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Screen Music and Multiple Versions Transdisciplinary Perspectives, Approaches and Challenges

Abstract: When films transitioned to sound around 1930, translation methods such as dubbing and subtitling did not develop immediately. It was in this context of experimentation that the first systematic audiovisual translation strategy of film history emerged: the multiple versions, a mostly European-related phenomenon. Multiple versions were intended to make films accessible to different national and linguistic audiences. In this article, we focus on an aspect that has been largely neglected up to these days, namely the role of music in the process of adaptation of multiple versions to their respective cultural contexts. We argue that this popular phenomenon ought to be analysed also in regard to the musical component of the films and go through the challenges of such research. We plead for a comparative *audiovisual* approach to the topic with transdisciplinary methods and theories, transnational source research, and a wide variety of archives.

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1. Audible Fractures of the “hegemony of the visual”

The period to which our proposal refers is one of ontological redefinition of the history of cinema, through the generalization of the technologies of sound films. In the years around the late 1920s and the early 1930s a “historiographical crisis” occurred.¹ Indeed, as Altman notes, the transition from silent to sound film is one of those moments when the identity of the seventh art was severely threatened, a period when the very concept of cinema was called into question and when conflicts with patents, technologies and endless experimentations emerged. The final breakthrough of sound film in 1930, according to Altman, was the turning point that generally overcame these problems. The introduction of the technologies for sound recordings revealed a new potential of moving images, namely that of being intrinsically audible, next to being visible: “The challenge of the crisis model proposed here is therefore the very rupture of the hegemony of the visual”.²

In this paper we focus precisely on the acoustic dimension of films, more specifically on the multiple versions of it of the early 1930s. We approach the musical dimension of multiple versions, an aspect that has been underexposed in research so far. We demonstrate the methodological approaches and challenges we came across in the exploration of this polyhedral topic.³

When film transitioned to talkies, in fact, translation methods such as dubbing and subtitling – the most widely used internationalization methods today – did not develop immediately. On-screen speaking characters were also perceived as unnatural in the early stages of the early talkies; after all, the three decades of silent films had led to a hegemony of visual gestures and facial expressions. For a few years, other internalization methods were used. It was in this context that the first audiovisual translation strategy in the history of cinema emerged: the multiple versions, a mainly European phenomenon.⁴

Multiple versions aimed to produce an “identical” film for each country interested in the production and distribution of the film, using different cultural adaptation strategies depending on each case. Unlike remakes, which are based on previously released films, multiple versions differ because the versions of the same title are

¹ Altman, Rick (1995).

² Ibid., p. 73. Original French text, translated by the authors: “L’enjeu du modèle de crise proposé ici est donc la rupture même de l’hégémonie du visuel”.

³ By the term we symbolically refer to a polyhedron with the idea that each film shot in multiple versions is composed and defined by its version, as a polyhedron is by its faces.

⁴ By that we do not mean that multiple versions originated or circulated only in Europe, but rather that multiple versions emerged in order to keep on exporting films in the European territory, which was an equally urgent matter for the market within and outside the continent, too. Especially in the European context, translation methods were challenged by the different languages – a situation that differed, for example, from that in the United States, where the language of film production was essentially English only.

planned and created in the same space and the same time of the others. Accordingly, each multiple version resulted in a product that can be considered one and many at the same time, as each version was nationally and culturally distinct. Aspects such as film stars, language, script, gestures, dialogues and music were adapted to the target country. In this sense, we tend to stick to the idea that there is no truly original version of any title produced as a multiple version.⁵ Thus, we view multiple versions as fundamentally transnational and transcultural objects, made simultaneously accessible to different national and linguistic audiences. Examples of films with multiple language versions that are still known today are *The Blue Angel* (D/E), *Dracula* (E/S), *The Congress Dances* (D/F/E).

Transnational and transcultural connections between film production and different film cultures have been explored in film studies for quite some time: not only film as a reproducible and transportable medium, but also stars, genres, techniques, aesthetics and theoretical approaches have been circulating since the first decades of the 20th century.⁶ And although the music of silent film was not technically fixed, it also circulated internationally. Thus, the mobility of musicians, conductors, and composers played an important role in the global standardization of silent film accompaniment, as did the international circulation of musical materials such as sheet music, records, and song lyrics.⁷ The transnational and transcultural conception and circulation of film music was also particularly promoted by multiple versions, leading to methodological challenges.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on music in relation to multiple versions as an object to be researched in a transdisciplinary way. Our paper is an invitation to transdisciplinary cooperation and engagement with this still largely underexplored research topic. Our starting point for this essay is our comparative audiovisual analysis of the German-French coproduction *Der Sohn der weißen Berge / Les Chevaliers de le Montagne* (Luis Trenker, Mario Bonnard, 1930), which we present by starting from the methodological approaches and problems with the aim to stimulate further scholarly discussion and research.⁸

⁵ The concept of original films has always been challenged by various factors since the silent era. It is hardly possible to speak of an original version during the silent era due to inconsistent screening tempos in cinemas or the local censorships, as well as an original version of sound films through special editions, directors' cuts, and remastered editions can certainly be called into question.

⁶ See Miyao/Sessue 2007, Gerow 2010, Kim 2017, Rawle 2018.

⁷ To explore transnational and transcultural perspectives on the practice of silent film music, see Windisch 2014 and Fuchs 2021: 637–652.

⁸ Adorno/Fuchs upcoming 2023.

2. The Sound of multiple Versions: Approaches and Challenges

In scholarly literature, multiple versions have so far been studied primarily with regard to the linguistic aspects and the visual components of the films – the “hegemony of the visual” attested to by Altman is therefore reflected here as well.⁹ Little attention has been paid to the musical component of the films or to an audiovisual perspective and thus there is also a lack of research in popular, transcultural musical culture. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions in the study of film music in multiple versions. For instance, the French-German multiple version *Die Dreigroschenoper / L’Opera de quat’sous* was examined Roberto Calabretto and Charles O’Brien have studied respectively, both focusing on how the particular cultural contexts of this multiple version influenced both the production and reception of the two films.¹⁰ Due to the fact that the German audience was more familiar with operas, they showed, that the German version gives more space to the original link to Berthold Brecht’s work, while the French one remains closer to the style of *vaudeville* and *divertissement*, in order to remain closer to the knowledge of the average French audience.

In addition, Ingeborg Zechner's recent article analyses the German, French and Italian coproduction *Paprika* (1932) in terms of its various soundtracks – a rare case of all three multiple versions still being accessible today¹¹. Paola Maganzani has also focused on the musical component of multiple versions in several works tracing their different national paths, which would have remained unclear or at least limited if the image had been considered alone.¹² Further evidence of the sound aspect of multiple versions comes from Martin Barnier, who has studied choreography, dance, and music scenes on a theoretical level in French-American multiple versions¹³. These examples show that there are isolated strong impulses towards a comparative, transcultural musical analysis of multiple versions within film history and audiovisual translation. Nevertheless, a systematic study of the role of music in the multiple versions of this historical phase of “pan-European”¹⁴ film production has yet to be undertaken.

Various reasons can be cited for the lack of attention paid to this (trans)cultural as well as (trans)national phenomenon of popular music. On the one hand, this lack of research interest may be related to the clash of two disciplines and the

⁹ See for instance the two issues of *Cinéma & Cie* devoted specifically to multiple versions, where the attention devoted to the musical aspect of the films is quite marginal: *Cinéma & Cie. Multiple and multiple-language versions*, 4 and 5 (2004; 2005). About multiple versions broader implications see Adorno upcoming 2023.

¹⁰ Calabretto 2004: 30–48, O’Brien 2006: 123–132.

¹¹ Zechner 2021.

¹² Maganzani/ Sharo 2020: 28–46, Maganzani 2015: 55–65.

¹³ Barnier 2003.

¹⁴ Quaresima 2006.

accompanying disciplinary traditions, methods, and theories, which in practice would require a time-consuming mutual approach as well as transdisciplinary cooperation. On the other hand, the sources' situation proves to be anything but particularly favourable for identifying the musical variations in the respective versions. Even though the first archives and cinematheques were founded in the 1930s, many of the films of this period, multiple versions included, are considered missing today.¹⁵ This prevents the comparison of these movies.

In this sense, we would like to emphasize here that in the research of multiple versions it is very helpful to give importance also to the more local, specialized cultural heritage. For example, our comparative audiovisual study of this film by Luis Trenker and Mario Bonnard *Der Sohn der Weißen Berge / Les Chevaliers de le Montagne* was only possible thanks to the availability of both copies at the Mountain Museum of Turin (Italy).¹⁶ Contrary to expectations, we were able to find the French copy only in this archive, which plays a relatively minor role in the European scenario.

Furthermore, the musical source material through which a comparison of the film scores in the different versions could be made, is often similarly sobering. The musical sources, much like the film versions themselves, are scattered in various archives internationally, which presents a challenge for their study. The disparate source situation of the music materials also goes hand in hand with the fact that commercial products such as sound *Schlager* (film hits) are not necessarily to be found in national music archives, since historical popular music research is still a marginalized field.¹⁷ It should be mentioned here that many of the first talkies were musical films, as the musical numbers provided a particularly good opportunity to show off the new sound film technology. In the 1930s, a large part of the *Schlager* recordings also go back to the existence of multiple versions, which is why the analysis of these songs takes an important aspect in the (trans)cultural interpretation of multiple versions.¹⁸

Film songs are in general plurimedially marketed according to the conventions of commercial distribution of film music by the music industry, through sheet music,

¹⁵ In the promotion of film as an art form Preservation of the tradition of silent film music, for example, the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, founded in 1935, played an important role, as did the Cinémathèque Française, also founded in 1935. About the preservation of silent film music in the sound film era see Windisch 2022: 71–105.

¹⁶ Museo Nazionale della Montagna “Duca degli Abruzzi”, CAI Turin, Italy: museomontagna.org.

¹⁷ Cornelia Szabo-Knotik, for example, has pointed out the problematic source situation of historical sound recordings, whose date of origin as well as biographical information on composers, arrangers, or performers can rarely be determined, cf. Szabó-Knotik 2008: 76–88. On the value of auditory sources for historically based research of popular music and its archives see also Mrozek 2011.

¹⁸ On the importance of the talkie hit in the 1930s, which formed the nexus in the system of “film, radio, and magazines” and which Adorno and Horkheimer described as a “culture industry”, see Currid 1999: 49.

records, music albums, or printed song lyrics. The hit songs of the multiple versions also experienced international plurimedial dissemination, as the lyrics were partly linguistically translated into the respective target country. As explained above, an essential infrastructure for investigating the media-cultural dynamics as well as the contemporary historical contextualization of individual hit songs is provided less by national archives than by a discographer's private collections or online marketplaces such as eBay, through which labels and distribution as well as graphic design can be determined for an analysis in terms of visual history. In his reflections on the importance of audiovisual sources for contemporary historical research, Bodo Mrozek has pointed out that the cover of a record, for example, is an important text and image repository for visual history, which can be used to trace body-historical processes as well as gender and racial aspects, cf. Mrozek (2011): 295-304.¹⁹ The cover design of the plurimedial distribution of sound film hits in multiple versions can also be used to evaluate transmedial narratives also in the respective cultural contexts of the film versions and to draw conclusions about the respective contexts of reception. Moreover, reconstructing the chronological dating of a record, which is indispensable for a historical contextualization of music, often relies on the knowledge of private collectors. Furthermore, the knowledge of private collectors can provide information about the so-called "catalogue runtime" of a record, i. e. how long a record was in the catalogue also says something about its popularity and the reception of the film and its music.²⁰ As part of our research, we examined the international distribution of the sound film hit *Wir Kameraden der Berge* in various media from the German-French MV *Der Sohn der weißen Berge / Les Chevaliers de la Montagne*, which is one of the first multiple version and also the first-ever sound film of the mountain film genre.²¹ In doing so, we were able to draw on the expert knowledge of historical record collector Andreas Schmauder;²² the fact that this sound film hit was still released in a new recording seven years after the film's release, for example, does not correspond to record policy – but says a lot about its popularity and reception context. The joint release of the song with the so-called "Skiläuferlied. Zwoa a g'fuehriger Schnee" indeed indicates that alpine skiing was in full swing as a mass recreational sport in the 1930s. However, the reason for the enduring popularity of this hit song will be attributed to the film's main protagonist, Luis Trenker, who emerged as an UFA film star in the 1930s and continued to be a darling of the public during the Nazi era.

The aforementioned state of research on film music in multiple versions has emphasized the important role of music in the cultural shaping of multiple versions.

¹⁹ See Mrozek 2011: 295-304. On the construction of publicness through the design of the cover of a record or sheet music edition of popular songs, see also Currid 2006.

²⁰ Private archiving and knowledge are a new challenge within cultural studies research.

²¹ Adorno/Fuchs upcoming 2023.

²² As long-time collectors of gramophone records and historical players, Andreas Schmauder and his wife Maria Kurz have founded an antiquarian bookshop and archive of historical sound recordings, which now include over 300,000 historical records from the gramophone era (1890 - 1960).

As a culturally encoded sign and communication system, indeed, music is capable of producing different contents and narratives. Therefore, especially the diegetic film music, as a narrative element of each film, takes a special role in multiple versions in playing with the respective national and cultural adaptation strategies – which do not necessarily coincide. As part of the cinematic narrative, the function of diegetic music²³ is aligned with the various scenic occasions, a convention established in silent film accompaniment. Thus, in multiple versions the use of incidental music, which provides cues from the milieu of the film's scenic events, can identify geographical references that serve an important narrative function in national and cultural conception as well as reading.

In analysing the extra-diegetic music in multiple versions, one is confronted, among other things, with questions of musical authorship²⁴, as our case study of *Der Sohn der weißen Berge / Les Chevaliers de la Montagne*, for instance, has shown. Although the marketing of the respective versions advertised the film score by Italian composer Giuseppe Becces, the extra-diegetic film music shows striking differences. In our comparative audiovisual analysis of this multiple version, we argue on the basis of less musical source material on the German version, that Becces's musical signature can be questioned in some scenes of the French film version. However, an adequate assessment would require insight into the French production materials, which we do not currently have. The search for production materials provided possible insights into national and cultural interests of the film music in the respective film versions and turned out to be another challenge in researching the soundtrack of multiple versions.

3. Call for transdisciplinary Networking

To be able to describe multiple versions in their audiovisuality requires, as we wanted to show with this paper, a multidisciplinary approach. In order to properly assess the diverse (trans)cultural and (trans)national adaptation strategies, film historians and musicologists would need to work more closely together, which in turn can only succeed through collaboration with experts in film technology, film archiving translation as well as adaptation studies. These fields would also need to be coordinated transnationally in the study of multiple versions, since most European countries were involved in the 1930s multiple versions, as well as many other countries outside the continent. It is, therefore, a multinational effort of

²³ The binary distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic music is problematized in recent film music theory (cf. Stilwell 2007, Winters 2010) because it is not uncommon for transitions or all conceivable variants to occur. For an overview summary of the fields of analysis and methods of music in film or music for film, cf. Tieber 2017.

²⁴ In many cases, film music is a collaborative effort. Especially in genre cinema, the music, as it is ultimately heard in the final soundtrack, is rather to be understood as a sequence of decisions. Conceptual preliminary stages of the film music can already be found, for example, in some scripts for Trenker's mountain films.

specialists working simultaneously in different national archival contexts, but ultimately interpreting their results transnationally and transculturally. When systematically researching historical film material, one must always be aware of the historically, nationally evolved archival situation of multiple versions. As our own experience in researching this field has shown, multiple versions in archives and cinemathèques are often not properly catalogued, especially if they date from the production phase between 1929 and 1932. For example, the French film *Les Chevaliers de la Montagne* was not quite considered a French film at the time, even though its producer was the French company Vandal & Delac. An aftereffect of this can be seen today, for example, in the fact that the film is basically non-existent in both French and German archives. In Germany, too, *Les Chevaliers de la Montagne* was not recognized as a national, co-produced film to be preserved: the “real” German *Der Sohn der weißen Berge* was the one to be preserved, and *Les Chevaliers de la Montagne* was (almost) forgotten.

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