notion of the sublime.²⁶ Music is indeed part of a sensual liminal world that functions analogously to terror,²⁷ with a paradoxical mixture of obscurity and delight. By simulating the human voice, these sounds actually express compassion for the victim, at least post-mortem, subversively capturing Julie's lifeless body in all its hostile allure and horror, completing the vicious cycle of dehumanisation.

Conclusion

Mike Cormack (2006) reminds us that "[c]lassical music allows a film director to add significant complexities to the film text and to link the film to other cultural artefacts" (p. 30). In the new age of digital capitalism, this sounds

²⁶ Following the philosophical reflections of Stephen Davies, Rafael De Clercq (2011) discusses the possibility that a musical work can be profound even if the composer's ingenuity served commercial rather than purely artistic purposes (p. 152). One might ask, then, whether the artistic and aesthetic merits of classical music can be preserved even when they have been contaminated by neo-liberal consumerism and trivial visual action. In the case of a positive claim, the digital, fragmented sounds of Tartini's score retain a certain degree of original depth, even if they are contaminated by the bi-political feature of a dehumanising metaphorical hapticity.

²⁷ The aim is to re-contextualise Burke's thought starting from his following concept of the sublime: Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror; is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (1990 [1759], p. 36).

Since this notion of the *sublime* often manifests itself in the form of terror, it is precisely this kind of ambivalent mixture of identification that makes the dehumanising electronic arrangement of "Devil's Trill" a neo-liberal musical vehicle for the sublime.

like a perfect excuse for the advocates of corporate neo-liberalism to justify their exploitative conventions that undermine Western cultural heritage. Through the psychological horror films *The Perfection* and *Nocturne*, one can discern non-normative interpretive, institutional and pedagogical musical practices characterised by bio-political simplification, ultra-liberal hegemony, de-moralisation and hyper-relativism. *The Perfection* displays the most radical ideals of bodily de-personalisation, inattentive listening and musical perfectionism when the performative strategies involve a subversive trinity between the body, brutal violence and the vulgar exposure of sexuality. In contrast to *The Perfection*, *Nocturne*, as a more aesthetically effective product, manages to convey a less raw, darkly vivid immersion through its supernatural demonic imprint –an effect woven from dehumanising forces that aurally captivate the consumerist spectator. Both films, however, produce alienated musical subjects and aim for a stereotypical, strikingly negative image of the sophisticated world of art. At stake is the film industry's need to present a distorted image of academic practices, as if professional musical success requires lethal sacrifice or ideological, mental and physical submission to an extremely violent systematic discipline.

The neo-liberal tactics of commercial agents have equated classical musicians with the dehumanising privileged class while consistently reinforcing the theme of hostile institutional domination. In addition to the overtly violent practices, this domination is also rooted in the profitable commodification of music and neo-liberal fetishisation, resulting in a distinctly disturbing and aesthetically devalued audio-visual resonance. Clearly, the pervasive bio-political interference in academies poses a threat to their fundamental qualitative aspects: the reflective musical understanding, comprehensive musical involvement, the transmission of disseminated musical knowledge and much more. However, all the criticism voiced in this article stems from the fact that both cinematic representations of dehumanised musical bodies are incompatible with contemporary musical practices, even in today's transcultural, globalised and mediatised world.

Given the growing trend of neo-liberal globalisation in the 21st century, one may wonder why this core issue of musical dehumanisation has not been thoroughly discussed in academic circles. To conclude this matter, I refer to Schwartz's (2019) statement that "radical sociologists and anthropologists study the 'micro' forms of resistance to the 'norming' of race, gender and sexuality more frequently than they do the nature of the neoliberal state in advanced post-industrial societies" (p. 68). This strategy of discursively wandering around the periphery instead of problematising

the core of the main systematic problem –global capitalism and its class antagonism– has led to the neglect of artistic and aesthetic discrepancies in the contemporary film industry that are firmly anchored in the discursive formation of neo-liberal episteme.

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Biography / Biografía / Biografia

Rastko Buljančević

PhD student and employee at the Department of Cultural Sciences at the University of Gothenburg and at the Graduate School “The Future of Democracy: Cultural Analyses of Illiberal Populism in Times of Crises (FUDEM)”. Simultaneously, he is pursuing a PhD at the Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad, where he has completed all doctoral courses with top grades. For his academic work, he received two exceptional awards from the University of Novi Sad. He was an exchange student at the Complutense University of Madrid for one semester. His research interests cover a wide range of topics, including the study of film music, video game music, audiovisual culture, poetics of music, piano literature, performance studies and music criticism. His particular focus is on the study of the musical aspect of Pedro Almodóvar’s films, Italian neorealist cinema, contemporary cinema, cultural industries and their intersection with neo-liberal and illiberal power mechanisms. He participates in major international symposia such as *Music and the Moving Image* (US), *Differentiating Sound Studies: Politics of Sound and Listening* (South Korea), and *La creación musical en la banda sonora* (Spain). Additionally, he is a member of the Latin-Americans International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM-AL).