

*MUSIC IN ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTARIES :
SEMIOTIC APPROACHES*

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Abstract:

Concerns with climate change are growing every day, more and more people are becoming aware and acting on the big problem of the twenty-first century. Documentaries play a big role in informing the mass population. There has been research on popular music as a tool for ecological awareness. However, few studies have explored film music in environmental documentaries. Using theories from semiotics field and departing from Heidi Hart's book *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster*, this thesis will explore in which ways music accentuates the narrative of different films. Specifically, in my thesis, I will discuss examples from *Océans* by Jacques Perrin (2009) and *A Plastic Ocean* by Craig Leeson (2013) in order to reveal recent narrative techniques. I will argue that music in these documentaries carries an immersive function and that horror conventions are used as a trigger for a high emotional response. In conclusion, this thesis aspires to shed new light on the way our emotional response is activated in order to take action for the pollution of the oceans.

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Introduction

We have been aware of climate change since the 1970s, but today the urge to stop the catastrophic consequences seems to be getting bigger and bigger. Climate change is the big problem of the twenty-first century and we came to a point where communication and education are key, which leads to the question of what is the best way to inform and convince people that it is time to take action. The first environmental documentaries go back as far as 1935 as a reaction on the impact humans made on the environment.¹ In fact, music is a powerful tool in spreading political ideas and it allows us to experience climate change emotionally. A great example for this is a symphony that was created, based on 150 years of global temperatures and in which each degree represents a pitch.² The result is a rather spooky, low melody that circles around in an almost melismatic way. From 1977, the pitch rises more and more until it reaches 2015, where it ends on a really high note, making us realise and experience that climate change is really happening.

In the last few years, academia has gained interest in the musical Anthropocene focusing mainly on popular eco-protest music. According to Heidi Hart, music has the “capacity to work as both critical *and* immersive force.”³ I agree with Harts idea on the immersive function of music and in this thesis, I investigate further how the music is used to trigger a high emotional response in environmental documentaries. Hart explores the narrative power of music for eco-films and states that “music can work as an agent, inviting a state of critical vulnerability in audiences, readers and listeners, raising the stakes for their concern with climate change in an embodied way.”⁴ She relates this to the musical structure and “immersive sonority.”

Furthermore, research has been done on popular music as a tool for ecological awareness. Authors such as Tyson-Lord Gray and Mark Pedelty have researched eco-protest music as a tool for environmental activism, where the focus laid on popular and folk music.⁵ However, there are still few studies that have explored film music in environmental

¹ John A. Duval. *The Environmental Documentary* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

² “What Does Climate Change Sound Like,” YouTube video, 1:32, “Guardian News,” November 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t7rswV0HTY>.

³ Heidi Hart, *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 6.

⁴ Heidi Hart, *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 6.

⁵ Tyson-Lord J Gray, “Eco-Protest Music and the U.S. Environmental Movement,” in *Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism*, ed. Eunice Rojas and Lindsay Michie (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), Mark Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

documentaries until recently. In the chapter “‘Eco-cinema’: Art Film and Documentary,” John Parham touched on the subject of eco-cinema and the rhetorical codes used to attain a big audience, and while the focus lay more on the filmic aspects rather than musical aspects, it is interesting to study a possible transfer of the features Parham discussed in film on the film music.⁶

In this thesis, I will discuss both filmic and musical aspects through an analysis of the relation between the images and the film and the music, using theories on audio-visual relationships by Nicholas Cook.⁷ A close reading of movie fragments is suitable here to find out how the message comes across. As a consumer of these movies, the direct experience is important in the emotional response. To investigate how music works in environmental documentaries, I chose two case studies that are available to a large public through the streaming platform Netflix.

The first chapter is concerned with the theoretical framework and will first introduce Cook’s concepts necessary to understand the audio-visual analysis in the chapters that follow. Based on works by Joe Tompkins and Peter Hutchings, the second part deals with the horror conventions that will be found in the case studies.

In the second chapter, I will introduce the movie *Océans* from Jacques Perrin and analyse it by dividing the sound layers in three. Firstly, I am going to analyse the music composed by Bruno Coulais and its relation to the visuals, using Nicholas Cook’s theories as well as Mervyn Cooke’s findings on the use of music in water movies.⁸ I am then going to point out how horror movie conventions are used to trigger an emotional response as well as relate this affect to the immersive quality of the music, using Tompkins’ and Hart’s article.

The third chapter deals with different musical topoi in the documentary *A Plastic Ocean*. This case study being of a different genre than the art-documentary *Océans*, uses more background music, which corresponds to John Corner’s theories on documentary music.⁹ However, I argue that the instances of foregrounded music are used to create a feeling of urgency and unease, thus strengthening the political message of the movie.

⁶ John Parham, “‘Eco-cinema’: Art Film and Documentary,” in *Green Media and Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

⁷ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸ Mervyn Cooke, “Water Music: Scoring the Silent World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2014).

⁹ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis).

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

To be able to analyse and understand the functions of film music in the documentaries *Océans* and *A Plastic Ocean*, I will shortly discuss the main analytical concepts based on Nicholas Cook's model. Furthermore, basing my research on studies by authors such as Peter Hutchings and Joe Tompkins, the second part of this chapter will serve as a theoretical introduction to the horror conventions found in these environmental documentaries.

1.1. Analysing multimedia

Nicholas Cook's work has really shaped the scholarship on multimedia in the past two decades. Since the relation between images and sound play a big role in making the political message convincing, Cook's theories are useful in analysing the music in environmental documentaries.

In *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Nicholas Cook argues that the meaning coming from multimedia is a result of the interaction of music and visuals. The structure and external factors, such as the audience, play a role in the shaping and understanding of meaning.¹⁰ Cook draws on a metaphor of a Venn diagram in which two circles A and X overlap to create a centre where both circles interact and where all meanings are combined. The meaning in audio-visual media is the result of such an interaction that combines different meanings to create a new one where all associations are available. Therefore, Cook argues, there is a certain tension between music and the visual. Their interaction creates a *transfer of attributes*, where both aspects of the music and the visuals co-create a new meaning.¹¹

In chapter three "Models of Multimedia," Cook introduces a model where he discusses three ways of interaction. When the visuals and the music express the same meaning when watched or listened to separately, we speak of *conformance*.¹² This often happens in cartoon films, where "mickey-mousing" occurs, for example when a descending scale accompanies someone coming down the stairs. The second interaction model is *complementation*, which happens when the visuals and the music are interconnected, adding meaning one to each

¹⁰ Nicholas Cook, "Multimedia as Metaphor," in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Ibid,

¹² Nicholas Cook, "Models of Multimedia," in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

other.¹³ For example when a desert is shown, accompanied by a pentatonic scale, typically associated with Arabic music, making the music locational. Another example of this model will be found in chapter 3. Finally, we speak of *contest* when the two meanings are contradictory.¹⁴ To illustrate, the torture scene in Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* is accompanied by the pop song “stuck in the middle with you,” giving it a very ironic meaning.¹⁵

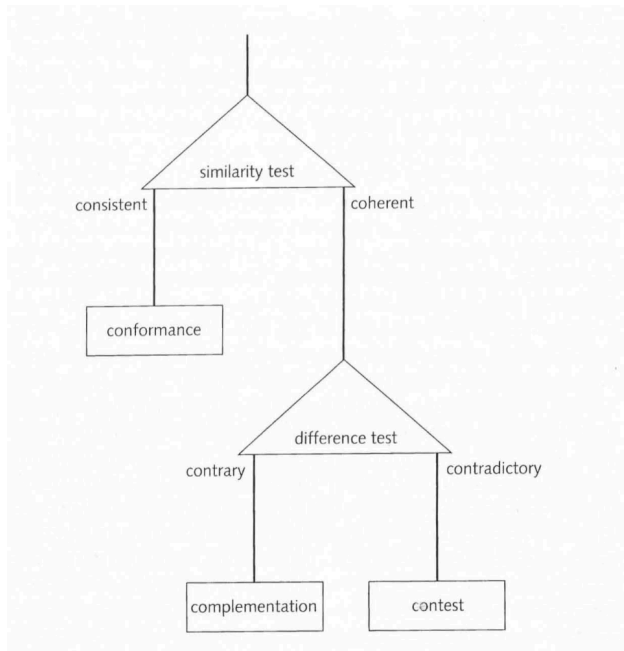


Figure 1: Nicholas Cook's model

1.2. Hearing Climate Change: Horror Conventions.

Over the years, the musical conventions used to fill us with fear have expanded and rooted themselves in our cultural practices. Horror films have used different conventions, from stingers - chords used simultaneously to a violent action¹⁶ - and dissonant strings to pop music intensifying an ironic opposition between sound and image, creating a disturbing feeling. According to Tompkins “most horror films make use of the same affective strategies in order

¹³ Nicholas Cook, “Models of Multimedia,” in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 103-106.

¹⁴ Ibid, 102-103.

¹⁵ “Stuck in the Middle with You- Reservoir Dogs (1992),” YouTube Video, 5:08, “Bartosz Rolka,” June 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIMg2Xw4_8s.

¹⁶ Mervyn Cooke, “Stinger,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/grovemusic/search?q=stinger&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>.

to convey a generally “suitable” tone that corresponds with our (culturally constructed) ‘sense of moral and musical right and wrong’—with what we imagine we *should* hear when confronted with violent imagery and horrific situations. Within this context, horror music is often considered as a signifier of emotion, a culturally specific approach to musical ‘mood’ conventions.”¹⁷

1.3. Affect and Emotion

There are a lot of different musical elements that are associated with horror movies and used to scare the viewers. Dissonance and chromaticism are important techniques in this genre. Conventions have changed over the years. In the 1940’s, a more common way of creating suspense was with a “standard model of ‘eerie’ mood music, one geared more towards atmosphere and suspense rather than impulsive moments of shock.”¹⁸ Atonal music leant itself very well to this purpose, which allowed for other instrumentation such as electronic devices. Composers such as Ennio Morricone and John Carpenter used these styles as well as synthesized scores, and ambient and industrial noises integrated the musical style of horror movies.¹⁹ Recent movies such as *The Descent* (2005) also make use of troubling noises.²⁰

A very common instrumentation choice is the use of strings, which - according to Kay Dickinson- are associated with the human voice, making it possible to express a sound very close to someone in pain.²¹ Tompkins argues that “to that end, horror’s musical affects carry a decisive moral connotation as well, one that works to implicate certain sounds and structures with the overall ‘negative’ implications of horrific action and events.”²²

Another common device used in horror movies is silence. Mostly used before a stinger chord for a jump scare, Hutchings argues that “audiences familiar with horror’s musical conventions will know that the maximum threat occurs once any atmospheric music ceases and we are left with a menacing silence that could at any moment be breached by an ear-

¹⁷ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 191.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 197.

²⁰ “The Descent – Original Film Soundtrack-01 Opening.” YouTube Video, 0:36, “Adam D,” June 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV1F-3St9SY&list=PLocqHZj7MJfkWptoUKqpbjksO6Vcy2FZt>.

²¹ Kay Dickinson, “Troubling Synthesis: The Horrific Sights and Incompatibel Sounds of Video Nasties,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 167-188, cited in Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 190.

²² Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 190.

splitting stinger”²³ However, silence can also “acquire an expressive function rather than merely marking the absence of music.”²⁴ This is the case in Philipp Glass’ score for the 1931 movie *Dracula*. In the case of the first case study *Océans*, the absence of music serves a similar function of provoking uneasy feelings.

Ostinati are also commonly used in horror scores to create tension. This means a musical pattern that is often repeated, while the other musical elements change.²⁵ An early example of this technique is Rosza’s score for *Double Indemnity*, where “ostinati are used for the underscoring of dialogue and voice overs [...], not conflicting with the audibility of the words but creating a feeling of underlying tension quite incommensurate with the simplicity of the means employed.”²⁶ This technique is also a common feature in the music for the 1975 movie *Jaws*, in which the leitmotiv for the shark – a repetitive minor second - creates a “sense of impending threat to the pursuers but can also suggest the panic of the pursued.”²⁷ John Carpenter’s score for *Halloween* (1978) also uses a minimalistic aesthetic, with a repetitive pattern “that ultimately work to create a sense of tension and release.”²⁸ Carpenter’s score makes use of strings and piano, both instruments that are commonly used to create tension and suspense.²⁹ The use of repetitiveness, ostinati, quick tempo, as well as the instrumentation are features that are used to create an uneasy feeling in *A Plastic Ocean*.

This chapter presented the main concepts necessary to understand the analysis of the case studies, which is vastly based on Cook’s metaphor model. I also identified the main horror conventions used in the score for both documentaries exposed in the following chapters.

²³ Peter Hutchings, “Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks,” in *Sounds and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*, ed. Graeme Harper (New York: Continuum), 221.

²⁴ Ibid, 220.

²⁵ Laure Schapper, “Ostinato,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000020547>.

²⁶ Mervyn Cooke, “Hollywood’s Golden Age: Narrative Cinema and the Classical Film Score,” in *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 111.

²⁷ Mervyn Cooke, “State of the Art: Film Music Since the New Hollywood,” in *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 461.

²⁸ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 200.

²⁹ Ibid, 195.

Chapter 2: Music and the Environment: *Océans*

2.1 Music soundtrack

According to John Corner, “documentaries do not usually invite us to *immerse* ourselves in the worlds they portray in the same way that feature fiction usually does.”³⁰ The movie *Océans* by Jacques Perrin differs from this, inviting immersion as well as critical reflection. The documentary shows the sea life and sends a message to save the oceans, threatened by pollution.³¹ The narrative is supported by the music and sound in order to provoke an immersed feeling and creates a contrast through the absence of music and use of horror conventions to awaken the listener and invite a critical state of mind.

The first seven minutes of the documentary, there is no music, only environmental sounds. Coulais’ music is introduced at 7:10, where a minimal, electronical atmospheric music accompanies the visuals with asteroids, which contributes to the effect of an abstract, far away phenomenon. This resonates with the question Mervyn Cooke asks regarding the music of Jacques Cousteau’s 1956 aquatic movie *Silent World*: “is the dissonant idiom intended [...] to place the audience in a responsive state that encourages deeper contemplation?”³² Through examples from fragments of the movie *Océans*, I am now going to investigate in which ways the immersion is created in this movie.

The term coined by Randolph Jordan “reflective audioviewing” is an important concept in the analysis of documentaries, especially documentaries with a dystopic storyline, as the active and engaged position of the viewer is triggered.³³ In the fragment with asteroids mentioned above, the music seems to encourage deeper contemplation and invites to continue watching for this purpose.³⁴ This allows the viewer to engage with the whole movie. The contemplation is triggered by the narrator mentioning other galaxies. At this point, we hear

³⁰ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 135.

³¹ Jacques Perrin, “Océans,” Pathé, 2009, 1:41:35, https://www.netflix.com/watch/70118953?trackId=14170287&tctx=0%2C0%2C5a93d401-63ba-474c-8bea-c69736a011a1-111976275%2C9e21ddc1-6565-4a17-97bd-18ca30c5eaba_13773613X3XX1560498022096%2C9e21ddc1-6565-4a17-97bd-18ca30c5eaba_ROOT.

³² Mervyn Cooke, “Water Music: Scoring the Silent World,” in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 112.

³³ Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard, “More than Background: Ambience and Sound Design in Contemporary Art Documentary Film,” in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis: 2014), 168.

³⁴ I understand “reflective audioviewing” as a state of deeper contemplation, which can be considered as a critical and analytical state of mind.

and see a heartbeat. This brings us back to the earth and centres our attention on what is coming next.

The mood changes in the next fragment of the movie, where we see medusas accompanied by a circling melody. The music in this passage is very visual, following the movements of the animals and of the ocean, with much rising and falling, imitating the waves and flowing movement of the water. At 10:23 where the narrator names “frantic races, wild packs,”³⁵ we see dolphins racing through the waters, at which point the music follows with a rapid tempo and pointed notes, mimicking the movement and playfulness of the dolphins.

Using Nicholas Cook’s diagram as a reference, we can consider this fragment as audio-visual conformance.³⁶ The rapid and playful movement from the dolphins is imitated in the music through the tempo and the pointed notes. This feature from the music is in turn applicable to the visuals, giving the impression that the dolphins are somehow playing. Cook uses the term *transfer of attributes* to refer to the features that both music and visuals have separately, but which, when combined, create a new but encompassing meaning.³⁷ Similarly, the feeling of synchronisation is defined as an “iconicity of process,”³⁸ which is accentuated by the fact that this technique is a recurring practice in the portraying of the ocean. A waltz for example often depicts the movements of the creatures of the sea.³⁹ In this fragment, there is a very fast waltz, punctuated with string ostinatos and harp glissandi to imitate the movements of the animals and water.

Heidi Hart states that while the visual aspect is privileged in movies, music has nevertheless an important role in eco-cinema.⁴⁰ Here, the visuals indeed play a big part, and the shots are taken in a very artistic way. However, the music is not neglected and left to the background. It is instead foregrounded and given a prominent role.

³⁵ “Des courses effrénées, des hordes sauvages.”

³⁶ Nicholas Cook, “Multimedia as Metaphor,” in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57-97.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Nicholas Cook, “Multimedia as Metaphor,” in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57-97

³⁹ Mervyn Cooke, “Water Music: Scoring the Silent World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2014), 106.

⁴⁰ Heidi Hart, “Mozart on Ice,” in *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 59.

2.2 Sound aspects and immersion

Océans begins with a soft sound of the wind blowing, while the black screen lightens up to name the collaborating partners, the movie being a production for the national museum of natural history. The next shot of breaking waves of the ocean is accompanied by a loud and close sound of howling wind. A feature that is striking from the very beginning is the closeness of the sound. We hear every sound the animals make, and every wave or wind stroke is directly transmitted in the microphone, working in a similar way to an asmr YouTube video.⁴¹

These sounds from the environment add an extra layer to the immersive quality of the music. The sound of an insect, buzzing close to your ears, especially when the viewer wears headphones, feels like a real insect, giving the reflex to chase it away. This prominence of the sound makes it tangible and therefore creates a feeling of immersion, as if you were yourself surrounded by the landscapes in the movie. A notable aspect concerning the soundscape is the result of these sounds as a product of the postproduction process. According to Mervyn Cooke, the “real underwater sounds- principally divers’ amplified breathing and sonar bleeps- can be integrated into the musical fabric to blur the distinction between the diegetic world and the musical commentary.”⁴² To illustrate, the part where the dolphins are swimming, the visuals are accompanied by music as well as the sounds produced by the moving waters. The result is a three-layered medium, where the combination of the iconicity of process and the locational sounds work together to create an immersive force.

2.3 Horror Conventions in the Dystopian Narrative

Another striking feature in *Océans* is the use of horror conventions to address the human impact near the end of the documentary. While the movie can be characterized as art film because it shows beautiful landscapes and animals in the purest and untouched environments, a dystopian storyline is included where it suddenly becomes dark. It sends a powerful message that the oceans are being threatened. At 1:21:00, the narrator tells: “The trail of human genius contaminates the shores and depths of the waters,”⁴³ which is mirrored

⁴¹ These videos are made by making sounds very close to the microphone. This creates supposedly calming sounds. According to the Urban Dictionary, ASMR stands for “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.” Urban Dictionary, “ASMR.” Urban Dictionary, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ASMR>.

⁴² Mervyn Cooke, “Water Music: Scoring the Silent World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2014), 109.

⁴³ “La trace du génie humain souille rivages et profondeurs.”

with images of water filled with garbage. A seal swims in the filthy waters, the camera following its movement and capturing the industrial landscape in the background. The screen is dark and reddish, smoke going up in the air in the background. There is no music in this passage. Only a hum, almost like a squeaky door, opening up on something terrible. It slowly rises in pitch. When the seal surfaces, the sound reflects the sound from the factories, operating at full capacity. As mentioned in the first chapter, these horror conventions in combination with the visuals provoke an uneasy feeling.⁴⁴

The silence in this part of *Océans*, where the music is otherwise so prominent, makes the contrast a tool for a critical approach from the viewer. Hart argues that there are two techniques for activist movies: sentimental images and music or other montage techniques that allow for critical distance.⁴⁵ In this case, the sentimental images are paired with absence of music. There is only a creeping sound in the background, that you have to identify and pay attention to in order to discover where it is coming from. According to Parham, “frequently offering silence and/or absence of dialogue, art film provides a contemplative space.”⁴⁶ The immersive quality created by the orchestral music in the rest of the documentary is disrupted by the absence of music, thus providing this space for reflection. I argue that in this case immersion is created through the *conformance* of music and visuals and that the obvious change in mood and absence of music create a contrast that leaves space for the viewer to come out of the immersed state and critically reflect on our actions and the implications for the oceans.

This chapter examined the immersive quality of the music in the environmental documentaries and how it is created. I identified some topoi used in the film *Océans*, basing my analysis on Cooke’s model of audio-visual relationships. The recognition of these often-used signs puts us in a state that is relatable, we feel immersed, completely engaged with the subject. The music is close to the classical Hollywood sound, with a big orchestra, following the movement of the visuals, which creates immersion through the working of the closeness of the sounds and the appealing images to the mind. The contrast becomes even stronger with the passage showing the pollution of the oceans, with a high note, rising in pitch, a humming

⁴⁴ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 195

⁴⁵ Heidi Hart, *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 61.

⁴⁶ John Parham, “Eco-cinema’: Art Film and Documentary,” in *Green Media and Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 178.

pedal sound and unsettling rumbling sounds. The visuals play a big part in the realisation that humans are destroying the planet, however the absence of music and use of sounds found in horror conventions is as strong as the visuals. There is not a domination of the visuals, rather a domination of the absence of music, which leaves room for critical thinking from the viewer.

Chapter 3: Hearing Urgency in *A Plastic Ocean*

The second case study I chose explores the same theme as the first one: the pollution of the oceans. However, the 2013 movie *A Plastic Ocean* Produced by Jo Rixton is very different in genre, compared to *Océans*. While the latter clearly took an artistic approach, *A Plastic Ocean* is very factual and shows how Rixton and journalist Craig Leeson go on a discovery journey and interview scientists and individuals that are affected by the plastic problem to assemble information about the pollution of the oceans. This difference in genre is also clearly reflected in the music. As Corner argues: “The more that a production privileges other aims, including journalistic integrity or the veracity of direct observational recording, the likelier it is that music will become a more sensitive issue.”⁴⁷ Since the movie is a production from the Plastic Oceans Foundation, there is a clearer political message than in *Océans*. This indicates that the music in *A Plastic Ocean* is likely to work in a different way than in the first movie.

My analysis here will be concerned with musical signs. Ronald Rodman uses the term *topical implications* to refer to a musical sign. He defines the term as “discursive labels that trigger within the audience some idea of extra musical expression. Audience members are able to decode these musical meanings based on their own experiences and competencies with musical styles.”⁴⁸ I will use Rodman’s definition of *topoi* to characterise the signs in the passages of the movie.

The documentary starts with a shot under water with light, and we hear low sustained strings, with a very slow descending melody in the harp. A dolphin appears, and the camera follows its movement from above. At this point, we hear a slow melody on woodwinds. Following Corner’s analysis method and diving the music in moments of musical usage, we can consider the beginning of the movie as the setting for general expectations.⁴⁹ The nostalgic melody prepares us for the images to come. We naturally expect that the beautiful images of clean water and dolphin are not going to last through the movie and I argue that the sad music already projects this expectation. We then see the first interview with Leeson and

⁴⁷ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 124.

⁴⁸ Ronald Rodman, “Towards an associative Theory of Television Music,” in *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

⁴⁹ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 127.

these microplastics. There is a clear musical contrast between the previous scene on the boat and the following scene where we see a beautiful shot of the three-mast sailboat with a sunset. Then, a peaceful, warm melody enters, played on low woodwinds and rising in arpeggiated notes, accompanying other beautiful images of marine life.

The use of contrasting sequences reflected in the mood of the music is evident in the case of the succession of scenes near the end. The scene shows a woman being interviewed as she shops with her child in the supermarket, trying to avoid all plastics and other chemicals for the health of her family. The music accompanying this passage has a strong accent on the first and third beat played by low strings, and an interval of a major second is repeated constantly in a quick tempo and in different pitches. The quick repetition of this interval and the strong, rapid underlying beat creates tension and suspense that the viewer can associate with danger, through connotations deriving from the famous soundtrack John Williams composed for the 1975 movie *Jaws*, which was also a prominent feature in the 1978 movie *Halloween*. Although the shark motive in *Jaws* is a minor second, the constant repetition of the small interval and the low register of the instrumentation is rooted in horror conventions and, as mentioned in the first chapter, creates a threatening feeling.⁵³ Using Cook's model, we can speak of a *transfer of attributes*, thus creating *complementation* as the music brings a connotation of fear to the environment of the supermarket filled with plastics, and these same images explaining the environmental issues add the meaning of threat to the music, reinforcing the audio-visual relationship to create psychological unease.⁵⁴

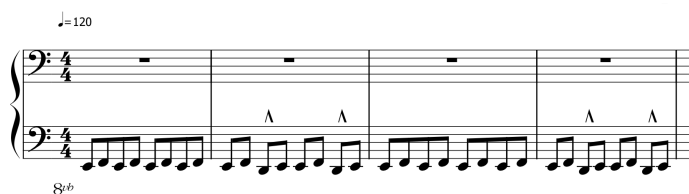




Figure 4: transcription from *A Plastic Ocean: Supermarket Scene*

The movie creates a contrast between this threatening feeling and a positive one in the next sequence. At 1:23:31 in the same supermarket when the narrator tells us to ask supermarkets for alternative packaging, leave plastics behind so that “when [the disposal of plastic packaging] becomes their problem, you’ll find out they will do something about it.”⁵⁵ The documentary sends an encouraging message and uses different music: the soundtrack features a quick and happy guitar tune with major chords in a higher register, thus actively participating in the new meaning created by the voice-over.

What I have demonstrated here is that the composers have made significant use of certain topoi to create a sense of urgency. Particularly the use of the perfect fourth as a signifier for urgency through the association with an ambulance alarm, and the strong beat on low strings along with a rapid repetition of a major second that is reminiscent of the minor second interval with strong beat of *Jaws*, are good examples to illustrate the tactics of the movie to encourage activism. While the soundtrack in the documentary lays mostly in the background and functions as glue between the different scenes, giving a sense of continuity, the instances where music is foregrounded without speech, results in it being “more fully active in the production of meaning.”⁵⁶

Conclusion: Music’s Role in Environmental Film

This thesis set out to understand the ways in which music is used to support a dystopian narrative in environmental documentaries. While performing the analysis, it became clear that music is a powerful tool for communicating a political message. This happened in different ways. I maintained that the music actively participates in the narrative, functioning as a

⁵⁵ Craig Leeson, “A Plastic Ocean,” Plastic Oceans Foundation, 2016, 1 :21 :40, <https://bit.ly/2HOCi5R>.

⁵⁶ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 128.

trigger for emotions. Using Cook's metaphor model, I argued that this is particularly the case in the first case study *Océans*, where this happened through the use of prominent ambient sound as well as the orchestral score that followed the movement of the visuals, creating space for the viewer to get immersed. Contrastingly, it were the instances where the music was absent that allowed the viewer to leave the immersed state and critically reflect on the narrative, particularly on the passage with a dystopian narrative.

The second documentary, *A Plastic Ocean*, makes use of other topoi to trigger a strong emotive feeling. The cultural association of a quickly repeating perfect 4th with the sound of an ambulance adds an urgent and serious meaning to the visuals. Another musical sign that played a considerable role in the creation of a fearful connotation was the rapid repetition of the major second interval. This litany of a small interval is a much-used horror convention as well: it is featured in "A Haunted House" from the soundtrack of *Halloween*, where the piano also plays a minor second again and again.

Accordingly, a significant finding was that both case studies use common musical signs from horror conventions. This became clear through the analysis of audio-visual interaction: the transfer of attributes of the music and images, creates a new meaning of unease and underlines the seriousness of the issue, promoting immediate action. In the case of *Océans*, a certain apprehension and fear is created through the use of unsettling sounds, reminding the viewer of horror movies such as *The Descent*, where strange sounds are used to create psychological unease.⁵⁷ Even though the sound of the water is still very prominent, the otherwise absence of music adds to the unsettling effect of the passage, which is also a method used in horror films to build up suspense.⁵⁸

The fact that both documentaries are completely different but are still treating serious issues such as climate change and pollution of the oceans by making use of horror conventions may be a sign that the urgency for a solution is growing. In conclusion, the music has a narrative function and is used to reinforce the political message. It is therefore relevant for musicologists to further research how music performs in (environmental) documentaries.

⁵⁷ "The Descent – Original Film Soundtrack-01 Opening." YouTube Video, 0:36, "Adam D," June 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV1F-3St9SY&list=PLocqHZj7MJfkWPtoUKqpbjksO6Vcy2FZt>.

⁵⁸ Peter Hutchings, "Horror: Music of the Night: Horror's Soundtracks," in *Sounds and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*, ed. Graeme Harper (New York: Continuum), 221.

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