

Siren's Song — Musical Prophecy in Tarantino's *Kill Bill*

Gertrud Koch

One of my first memories of cinema was the strange experience of seeing my own mother crying in the seat next to me while I was too small a child to be equally moved by a melodramatic turn in a film I don't even remember. Usually children are the ones who easily cry and laugh, show anger and disgust in a series of micro spans of time. To see my mother crying came as a surprise to me, and I sensed that it was something different happening in her face than when she cried out of pain after an injury occurred. To my even bigger astonishment, my mother denied having cried in the dark of the cinema, when on our way home I tried to squeeze out of her why she cried.

I remembered this situation when I read Sartre's famous words from *Les mots*, where he remembers the afternoons at the cinema with his mother. In his dense description of the affective transfers between the phenomenon on the screen of the theatre and the screen of his face, he goes to the multimodal perceptions that would stir involuntary tears when specific chords enveloped the visual narrative on screen. He writes: "I would perceive by ear the proud grief that remains silent. I was compromised; the young widow who wept on the screen *was not I*, and yet she and I had only one soul: Chopin's funeral march; no more was needed for her tears to wet my eyes."¹

Sartre's description of his early experience at the cinema as a multimodal perception is based on synaesthetic assumptions that give music the triggering power over affects that couldn't be evoked by the picture alone. The sound, the music and the process of immersion that goes with it are described in Sartre's phenomenological approach as an experience of decentering; what was going on on screen "*was not I*" and when the "I" lost control and started to cry it was mediated by a third party, by Chopin's "Funeral March." This is a decentering that gives way to a concept of aesthetic emotions as a specific kind of emotions that are not identical with emotion as such; for example, the pleasure in horror is an aesthetic emotion that is very different from the experience of real horror.

The role music gains in Sartre's memory of silent films is a very specific one. It becomes an agent, in the sense that it works as a guide through a scene and not only as door opener into a fictive character by raising empathy. Music in silent films does what music does in an operatic performance: it links and at the same moment

separates characters on stage and lets them merge into a scene to which the music is observer, commentator and co-player:

I felt I was a prophet without being able to foresee anything: even before the traitor betrayed, his crime entered me; when all seemed peaceful in the castle, sinister chords exposed the murderer's presence. How happy were those cowboys, those musketeers, those detectives: their future was there, in that premonitory music, and governed the present.²

When Sartre describes in these remarks the leading function of music as the invisible hand behind the scene and the screen, he comes very near to what Siegfried Kracauer once analyzed as the central point in film, e.g. movement:

Movement is the alpha and omega of the medium. Now the sight of it seems to have a "resonance effect," provoking in the spectator such kinesthetic responses as muscular reflexes, motor impulses, or the like. In any case, objective movement acts as a psychological stimulus.... the effect itself appears to be well established: representations of movement do cause a stir in deep bodily layers. It is our sense organs which are called into play.³

Kracauer doesn't stop there but comes to a direct analogy between film and music, when he continues:

Aside from its meaning in each case, music has a direct effect on the senses; its rhythms directly stimulate the senses. The material phenomena represented in film and their movements fundamentally produce the same effect—indeed, film images are thus doubly allotted to this effect because without it they sink back lifelessly into the surface.⁴

Movement and/as music brings plasticity to the flat surface of the screen; therefore one could argue that it is movement that animates the filmic image, not only the mechanical movement that transports frames in a way that we see movement but also the movement that is in the temporal organization of sound. To sink back, "lifelessly into the surface," would spell the aesthetic end of film—it would have lost its power to bring to life.

The animation of the spectator in front of moving visual and acoustic objects is at the bottom of the synesthetic experience linked to film and cinema. It is mostly a "mixed feeling," and an emotion of second order like pleasure about horror or excitement about crying. Only as aesthetic emotion is it possible to enjoy this kind of brutal bloody horror. It only works in fictional settings. In this sense one can establish a link between

aesthetic emotions and narrative emotions, as both are dependent on imaginary processes that are different from the traumatizing experience of live events.

In many situations I have had a problem to articulate, for example, why I like Tarantino's films that many of my friends (not necessarily "professionals") couldn't bear to see because of the violence involved. In this process I have had to explain why I took pleasure seeing the films, not despite but probably because of the Grand Guignol-like presentation of violence. In *Kill Bill* the music plays a decisive role in the subversive transformation of bodily violence on screen into the sarcastic pleasure of vengeance in the spectator.⁵ Its role is very similar to what I described in Sartre's "words": decentering the big "I" of the spectator into a perspective of a scene that is not one with the figures acting in it. In the opening shots of the film, we have seen a close up of Uma Thurman's face full of bloodspots and heard her painful breathing, all in black and white, have watched the close-up of black boots stepping towards her and have heard the weird dialogue about sadism and masochism making it explicit that the shot we hear was the last exchange between two former lovers and their unborn child. Then again the screen turns black and, while the credits appear, we hear Nancy Sinatra singing her famous song from 1966, "Bang Bang My Baby Shot Me Down," and it's worth remembering the lyrics:

I was five and he was six
 He rode on horses made of sticks
 He wore black and I wore white
 He would always win the fight
 Bang bang, he shot me down
 Bang bang, I hit the ground
 Bang bang, that awful sound
 Bang bang, my baby shot me down
 Seasons came and changed the time
 When I grew up, I called him mine
 He would always laugh and say
 "Remember when we used to play?"
 Bang bang, I shot you down
 Bang bang, you hit the ground
 Bang bang, that awful sound
 Bang bang, I used to shoot you down
 Music played and people sang
 Just for me the church bells rang
 Now he's gone, I don't know why
 And till this day, sometimes I cry
 He didn't even say goodbye
 He didn't take the time to lie

Bang bang, he shot me down
 Bang bang, I hit the ground
 Bang bang, that awful sound
 Bang bang, my baby shot me down

The textual narrative, in combination with the melancholic voice of Nancy Sinatra and a very soft and minimalistic tremolo guitar, a.k.a. "Whammy," mark a clear sensual difference between the metallic voice of metal weapons and the vulnerable voice of the singer and the tremolo guitar, which emphasizes the enlarged band with not only the strings but also the range of feelings culminating in the lethal love scene. Indeed, one can argue with Sartre that it is the music (and not alone the words) that functions here in a prophetic way. It announces that, in the next scenes, we will encounter multi-layered emotions that are not as simple as just the outburst of sadism but a masochistic look on sadism. A ballad of revenge, bang, bang, my baby shot me down. The form of the ballad, mixing horror with romantic love motifs, shapes the emotions of horror and disgust into aesthetic pleasure.



The opening credits sequence of Quentin Tarantino's revenge film *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, via criticalcommons.org

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Notes

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, transl. Bernhard Frechtman, (New York: Georg Braziller, 1964), 124.

² Sartre, *The Words*, 125

³ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 158.

⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, "Marseiller Entwurf zu einer Theorie des Films. IV. Mit Haut und Haaren," *Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main, 2005) p. 579.

⁵ *Kill Bill* vol. 1, directed by Quentin Tarantino, 2003.