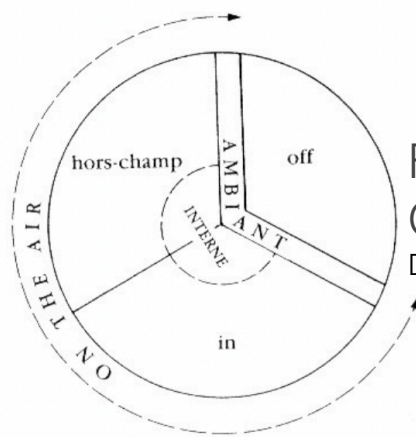


**EMIL CHIEUSSE**


## FILM SCORE CONCEPTUALISATION

Defining musical identity in short-film projects

Music Technology Department

Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki

April 2023

All audio examples are available through the following link and accessible through hypertext links in the .pdf when clicking on the  icons.

All video examples are available through the following link and embedded in the .Epub version of this thesis. You can also click on the caption under the video to open the link to the extract in question.

[Click here](#)



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## ABSTRACT

Conceptualisation is the step of the film scoring process that focuses on defining the musical identity of the film project in question. It consists of determining the key ideas at the core of the musical language that will be developed in the composition of the film's soundtrack. In this thesis, I will define and demonstrate my view on what a film score *concept* is and how the conceptualisation process can be designed to create unique musical identities that support the singularity of each project. My research objectives for this thesis are to examine how the different stages and aspects of the filmmaking process can inform the definition of the film score concept, and how, through processes of abstraction and restriction, I can determine a compositional toolbox that answers the specificities of each project and each story.

The thesis is articulated around the exploration of multiple facets of the filmmaking process (such as working with the screenplay or the relationship of music with sound design) and of specific narrative elements (such as the setting and characters of the story), that may inform the elaboration of the film score concept. These observations and discussions about creative processes are based on a body of work of eleven short film projects at different stages of their development and from different film genres. While the core of this work is in the reporting of my experience in those short film projects, the ideas discussed in the text are also discussed in relation to existing cinematic works and film music theories.

This thesis serves as a consolidation of my current views on the film scoring process, the learning outcomes of the projects I participated in during my studies and the directions towards which I wish to develop my ideas and practices in the following steps of my career.

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will take a practical approach to the film scoring process in order to discuss topics such as conceptual scoring and sonic identity from a film composer's perspective. We will broach these topics from a theoretical angle but also follow the practical applications of these theories in the technical process itself. The conclusions and deductions we will make from my case studies and theoretical readings only depict my own interpretation and what suits my own film-scoring process at this moment in time.

I believe writing this thesis is a great opportunity for me to articulate the development of my thinking and the current state of my process at this turning point of my career, as a young film composer finishing my studies.

Every way of working is personal, and most of what I have learned up to this point I have learned through trial and error, testing methods and systems until finding something that suits me, and that keeps evolving. Ultimately those things are very much project-dependent and every new project comes with its own challenges and situations to adapt to.

This thesis serves as a checkpoint of my development as a film composer in the early stages of my career. It is a consolidation of my point of view on the field as a newcomer with the knowledge and skills I have acquired through my studies and the multiple projects I have worked on. Part of this thesis will also focus on future career prospects and some projects that are currently in the works. I would wish this thesis to be also valuable on a practical level, perhaps for fellow composers starting in the field or filmmakers interested in hearing a composer's perspective.

The discipline of film music studies logically derived from the field of film narratology, which itself came to its own in the 1970s, 80s and 90s with authors such as "Christian Metz, Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, Michel Chion, Edward Branigan etc., building on the work of literary theorists and narratologists from the Russian formalists via Wayne Booth,

Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Mieke Bal, David Herman, Ansgar Nünning, Manfred Jahn, Monika Fludernik etc.” (Heldt 2011).

Claudia Gorbman's book *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (1987) is considered a pioneering work in establishing film music studies as its own discipline. Many publications followed her lead in the 1990s, widening the spectrum of approaches and angles on the topic, “beyond the general questions of description and interpretation that were the focus of the earlier literature” (Neumeyer 2013).

In this thesis, I will attempt to establish a clear connection between theoretical sources and their practical application in the film scoring process.

The vast majority of references and documentation of film composers' processes and working methods come from Hollywood. The influence of those Hollywood methods on all film industries around the world is undeniable, and while my own work does not directly relate to that market, I believe it is valuable to consider what is now considered a global standard in filmmaking, to compare, learn and question the position of the film composer within the overall process, and how to perhaps adapt those standards and shape new ways of working that permit and encourage deeper conceptual film scoring methods.

### Film Scoring Process Timeline

Looking at the film scoring process in its standard chronological order, this paper will mostly focus on the earlier stages of the timeline. Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright, in their book *On The Track: A Guide to Contemporary Film Scoring* (2004) list the different stages of the process as follows: *Preliminaries* (meeting the team, analysing the script, temp tracks, spotting, budgeting and scheduling), *Conceptualising* (developing the concept, creating mockups), *Timings* (setting up tempo maps, synchronisation and time-code related things), *Composing* and *Recording*. (Karlin and Wright 2004).

According to music editor William Bernstein, the involvement of the composer in the Hollywood system is usually quite late, after both the picture editor and music editor have already discussed and tried various musical options with the director and assembled temporary soundtracks for test screenings. (Bernstein and Badami 2022)

- 1) Composer is selected
- 2) Music added to scenes by **picture editor**
- 3) **Music editor** assembles a *temp track* and *Temp dub*: temporary soundtrack for test screenings
- 4) **Composer** sees the movie and meets the temp (some composers refuse to hear the temp)
- 5) *Spotting session* with composer, music editor, director and producers
- 6) Budgets and schedules
- 7) Demo meetings with the composer's first demos

The first stages of the film scoring process in Hollywood productions (Bernstein and Badami 2022)

In the case of the selected works we will be focusing on in this thesis, the practice has been quite different from the standardised feature film process and the freedom and flexibility of the short-film projects I have worked on have allowed more exploration of alternative ways of working and so-called "non-linear processes".

- 1) Composer gets involved around the end of the screenwriting process
- 2) Conceptualisation and discussions with director **and sound designer**
- 3) *Screenplay-based spotting session* with sound designer and director
- 4) Early demos for cues that may be useful to have *before the shooting* of the film (demos shared with director and sound designer)
- 5) Composer on set when possible
- 6) Larger set of demos for picture editor to try on first edit versions
- 7) *Spotting session* on edit versions

General outline of the first stages of the process in my short-film projects

Regardless of at which stage the composer gets involved in the project, the establishment of the score's concept will in most cases be one of the first things to do. That concept may then be modified and adapted throughout the different phases of the process.

I decided to be referring to examples of short films in different stages of their production, thus illustrating how later stages of the process may alter, modify and challenge the original concept ideas set at the beginning of the composition work.

## Research Questions and Methodology

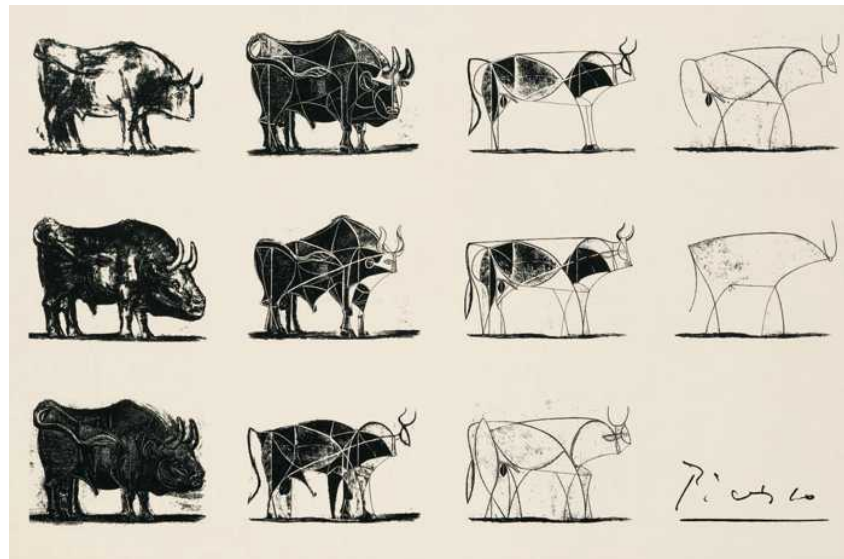
For this thesis, I will take as an objective not only to explore theories about abstraction and restriction as tools for conceptual scoring but also to define, shape and share my own personal *modus operandi*.

Through the different projects I will be referring to, we will examine **how the different stages and aspects of the filmmaking process can inform the definition of the film score concept and its sonic palette**. How each phase of the project and every aspect of the narration of a film may be sources of inspiration and fuel for the process of abstraction? How, through abstraction and restriction, I can **determine my playing field in terms that hold meaning, purpose and intention under a solid unifying concept?**

Before diving into the exploration of these questions, we must define the pivotal ideas and terms I use as cornerstones of my thinking process.

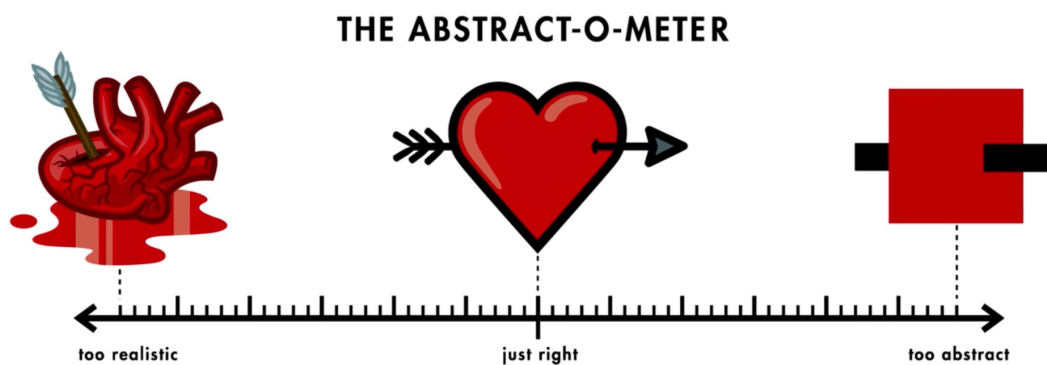
## ABSTRACTION

My recent visit to Los Angeles, studying for a semester at the University of Southern California, has been a turning point for me. It served as a conclusion to my studies and opened up new prospects and personal goals for my career.



Picasso's *Bull Study* (1946)

Patrick Kirst, head of the Screen Scoring department of the University Of Southern California's Thornton School of Music (USC Thornton) — one of the leading programmes in film scoring in the United States — has the idea of “abstraction” at the very core of his work and pedagogical angle. He used Christoph Niemann's abstract-o-meter to introduce us to such concepts.

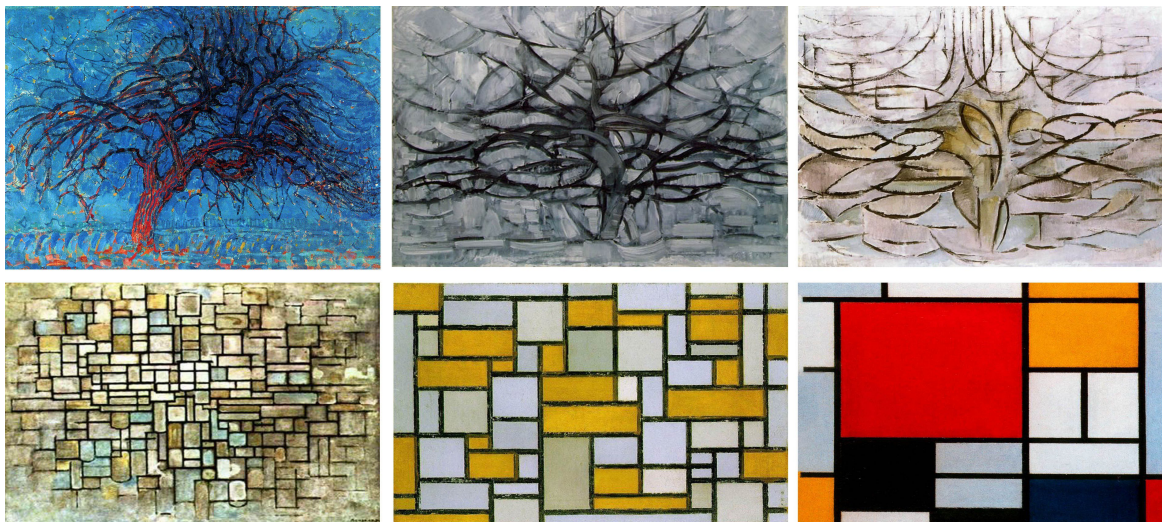


Christoph Niemann - *Abstract-o-meter*

Christoph Niemann himself describes his relationship to the process of abstraction as the process of “getting rid of everything that is not essential to making a point” (Niemann 2019)

“Each idea requires a very specific amount of information” – it’s not just about minimalism or making things oversimplified, but about determining the appropriate extent of the creative substance needed to get the message across.

Abstraction can be defined in many different ways, some of which are very broad. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “the situation in which a subject is very general and not based on real situations” (The Cambridge Dictionary). Perhaps a more useful definition for us comes from scientific use: “the act of obtaining or removing something from a source: the act of abstracting something” (Britannica Dictionary). This already leads us closer to the sense of process,



Mondrian's Trees and Compositions (circa 1910 - 1930)

abstraction as a *method*. The online glossary of the Tate art galleries defines it as the act of removing elements from an object in order to create a more simplified form of it.

Composer Augusta Read Thomas, during her composition masterclass at IRCAM for the *Manifeste 2022* festival, also presented her relationship to levels of abstraction in her work, taking Mondrian's trees as a pictorial example (Read Thomas 2022).



## “THE HOLLYWOOD BOX”

During the masterclass held by Patrick Kirst, it occurred to me that the discussion was mostly centred around compositional techniques involving traditional notation and the “abstraction” applied only to the musical, thematic, and tonal aspects while keeping the instrumentation — the romantic orchestra (especially the string section) – quasi-untouched. As if there was a limit not to cross in how much the orchestra could be altered or modified sonically. Patrick Kirst used the term “Hollywood box” to define those limits (Kirst 2022). While it felt to me these theories and philosophies of abstraction could apply to many more musical and sonic parameters, they are, in the very specific Hollywood context, mostly used only in accordance with the traditional instrumentation that can only be modified to a certain degree. This phenomenon could be given multiple different reasons, historical, artistic, but mostly economical, that we will not discuss here. One aspect that reinforces that feeling of the existence of a “Hollywood sound” is indeed the very standardisation of the film scoring process itself, steeped in traditionalist and conservative methods and artistic visions, largely shaped by economical factors. The considerable use of *temp* music<sup>1</sup> from prior productions is one manifestation of such inward-looking ideologies.

Many of the composers I got to hear from in Los Angeles had the term *concept* at the very core of the depiction of their working methods. But often, the abstractions and conceptual ideas in musical terms seemed to remain a clever detail in the writing, something akin to an *easter egg*, a message, hidden in the musical score for the analysts to discover, not something that would define the entire musical language of the score. It seems to me the composers were stretching the possibilities of their musical experimentation while keeping the “illusion” of the Hollywood sound intact, never to risk disconcerting the average blockbuster-movie audience.

Perhaps the quote that struck me the most was one of Carter Burwell (*Blood Simple*, *The Big Lebowski*, *No Country For Old Men*), a composer who willingly keeps himself afar from the inner

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<sup>1</sup> existing pieces of music — often from previous film scores — used by the editing team to cut the picture with music before the composer gets to join the project



workings of the industry and from the biggest money-machine blockbuster projects. He talked about the film composers having a “moral obligation to use the orchestra”. Many of the great film composers I got to hear from talked about their responsibility regarding orchestras, and Hans Zimmer insisted on the fact that “it is an honour to keep orchestras alive” (Zimmer 2022).

This is just one example of the economical and cultural aspects far outside the creative needs of the projects in question that still largely seem to influence the artistic choices of film composers.

Although startled and somewhat disillusioned by the realities of the creative status of the Hollywood context, the point of this thesis is not to illustrate my opposition to the Hollywood standard. On the contrary, a lot of the theories about conceptual scoring come from Hollywood composers themselves and most of what I personally have come to learn about these topics come from Hollywood productions and creators. I am not speaking from within that system and do not wish to speak for creators involved in it. However, the things I discovered during my time in Los Angeles and from the various sources I explored regarding the shape of the industry and the creative implications of this so-called “Hollywood box” were catalysts for the development of my own thought process. Incentives to shape my own ideals for the creative work of film scoring and the ways I would wish to push the boundaries of what conceptualisation can do for the composition process.

This thesis consolidates my own vision and point of view on the film scoring process as it is now and describes how I adapt it within the context I am working in at the moment.

This discussion around the topic of abstraction leads us to the main notion that I wish to broach and that is the term that encapsulates all this philosophy around this creative process: the *concept*. This term is so widely spread and overused that it may have already become a cliché. But if we define it carefully and precisely, I believe it is a useful term to describe the way of thinking that I wish to develop in my own process.

## CONCEPT

The most appropriate definition in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is perhaps: “organised around a main idea or theme”. Often referred to as *mental objects*, concepts are very much linked with the idea of abstraction we discussed above. Its etymology traces back to the Latin word *conceptus* meaning *something conceived* or *the act of containing or holding something together* (from the verb *concipere*: to contain). This is the notion that I consider the most crucial when describing the artistic process. Kant describes **concept** as what summarises a multiplicity of mental or empirical objects by means of **abstraction**. Modern philosophers that came after him such as Nietzsche or Bergson contest such a “cold” way of understanding the world, describing it as a way of slicing reality by atrophying it (Tenailon, 2022).

In the film scoring context, we may link this to the idea of *coherence* or *identity*. The concept is the idea that encapsulates the musical identity of the project. And that unifying idea is applied in the form of a set of rules that may inform the instrumentation selection, the sonic palette, but also the workflow, the creation of a unique way of working tailored to the project in question.

Defining the concept for every project is for me not only a way to find coherence in the sonic language of the film itself but also to distinguish it from other projects in a practical sense, making the composition process specific to the film.

“Concept is the heart of the score. It is the primary idea, either small or large, modest or grandiose, which functions as a foundation upon which the score is built. As such, defining and developing this focused, central idea is the first step toward creating a successful film score, and in many ways the most important. “ (Karlin and Wright 2004).

Hans Zimmer talks about the “intellectual concept” in his work, he uses the culinary metaphor of the chef “whose ingredients are all unique and new”. He also claimed that he has “never changed his concept [after it is set in the beginning of the process]. It stays solid from beginning to end”. (Zimmer 2022)

“Concept” includes for me both the **set of rules and restrictions** that regulate the composition process and the **sonic palette**: the set of musical tools that results from that restriction process.

## SONIC PALETTE / INSTRUMENTATION

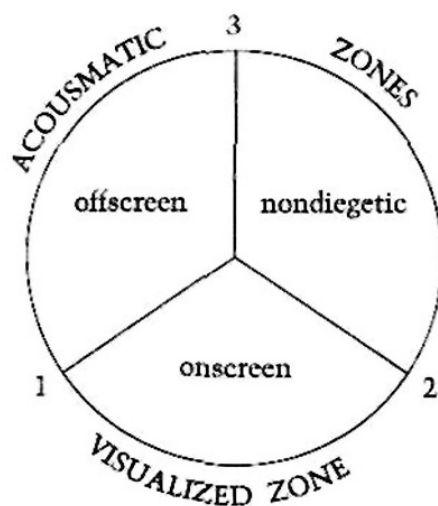
In this thesis, I will use both the terms *sonic palette* and *instrumentation*. I consider the prior to be a wider notion, that englobes the latter. “Instrumentation” refers to the choice of musical instruments, whereas the term “sonic palette” introduces more sound-based, acousmatic thinking to the choice of musical colours, focusing on the sonic qualities and characteristics of the chosen sounds instead of their source. *Instrumentation* and *sonic palette*, therefore, are complementary in my thinking process as the conceptual basis for the selection of an instrument or sound source may sometimes rely on the narrative meaning behind its source, while sometimes only on sonic characteristics.

We will see later that the idea of *sonic palette* also includes the processing and transformation tools used to modify and develop those initial conditions. It is not only about finding a concept that fits the starting point or premise of the story, but also one that encapsulates developments, plots and narrative arcs.

## LEVELS OF NARRATION

We must define the terms we will be using when referring to levels of narration in film. Claudia Gorbman adapted the narratological theories of Gerard Genette in her research on film music. She started using the terms “nondiegetic”, “diegetic, and “metadiegetic” to describe the interrelation between music and narrative levels in cinema (Gorbman 1987).

The term *diegesis* refers to the narrative elements included within the realism of the story. As opposed to *nondiegetic* elements, which are related to the way the story is told. In his study of film sound, Michel Chion defines nondiegetic sound as being “situated in another place and



Michel Chion's diagram illustrating the narrative levels in which sound may be located in a film (Chion 1990)

another time than the events directly represented” (Chion 1990). In a very simplified way, non-diegetic sound could be defined as sound that is not heard by the characters in the story.

In a more general narratological context, “*metadiegesis*” refers to embedded narratives: stories within stories. Gorbman uses that term to refer to sound that is placed within the mind of a character, and Chion then expands on that idea by introducing concepts such as *internal-objective* and *internal-subjective* sound (Chion 1990), which we will get into in section 2.3.2 Internal Diegesis and Psychology.

Branigan considers narrative information to belong to eight different levels, going from most fictionally external to the most internal (being for instance a character's thought) (Branigan 1992). Terms such as *transdiegetic* have later been used to describe music and sound that cross the frontiers between those categories (Jørgensen 2007).

The distinctions between those categories have been largely questioned and remodelled over time, often deemed too limited and steeped in a model of narratology best suited to literature (Winters,

2010). As Guido Heldt points out, the “old terms” such as *source music*<sup>2</sup> and *score, underscore*<sup>3</sup> or *background music* are still much more widespread outside of the academic context, among film composers and in the industry (Heldt 2013). After all, every film redefines its rules and its own realities (Takala 2018) and music and sound have the unique power to blur the lines between narrative levels. We will therefore not use these terms to make strict categorisations but only as guidelines or reference points when discussing narrative layers in films.

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<sup>2</sup> in most cases refers to pre-existing songs that exist within the physical reality of the film (a radio, a television, a street musician...)

<sup>3</sup> Original score that is composed to accompany dialogue. A term sometimes wrongly used interchangeably with the term “score” to refer generally to all non-diegetic original music.

## FINDING THE CONCEPT

The concept definition process consists of establishing rules — for the musical and sonic language and therefore also for the composition process itself. In other words, what we're seeking in the abstraction process is *restriction*. Reducing the palette to its minimal form that withstands the narrative purposes it needs to fulfil.

As film composer Thomas Newman said, “the less territory you have, the more you defend that territory”. He was referring to the idea of having a clear and solid vision as the composer instead of trying too much to suggest a myriad of options and styles (Newman 2022). I believe *concept* has a big role in the definition of that vision.

There are multiple elements in the creation of a filmic work that can inform the characteristics of that film score concept. Every department involved in the making of a film must define its stylistic approach according to the various elements it chose to take into account. This also holds true for me as a composer, as I must decide where to look for finding the ideas most suitable for the overall filmic work and in accordance with the music's roles in the story.

In most cases, I have the chance to witness almost the entire development of the project at least from the screenwriting process to the final sound mix (often being the last thing to happen in the filmmaking timeline). This allows me to start developing ideas and establishing my restrictions already from **reading the screenplay**, and then progressively shaping and altering those plans as the project goes forward and finds its shape and style through the input of all departments involved.

**Narrative themes** and overall **story concepts** are sometimes already very early on clearly meant to be cornerstones for the soundtrack. Such concepts may however face alterations and modifications along the way and the most all-encompassing and broad concepts may not always withstand the specific narrative needs music needs to fulfil in the long run.

As the project goes forward and discussions with the different team members go further, the more specific narrative elements involved start to become more concrete. **Setting, location,**

and **characters** for instance become more clearly defined and one of those (or a combination of them) may turn out to be the ideal path for the soundtrack to take.

In some cases, existing stories, folklore or referred **mythologies** may have to be taken into account when developing the sonic identity of the film. Sometimes, projects come to me with a set of references and clear requests from the director. Those are given in the form of **references**, requirements specified by the **genre** of the film or **temp music** already placed in the edit versions I get to see.

Although the film score concept may be considered as a set of initial conditions for the musical language, it is not an idea frozen in time: it must shape itself along with the **plot and narrative structure** of the film, and keep its coherence throughout the storyline accompanying the twists and turns of the narrative arcs.

The discussions with the sound department are for me perhaps the aspect of film scoring most essential and close to my heart. **Sound design** is the closest collaborator of the score as they play in the same sensorial realm and should work hand in hand in making a seamless and coherent soundtrack. I therefore always try to have conversations with sound designers as actively as possible and take their input closely into account when defining the concept for the score.

The overall **available resources** are a very concrete and down-to-earth aspect that cannot be omitted and that may largely restrict the possibilities in which a certain concept may be applied.

These various elements I mentioned are in no way an exhaustive list and do not exclude one another. The soundtrack concept is in fact in most cases determined by a combination of multiple of those features, with varying amounts of focus on some aspects, all of them being anyway part of a coherent narrative whole and influencing one another.

In the following sections, I will give examples from my work to illustrate different ways in which the score concept has been determined.

## 1. SCREENPLAY

The script is often the first contact we have with the project. It is also the basis upon which are built the first defining discussions with the director and the team about the plans and intentions on how to interpret that script.

-----  
Kai sä tajuut et toi on ihan vitun  
tyhmää? prelap

IN Tiuhti menee huoneeseensa. Ilo jää seisomaan käytävään yksin.  
"Ilo stays standing in the corridor alone"

6 INT. ASUNNON VESSA - PÄIVÄ

Ilo on riisunut klovniasun pois ja yrittää putsata kakkutahraa asusta pois. Ilo turhautuu ja heittää klovniasun pesukoneen päälle ja kääntyy katsomaan itseään peilistä. Ilo ottaa peruukin päästään ja viskaa sen lattialle. Ilo alkaa pestä klovnin meikkejään pois.

SCORE Ilon teemaa

Ilo ottaa klovnin nenän lavuaarin reunalta. Ilo katsoo itseään peilistä, meikit vain osittain pois pestynä. Ilo katsoo klovnin nenää ja puristaa sen epämuodostuneeksi. Ilo heittää litistyneen nenän roskakoriin.

7 INT. ASUNTO - PÄIVÄ

Ilo kävelee kotivaatteissaan eteiskäytävää pitkin.

*Prelap* – identifying where music plays the transition to the next scene

*IN* – Finding most likely entrance points for

*Yellow highlight* – narrative moments that imply space for music or sound

Identifying the possible thematic material/role of the music (without specifying the content or

*Overlap* – music crossing over scenes. Might influence how the scene is shot (leaving more space for music to enter? Slight camera movement?)

overlap 5.  
"Ilo walks into an invisible wall"

OUT **THUM!** Keskellä käytävää Ilo törmää näkymättömään seinään. Ilo pelästyy, katselee ympärilleen ja pitelee otsaansa. Seinä on samassa kohtaa, johon Ilo sitä aikaisemmin miimikoi.

Ilo ihmettelee tapahtunutta. Hän ojentaa käsiään varovasti eteenpäin, kunnes ne osuvat jälleen näkymättömään seinään.

IN Rising

Ilo tunnustelee seinää käsillään, koputtelee sitä, painaa kasvonsa sitä vasten. Näyttää kuin Ilo miimikoisi seinää, mutta tällä kertaa näkymätön seinä on oikeasti siinä.

Ilo on silminnähden liikuttunut. Hän saa idean.

8 INT. TIUHTIN HUONE - PÄIVÄ

Sharp OUT Tiuhti makaa sängyllä lukemassa kirjaa. Käytävältä alkaa kuulua rumpujen pärinää ja sirkusmusiikkia. Tiuhti pyöräyttää silmiään ja laittaa kuulokkeet korviinsa.

**Musiikki voimistuu.** Tiuhti nousee turhautuneena sängyltä.  
"Music intensifying"

*Green highlight* – references to sound. These sounds have generally important roles. This **THUM!** -sound maybe enhanced with musical material to illustrate the magical aspect of the material

*Sharp OUT* – identifying the cuts in which music will drop completely and suddenly.

*Music intensifying* – sometimes even musical intentions of the screenwriter/director are already in the script

Notes from spotting session of *Ilo P. Illerin Taikatemppu* (screenplay by Kasperi Riihimäki & Veikko Timonen) 2022



We won't go through the details of script analysis in this thesis, but I believe it is always beneficial to be inspired by the work of actors when getting acquainted with a text. Although it is more essential to capture an overall atmosphere than to deeply dissect screenplays, identifying sections, beats and transitions is a valuable tool to start defining the role of the score in the different narrative layers of the story.

Going over the mentions of sonic elements within a screenplay can be very informative in this early phase of the process. The sonic and musical aspects already mentioned in the screenplay usually have major importance in the narrative. Going through the different types of sound mentioned in the script, and the layers of narration those may be located in – diegesis, extra-diegesis, metadiegesis (see [levels of narration](#)). – can give very useful advice as to the functions of

	Blue Rev. (09/10/22)	6.
	8 INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS	
SD and MX heavy section. Silence of Jude creeping about. Silence whenever we look at her. But when we see what she sees our senses should be completely overwhelmed.	The door looms, as Jude tip toes towards it. She puts her hand on the knob. Hesitates.	
	On the other side of the door, the floor creaks. Someone, something is there. Jude trembles. In several long moments, she pieces together the courage to quietly fall to her knees.	
	A small, volumetric light escapes through the keyhole. Slowly, cautiously, Jude puts her eye to the keyhole to see -	
	I/E - JUDE'S HEADSPACE - CONTINUOUS	
	A hundred eyes. They're overlaid on top of each other, some blinking, a horrific variety of human, insect, lamb eyes.	*
	The eyes blink away to reveal the silhouette of wings - the barest glimpse of the seraph. In flashes we see the vast expanse of a nebula, bleeding into a cornea that rotates and swirls into Jude's eye.	*
	Jude's pupil dilates, reflecting a flame. Through the keyhole, she sees Gloria's face, encased in a golden glow. There's birdsong. She's saintly.	*
	A shadow casts over her shoulders. Unseen hands cover her shoulders in wires, tangling in her hair.	*
	Gloria's hair is tangled up in wires at her shoulders. She smiles wetly, and rips the detonator from her chest as the glow turns hotter, into flame.	*
	From the reflection of Jude's eye, we see Gloria burn. The light, white hot, intensifies into a white screen.	*
10 INT. GIRLS' BEDROOM - DAY		
SD only. Back to a regular day.	With a gasp, Jude somehow finds herself in front of her mirror. She touches her face. There are no extra eyes in sight. Its daylight.	
	Birdsong fills the air as Jude takes heaving breaths. Clattering noises down the hall. Jude looks up.	
11 INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS		
Jude staggers through the door frame, where Gloria is suiting up. She's wearing all white, a dainty flower crown, and her hair is tucked neatly back with a clip.	*	

Simple script breakdown by sound designer Ophelie Wolf for *Seraphim* (screenplay by Joanna Fernandez) 2022

sound in the narrative context. It is also a very useful way to start establishing a deep connection between sound and music early on in the process.

Having a sort of *screenplay-based spotting session* with the director and sound designer has gradually asserted itself as an inevitable stage of my process. During this meeting, in the preproduction of *Ilo P. Illerin Taikatemppu* we realised with director Veikko Timonen and sound designer Jaanis Hällman that identifying moments where sound and music would play a key role in the transitions between scenes was highly beneficial for all of our processes, and the ideas we came up with even ended up altering some of the shot list and plans for the shooting.

In the preproduction phase of the horror short *Seraphim* (dir. Oscar Ramos), breaking down the screenplay with the sound designers allowed us to realise that the score would become the thread between the concrete sounds of the diegesis (the sounds of the monster itself) and their perception by the main characters. Music and sound would then sometimes completely merge into one in certain key sections of the film to “overwhelm the senses” (see example of script breakdown above).

Working on the script is not always part of the process and some composers such as Carter Burwell would anyway rather wait to see some form of the film, “see the look of it”, before starting to compose. It is a valid point, that “there are so many ways to shoot a script” (Burwell 2022), and that imagining one’s own interpretations of the text before knowing the one the director is going for may lead to complications down the line.

## 2. NARRATION

In this section, we will attempt to gather different aspects of the stories themselves that may help in defining the film score concept. In order to pertinently determine those narrative elements, we must look into film narratology and its intersection with film music studies.

Narratology theories were inevitably already at the heart of the filmmaking process from the very early days of its existence. Eisenstein claimed that his methods of editing parallel scenes was influenced by Charles Dickens's narrative art (Schmidt 2009). But film narratology became its own branch of study from the 1970s onwards, with authors such as Christian Metz, David Bordwell, Kristin Thomson and Michel Chion applying and adapting narratological concepts to cinema studies. As mentioned earlier, Claudia Gorbmann, for instance, was the one who started using the concepts of nondiegetic, diegetic and metadiegetic to illustrate the relationship between music and narrative levels in cinema (Gorbmann 1987).

There are multiple ways to classify the basic elements of a narrative. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter (see [Finding The Concept](#)), narrative elements such as themes, characters, locations, settings, plots et cetera, become more concrete as the project goes forward and the different departments involved define their own approaches to the film. For instance, the idea of the location of the film may not seem essential to the story before the actual shooting locations are found and set designers play their part. Therefore, these narrative elements and the collaboration with the different departments focusing on them may turn out to be great sources to develop the concept for the soundtrack.

The classification outlined by the following sections of this chapter is not based on any particular narratological system but is shaped around the most relevant examples we will examine from the body of work.

## 2.1. Narrative theme

The narrative theme may be defined as the overall idea of the film, the catalyst of its story. Film scores that base their concept on that dramatic theme are described by Karlin and Wright as “overview music”: the music “stands back and reflects the overall attitude and thrust of the film”. In some cases, the score based on the general dramatic theme of the story may also be particularly fitting for the individual characters and the setting (Karlin and Wright 2004).

### 2.1.1 “High Concept”

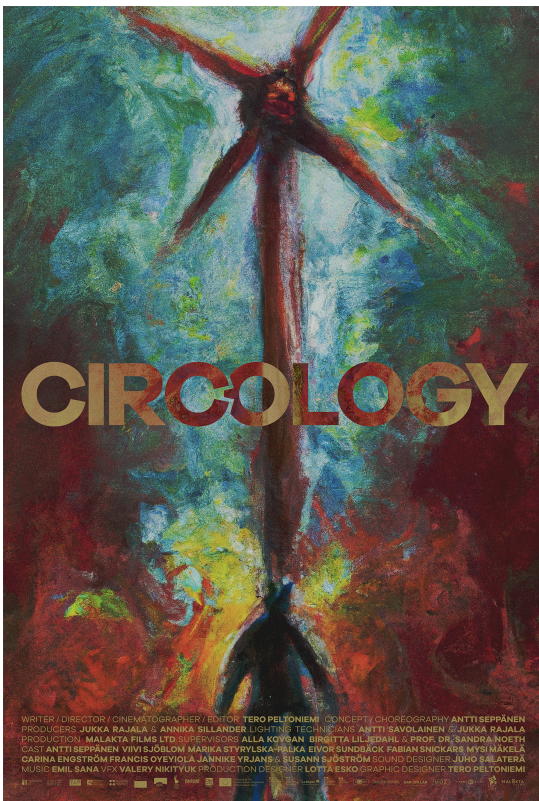
Some stories have prominent concepts at their very core. Such films are often referred to as “high-concept”. This means that by abstraction, their narrative theme may be synthesised easily into a short synopsis that encapsulates the main idea that drives the story. Without being a qualitative attribute, this “high-concept” vs. “low-concept” -idea is mostly a distinction made for marketing purposes: a high-concept film can be much more efficiently marketed since its central idea is graspable in very few words. In the creative process, what we can take from this dichotomy is the process of defining how easily the theme of the film can be synthesised or outlined. To put it simply, the easier we can epitomise the story in the fewest constituent elements possible, the more *conceptual* the story is.

Working on a low-concept film does not, however, necessarily minimise the conceptualisation process for the composer. Patrick Kirst described that for him, working on low-concept films meant that his scores had to be conceptualised on a more scene-specific basis, as opposed to

having one big general concept guiding the entire soundtrack (Kirst 2022).

A very demonstrative example of a high-concept story would be the dance short film *Circology*, directed by Tero Peltoniemi.

As often in so-called “high-concept” stories, the main idea is already stated in the title. The circle is what every element of the narrative revolves around... The community, following this disturbingly alienating doctrine of the closed circle, are doing all their actions in circles, living their lives in loops, generating their energy through the power of circular movements (“arm-spinning” in the film). The



Poster for *Circology* (2022)

windmills play an essential role in the narrative, as it holds a somewhat twisted image of a monolith or god-like force in which everyone believes in.

To start approaching such a story, it may be a good exercise and an essential piece of information to discuss with the director about ways to sum up the main ideas of the narration. I asked the director Tero Peltoniemi and the choreographer Antti Seppänen how they would summarise the story in the least words possible.

“Atlas lives next to a wind turbine in his remote and safe town. Although a master of arm-spinning, he finds himself breaking away from the tradition of his town. Until an explosion of his turbine burns his life's meaning to the ground.” (Synopsis by Tero Peltoniemi)

*Circology* being also a dance film, the concepts involved in the story must be expressed also through gestures. We went through extensive discussions with the choreographer about how he intended to translate those in his dances, and how I should follow those intentions in the music.

The screenplay originally included a “circology song” in the story, a melody that everyone in the community knows and sings together. We started looking into different dance and vocal traditions of communities throughout the world and came to the realisation that the expression of that communal feeling didn't have to be through the converging of all actions into one. Both melodically and choreographically, the sense of *community* would be stronger expressed through the complementarity of individualities rather than the uniformity of the group: the circle would be whole only if all the constituent members of the group cooperate. This also emphasised the idea that if one member was to drop out of the circle, it would put the entire integrity of the group at risk. Gesturally this meant that actions would flow from one person to another and that movements would be interactions between characters rather than uniformly synchronised. Musically, this meant to me that the “circology” motif would be one that would not be achievable by one individual alone. More in a canon-like texture, the circology theme would be formed of a collection of individual spinning “lines”.



**[Video 1]** "Gym scene" from *Circology* (2022) - Demo of the musical representation of the multiplicity of "spinning lines" in the *Circology* theme

The fact that this film is very conceptual in itself does not necessarily make the conceptual scoring process easier. In fact, the concepts of the story are multiple and very abstract, and it was actually very difficult to derive them into finding the sonic palette for the soundtrack. The idea of the *circle* is so abstract that it leaves open all possibilities of instrumentation and sound choices.

Originally, the idea was to have the singing voice of the *circology* followers at the centre of the soundtrack. The community of characters would then be actively creating the musical and sonic identity of the film through their breath and their voice. But as conceptually compelling as this idea felt, its realisation turned out to be too complicated for this project both narratively and technically.

We decided to keep the idea of the *breath, air and wind* to be the unifying energy behind the musical choices of the soundtrack. The organ came as an ideal musical reference to breath and a way to relate to the story's religious aspects. I also tried to use as many of the vocal sounds we got from the shooting of the film in the soundtrack, but those were not melodic lines or in any way thought to fit into the melodic and harmonic context I was going for in the soundtrack. I used





[Audio 1] Morphing experiment between on-set vocal warmup and organ sounds

convolution and “morphing”<sup>4</sup> processing techniques to express the idea that it is the breath and voice of the characters that drive the “circle” and create the energy they use to make their world (and the wind turbines) spin.

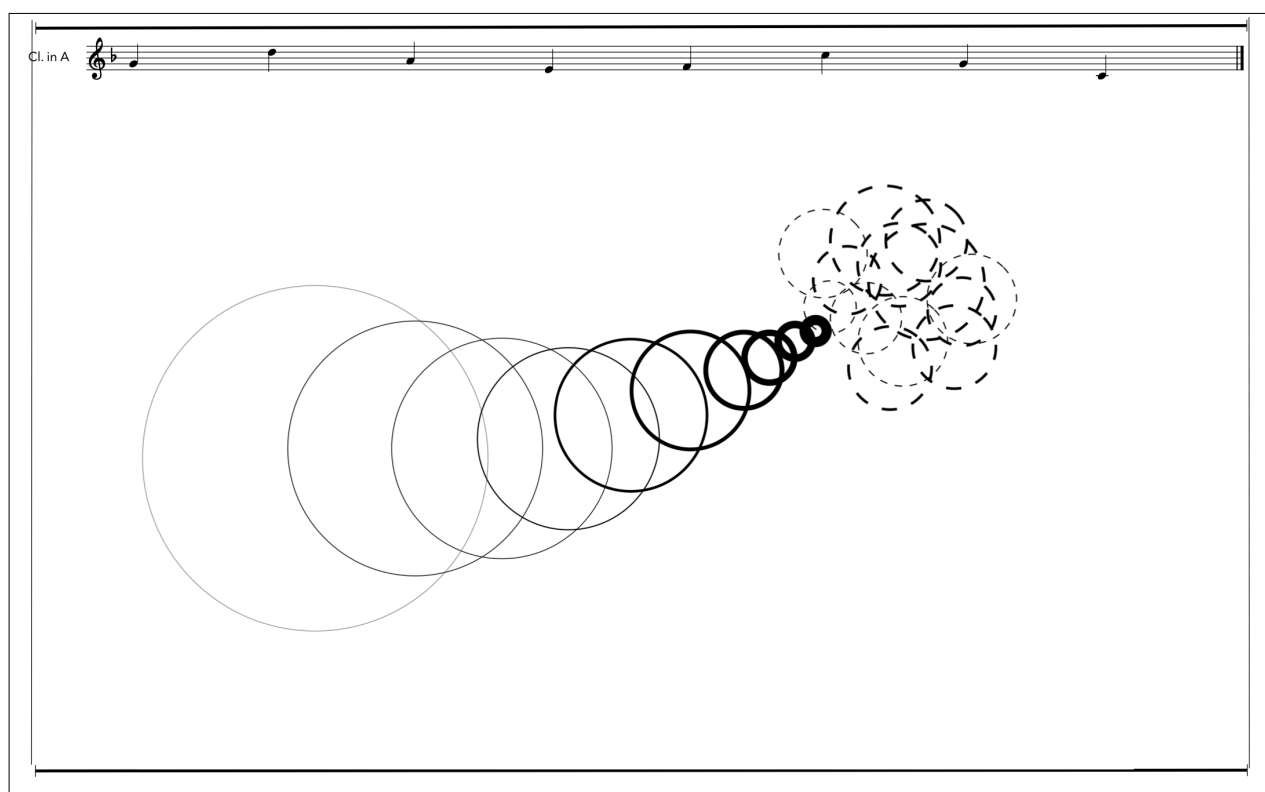


[Video 2] Woodshed scene from *Circology* (2022) - early demo of a variation on the *Circology* theme

Other wind instruments such as the clarinet turned out very fitting in the musical world of the film. I had the wonderful chance to work with the talented clarinetist Espen Aas to develop sounds through improvisations and interpretations of graphical scores. I could provide him with a set of movements inspired by the choreography and with the tone sets from the *circology* theme and he would come up with sonic explorations and musical gestures that I then edited and used as source

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<sup>4</sup> There are several morphing plug-ins available on the market, most of which are based on different kinds of convolution algorithms. Zynaptiq's *Morph 2* is the one I used in this case.



Circology motif tone set and graphical representation of variations of the theme throughout the plot



**[Audio 2]** Example from Espen Aas's clarinet experiments based on the *Circology* tone set and graphical representation

material for the development of the score. This process showed me that the use of graphical scores and other aleatoric or system-based compositional techniques that leave some level of freedom of interpretation to musicians would allow me to potentially unify multiple different instruments and interpretations under one concept. This is comparable to the process of abstraction we described in earlier chapters applied to musical notation and instrumental composition techniques.



The post-production process of *Circology* is still ongoing, and the project has been postponed and its artistic objectives and ambitions reassessed due to numerous technical challenges and a lack of resources (the film will be released in its final form in spring 2023). But the process of elaborating its musical concept has been greatly instructive.

This project has also in some sense shown me the limits of conceptual thinking. While the “high-concept” nature of the film seemed appealing for the most conceptual form of scoring, the process showed me otherwise: the very abstract visual and choreographic language left the story difficult to follow for the audience and sound had to take on the role of clarifying certain narrative arcs and sequences. This led to music having to be more scene-specific and pragmatic rather than overarching and transcendental.

Another film that follows a strong central concept is *Pyykkitupa* (EN: *Laundry*) directed by Fabian Munsterhjelm (2021). In this case, the concepts are not as overwhelmingly symbolic as in *Circology*. The official synopsis of the film is “a story about starting over and the difficulty of booking a time slot in the laundry room”, which does indeed encapsulate the whole narrative theme. However, I decided to anchor the scoring concept into a more concrete element of the story: the washing machine itself. This is in line with the central idea of the film, its location – most of it happening in the laundry room – and is at the same time a very clear sound source for the music.



[Audio 3] Example of processing used on the original washing machine recording

The first step in the gathering of sonic materials was therefore to record washing machines. Especially my grandmother's old-school washing machine that happened to produce quite expressive noises throughout its roughly 45 minutes programme: rhythmical patterns, drone-like



[Audio 4] B Twenty-six Eero - from Pyykkitupa's Original Soundtrack



[Audio 5] Sh\*\* Everywhere - from Pyykkitupa's Original Soundtrack (vocal imitations of the washing machine sounds)

textures sometimes with clear pitch information, sometimes with more noisy qualities, percussive hits and polyphonic sequences all could be extracted from this recording. This material would



[Video 3] Social media post about the use of the washing machine in the score for *Pyykkitupa* (2022)

become the cornerstone of the soundtrack as a whole, both in my composition process and also in the sound-design process, as we will discuss in later chapters (see "[sound design](#)").

As I wished to keep the sound of the washing machine somewhat recognisable within the cues, the processing techniques used remained fairly straightforward: most of them rooted in basic sampling techniques including chopping (at transients), looping, pitch-shifting, time-stretching, saturating and various uses of reverbs and delays.

Other musical elements such as the harmonica also found their way into the score during the process, through other narrative needs, requests and references (see "[references/temp/genre](#)").

### 2.1.2 meta-scoring

I consider meta-scoring the process of scoring an audiovisual work included inside the diegesis of the film and drawing from that inner score to define the concept of the actual soundtrack of the film.

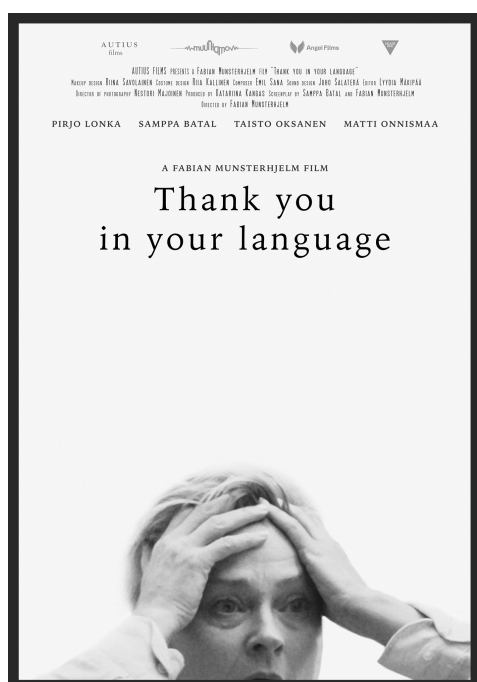
In a way, source scoring – what Earle Hagen defines as the process of composing cues that are “like source in [their] content, but tailored to meet scoring requirements” (Hagen 1971) – can be considered a simple form of meta-scoring.

In this context, speaking of the narrative setting, I would like to consider meta-scoring as the process of actually composing original music for a film, commercial, or media that is inside the diegesis and letting that inner score become the core of the “actual” soundtrack.

A famous example including nested levels of narration is *The Truman Show* (1998), where the main character Truman Burbank finds himself imprisoned in the fiction he was born in. Guido Heldt uses this film as an example of non-conventional “embedded narration”. While a traditional use of embedded narration would be when the narrator of the main story shown in the film is a character inside it, *The Truman Show* presents a more complex situation. "The double irony of his

name is obvious. He is the only one in his world who is authentic, who is true. But he is also the only one who does not see the truth about his world, which is a great lie – a lie that uses Truman's blind authenticity as its [Unique Selling Point], as a quality that sells itself to TV audiences, but also helps to sell products (via ads or product placement).” (Heldt 2013). Musically, the film presents multiple forms of cues attached to different layers of the narration: some at the level of the diegesis of Truman's reality, some inside in the soundtrack to the reality TV series made from his life and some on the extra-diegetic level of the film we are watching.

I have used these ideas of narratological mise-en-abyme<sup>5</sup> to inform musical choices in the



development of a score for a short film I scored recently: *Thank You In Your Language*, directed by Fabian Munsterhjelm (2022).

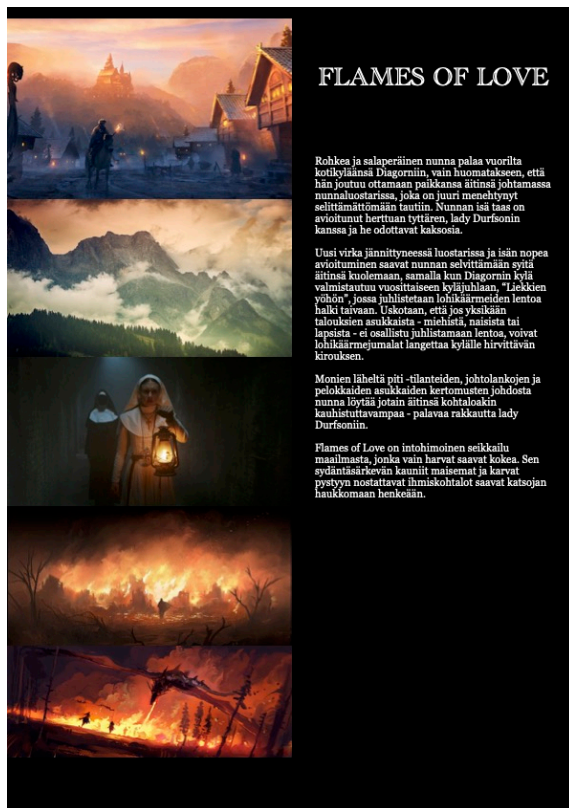
In this short, the main character (Pirjo Lonka) is an actress, preparing for a role in a “Chinese dragon fantasy series”. She is working in a great hurry on her self-tapes (audition videos) under the pressure of her manager. As we see her diving into her acting, we can hear the music of the epic fantasy series she is auditioning for, and the viewer gets immersed into that scene solely by the actors' performance, the lights magically dimming in the hotel room and the sound that starts enveloping them, without ever actually showing any visuals of that scene.

This kind of setting is ideal to develop this meta-scoring idea as the film is itself very metatheatrical: having the life of an actress practising for a scene as the starting point of the story.

I wished to define the whole concept of the soundtrack of *Thank you in your language* by first focusing on creating a score for the overly and ironically epic and dramatic “Flames Of Love”

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<sup>5</sup> “A reflexive strategy where the content of a medium is the medium itself: for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* features a play within a play and Fellini's *8½* (1963) is a film within a film.” (Oxford Reference)



Mood-board and synopsis for *Flames of Love*

series. After reading the script of the short, one of my first reactions was to ask the director (with whom I had worked before and therefore felt comfortable expressing such requests) to write me the synopsis of “Flames of Love” and to give me a more in-depth idea of what this fake dragon series would be about. Fabian and the co-writer Samppa Batal really liked the idea and delivered a very convincing mood board. The objective was then to focus on making the instrumentation choices to define the sound of that ironic score. I took inspiration from the things I learned from my semester in Los Angeles (especially in the field of trailer scoring) and went for a tongue-in-cheek caricatural approach of those over-the-top, sample-heavy styles<sup>6</sup>. Big percussion samples from *Heavyocity*, massive “trailer braams”<sup>7</sup> from *FalloutMusicGroup* and excessive choir staccato patches from *EastWest* would become the basis of this joyful explosion of “epicness”, besides also being an adequate choice regarding the resources available for the project. The challenge of finding the balance between making purposefully distasteful choices and still having convincing moments where the irony may be forgotten is a difficult one to hit, and the audience will be the judge of our success in achieving it. The sound designer and director also encouraged me to not refine the cues to avoid the risk of making them sound “too good” (as in too realistic, less sample-sounding). This was a healthy reminder that the film score’s purpose is to support the film’s humour and irony at all costs, even if it means using lower-quality sounds or less tasteful musical choices.

<sup>6</sup> musical genres or stylistic approaches that rely heavily on the use of virtual instruments and sample libraries.

<sup>7</sup> a loud and low-pitched sound effect and musical device traditionally produced with brass instruments



**[Video 4]** “Flames of Love” scene from *Thank You In Your Language* (dir. Fabian Munsterhjelm, 2022)

The choice of using this meta-scoring technique for the overall concept of the score is a risky one and complies with the absurdity of the film overall. It inevitably creates an enormous contrast with the picture that hopefully becomes equally comical to the viewer as it is disturbing.



**[Video 5]** Cue 2 “Phone call” from *Thank You In Your Language* (dir. Fabian Munsterhjelm, 2022)



This example is from one of the first scenes of the movie when the main character's manager calls to remind her of the "Chinese dragon drama" that she is supposed to audition for. This is one example of how I tried to introduce the Flames Of Love concept subtly into the underscore<sup>8</sup>.



**[Audio 6]** End credits track for *Thank You In Your Language*

The challenge was then to be able to bend that concept to fit the other unexpected narrative needs of the film. We will address those challenges in chapter 2.5 about narrative structure.

The narrative themes of a film are its core ideas, which may, in the case of "high-concept" films be encapsulated in a tight idea that drives the entire story. That central narrative idea may inform the score's concept as it is, but may not on its own bring enough restrictions for the definition of the musical language if that notion is too "abstract" (such as the "circle" in *Circology*). In the case of films that have elements of embedded narration in their thematic core, a way to use that in the conceptualisation process is to extract the restrictions of the overall score from an imaginary embedded score within the diegesis of the film.

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<sup>8</sup> Music that accompanies dialogue

## 2.2. Setting

### 2.2.1 Location

A very concrete and straightforward narrative element that may define the sonic palette of the score is the location.

In the film *Suoterapia* (directed by Santtu Salminen), the swamp and the forest play key roles in the story. The two main characters go to Finnish nature to reach out to their primitive selves and animal instincts. The nature surrounding them can almost be considered as a character of the story. And sound is its voice.



[Video 6] Extract of the behind-the-scenes video for *Suoterapia*'s soundtrack

A crucial aspect of the conceptualisation of the soundtrack is the shaping of the composition process itself. As a film composer, I wish to do everything in my power to make every process feel different, as I believe that a unique process is key to unique results.



Being inspired by the location of the film is a great way to root the composition process closer to the narrative and immerse myself as much as possible in the story. It is also essential for me to avoid spending the entire process sitting in the same studio environment, which leads to working with the same safe and comfortable equipment and mindsets and gravitates towards similarity with previous works. If possible, visiting the shooting of the film may be greatly inspiring, firstly for meeting the team and watching how they work but also for exploring the locations where the story is set. In the case of *Suoterapia*, visiting the shooting was not an option for me. But that did not prevent me from getting immersed in similar environments and gathering recordings from Finnish swamps and forests. The sound designer and on-set recording engineer Jaanis Hällman also provided me with sounds he recorded in the swamp the film was shot. The following video shows in more detail the development of the sonic palette of the soundtrack.

I used the footstep sounds of the characters running in the swamp as percussive elements, imitated sounds of the environment (birds, mosquitos...) with musical instruments, used the wide open spaces of the swamp and the more dense surroundings of the forest scenes as inspirations for the use of reverbs and delays in the score.

The birds play an important role in this film too. The birdwatcher (Hannes Suominen) can be metaphorically considered the guardian of nature. The personification of the story's location. His musical identity is centred around the use of a rooster whistle<sup>9</sup>, that happened to produce sounds almost identical to the sounds that sound designer Jaanis Hällman used for the bird.

This is an example in which the choice of the instrument (the clay flute being a very primitive and simplistic instrument, fitting the overall concept of the score) and the independent sonic qualities produced by it (the similarities in sound between the flute and the bird) both hold significance regarding the concept of the score.

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<sup>9</sup> A bird-shaped clay flute



**[Video 7]** The birdwatcher's first appearance in *Suoterapia* (dir. Santtu Salminen 2021). The sound of the bird is intentionally difficult to locate as it could be part of the flute texture of the score as well as the diegetic sound of the bird itself.

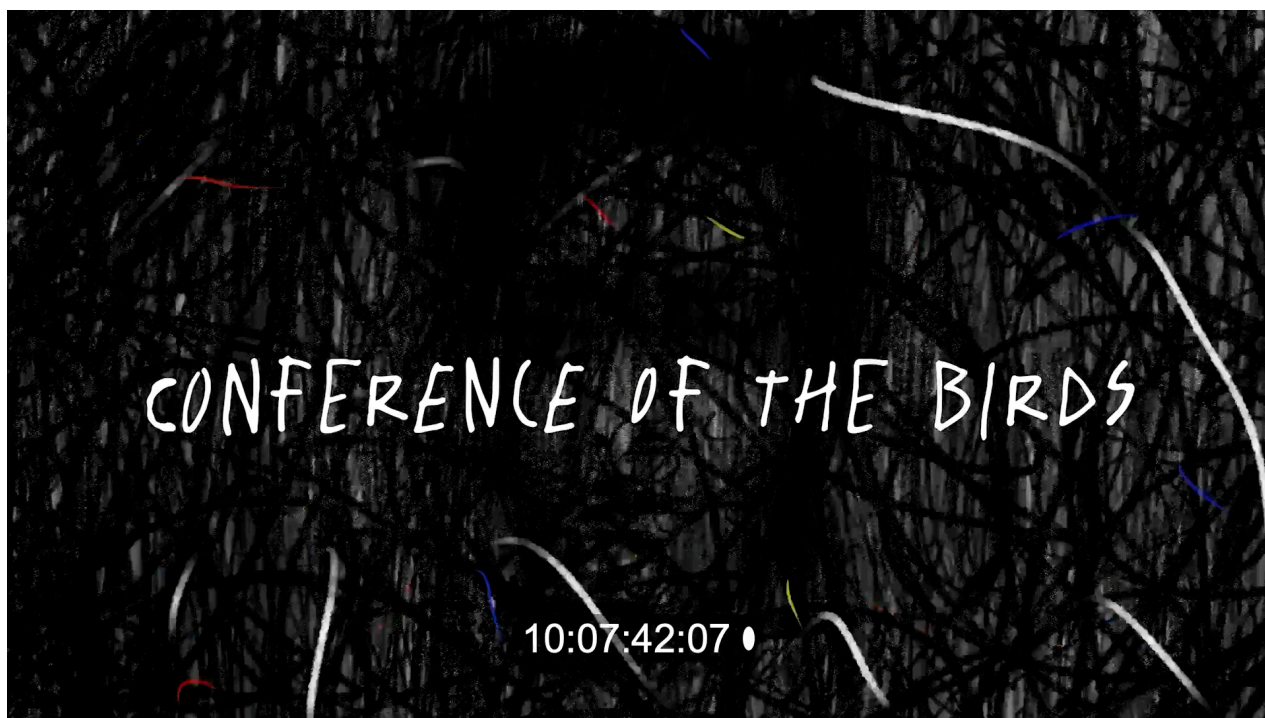
As the main character (Eppu Salminen) starts turning into a beast, he impacts his surroundings by becoming a predator, a threat to the birds and the birdwatcher character (Hannes Suominen). That alteration of the surroundings, that shift in the natural balance is something music and sound can illustrate. Therefore the concept of the score must be one that allows us to bend it to express that transformation ([see chapter 2.5.1](#))

### 2.2.2 Placelessness

The short film *Conference of the Birds* (directed by Shamsil Balkis) poses a very evocative challenge in the definition of the scoring concept with regard to its setting. The main theme of the film is about the idea of migration, detaching it from its sociocultural context to approach it through the natural, instinctive travels of migratory birds. The location is clear and the film really depicts the “Finnishness” of the situations in its filmmaking: wide open fields and forests, quiet moments, Kaurismäki-like static shots and silences...

The location is in this case only the arrival point of the migratory movement of both the birds and the main character Samir (Kardo Shiwan). The ideas we discussed with the director were about how to express that concept of the *elsewhere*, without referring to a specific location or culture.

Birds and abstract metaphors are used to describe those ideas of movement, fleeing, finding a new home... In a way, the process of abstraction we have talked about in a musical context happens in this case already in the narration and in the visual expression (major parts of the film are animated).



**[Video 8]** Opening scene from *Conference of the Birds* (2022) demo using samples of the Kora instrument and bass clarinet

Counterintuitively, this poses greater challenges regarding how to define the concept for the soundtrack. It is much more straightforward to make an abstraction from something concrete rather than finding a concept from something already very abstract. In fact, the narrative purposes we are going for in this film are therefore much vaguer and harder to define. There are much fewer concrete elements to hold on to and to express in the abstract language of music.

More specifically in this project, the idea that we are not referring to a specific population or culture or background is challenging sonically.

This leads us to the concept of “otherness” and how to express it. This is a whole topic of its own that deserves a much deeper dive than what I can do in this thesis, but it may have some aspects that can inform the process of defining the concept of a soundtrack. Referring to the “unknown” or the “other” through music and sound. Otherness is always in relation to something that is considered normal. Creating the sound of a “different” culture might lead to misconceptions and conflating of real musical cultures, to clichés and caricatures of ethnicities and origins.

The most honest and genuine approach we found was to take a naive and innocent way of creating the musical language of the film. The director had found this odd-looking Kora<sup>10</sup>-like instrument in a flea market in Finland and decided to make one of the film's characters play it onscreen. It was therefore an obvious anchor point to start elaborating on the sonic identity of the soundtrack. We decided to embrace the fact that we did not know where this instrument was originally from and allowed ourselves to use it in creative ways without actively considering its possible “traditional” uses. We decided to remain as neutral and impartial as possible during the process, which may have also been a risky approach, leading us to problematic unintentional cultural references if our intended innocence came out as outright ignorance.

This is a topic that is close to my heart and that I find problematic in a lot of productions today regarding the sonic palette of, for instance, big Hollywood soundtracks making references to far-away cultures or claiming to create the music of otherworldly civilisations while actually only making ethnocentric (eurocentric, musically speaking) caricatures of history or existing ethnicities. I have not found a solution or developed a clear opinion on the matter and it is a topic of film scoring that I wish to study in more detail and approach with more confidence in the future.

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<sup>10</sup> The Kora is a harp-lute instrument originally from western Africa mostly characterised by its long neck and a leather soundboard.

The setting of the story, its location in time and space and its cultural background are crucial aspects of every story, and may sometimes be the main feature of the narration that music should attend to. The locations of a film can inform the sonic palette and overall musical concept in multiple ways, using sounds directly from the location or getting inspiration from its fauna and flora and spatial characteristics. Music's role may also sometimes be to blur that sense of space and time, playing with contrasts with the on-screen locations and the concept of placelessness and otherness.

### 2.3. Characters

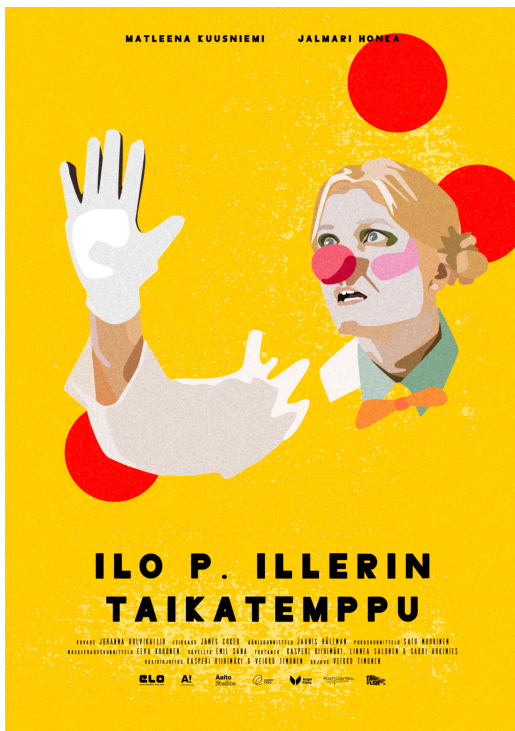
“You can't conceptualize the central character unless you understand him. Your musical impression of that character can become the concept. At its simplest, this can be superficial, but if the character has any psychologically interesting reactions or feelings, the music can function most effectively for the film by characterizing these internal attitudes.” (Karlin and Wright, 2004). There are multiple examples of films in which the concept of the score is based on the main character of the story. Jerry Goldsmith's score for *Patton* (1970) focuses on the musical personification of the legendary military figure. He used background information on the character, such as his religious beliefs in reincarnation, to develop the instrumentation and the motifs for the character. Elliot Goldenthal played *against* the main character of the film *Cobb* (1994) in his score, by basing the music on the “concept of collision” and strong contrasts with how the main character is represented (Karlin and Wright, 2004).

We will look into two alternative ways of including characters in the development of the score concept.

#### 2.3.1 Role-play scoring

Here I will expand on the idea of meta-scoring we introduced earlier. A variation of this method, specifically related to characters in the story is what I will call “role-play scoring”. This refers to





the process of composing music that a character in the diegesis of the film would have composed. To illustrate this concept, we will use the short film *Ilo P. Illerin Taikatemppu*, which I have been working on during the summer and fall of 2022. In this film, the main character Ilo plays, on an old radio, music that she has composed as an accompaniment to her clown shows. During the pre-production process, it became obvious that Ilo's track would be a central element of the score and musical identity of the film as a whole. Being a core element of the diegesis, the track would have to be ready to be played on set to help the actors (which included many kids) to get a better feel for the scenes. It

would therefore logically be the starting point for the scoring process of this project.

I then had to define the rules for that meta-composition based on the specificities and background



**[Audio 7]** First demo of *Ilo's* song

of the character herself. In similar ways to an actor preparing for their role, I must dive deep into a character study, with the help of the screenwriters/director to set the restrictions for creating this song.

Ilo is not a musician or composer, and she does not have extensive knowledge of the musical conventions of circus music. While she is interested in the matter and takes her job seriously, she has never really deeply studied the topic. From the backstory of the character and a deeper understanding of her motivations, we drew a set of restrictions both sonically and melodically. Ilo



Picture of the actress from the first fitting session of the costume designer Satu Muurinen.

is limited in her technical abilities to create music, but she knows how to make a track and play it on her radio. She may have a microphone and basic recording software and is creative enough to come up with original ways to replicate the sounds she has heard in some of the circus music references she may have heard. She may not know music theory and has not analysed melodic or harmonic aspects of that style, but she has a good ear and a natural talent, although mostly overlooked, as are her skills with magic tricks. Extensive discussions with the director Veikko Timonen allowed me to really get to know this character and put myself in her shoes and state of mind to create her song.

The very first demo I made ended up too harmonically conventional, theoretically “correct” and not chaotic enough to represent Ilo’s character. The difficulty to pretend the right level of ignorance and lack of musical skills prevented me from reaching the sense of genuine effort that Ilo must have put into her track.

After further developments of the other characters’ backgrounds in the story, new narrative elements allowed us to deepen the role-play aspect of the process. From discussions about costume design and location scouting, the director and the team came to the conclusion that Ilo’s



**[Audio 8]** Ilo’s theme (homemade version)

son, Tiuhti, would be a violinist and aspiring musician. There are scenes in which Tiuhti is seen with his violin case, and some simple music production tools such as a MIDI controller would be

$\text{♩} = 108$

Mellotron

Mell

Mell

1 2 3 4

5 6 7 8

9 10 11 12 13

*Ilo's Theme* in its basic form

seen in Ilo's apartment. This allows us to consider a possible contribution from Tiuhti to Ilo's production of her performance track.

In an experimentation session held at my home studio with the director Veikko Timonen, it occurred to us that it would bring better results if we would enact a situation in which Ilo comes to her son for technical help in making her track. Tiuhti's rather judgmental and embarrassed sentiment towards his mum's profession is established in the story. I would then, with a certain sense of adolescent nonchalance and disinterest – but with some basic production skills – record Veikko's overly enthusiastic performances on various instruments and toys, and, without too much effort, put it all together in a loop that Ilo could use in her clown performances.

While having to role-play as much as possible, I must also keep some perspective to direct that roleplaying process in a way that provided me with results suitable for the broader purposes of the soundtrack as a whole. There are a set of parameters that Ilo would obviously not know about, for instance in the way we intend to develop that diegetic music in the score. These elements and compositional intentions must be kept in mind when making Ilo's track. I must then operate within the limits of what can be ascribed to coincidence or luck: Ilo must have come up, partly by accident, with a very simple but efficient piece, that happens to be easily re-harmonised, manipulated, and enhanced later in the score to fit the narrative purposes we must fulfil.





**[Video 9]** *Ilo P. Ilerin Taikatemppu* (dir. Veikko Timonen) - Bathroom Scene

Once that theme was set, the rest of the process was about varying that theme for the different emotional states the score needed to portray. Proof that this conceptual thinking as a starting point for the composition process does not become an obstacle for traditional melodic and thematic scoring. That simple melody being so clearly associated with the main character, it only seemed appropriate to create as many variations on it as possible as we follow Ilo through her struggles and triumphs.

In the last scene of the movie, as the main character has discovered her surrealistic magical talents, we decided to bring that theme to its fullest form. The original idea was to make it “the track that Ilo had in her mind when making her original song”. But we decided to step away from standard circus music to create a more “cinematic”, emotionally loaded version of her theme.

This way of approaching the composition of a diegetic piece of music while manipulating it according to the needs of the overall score is an example of what Earle Hagen describes as “source scoring”, a term we introduced in the chapter on [meta-scoring](#).

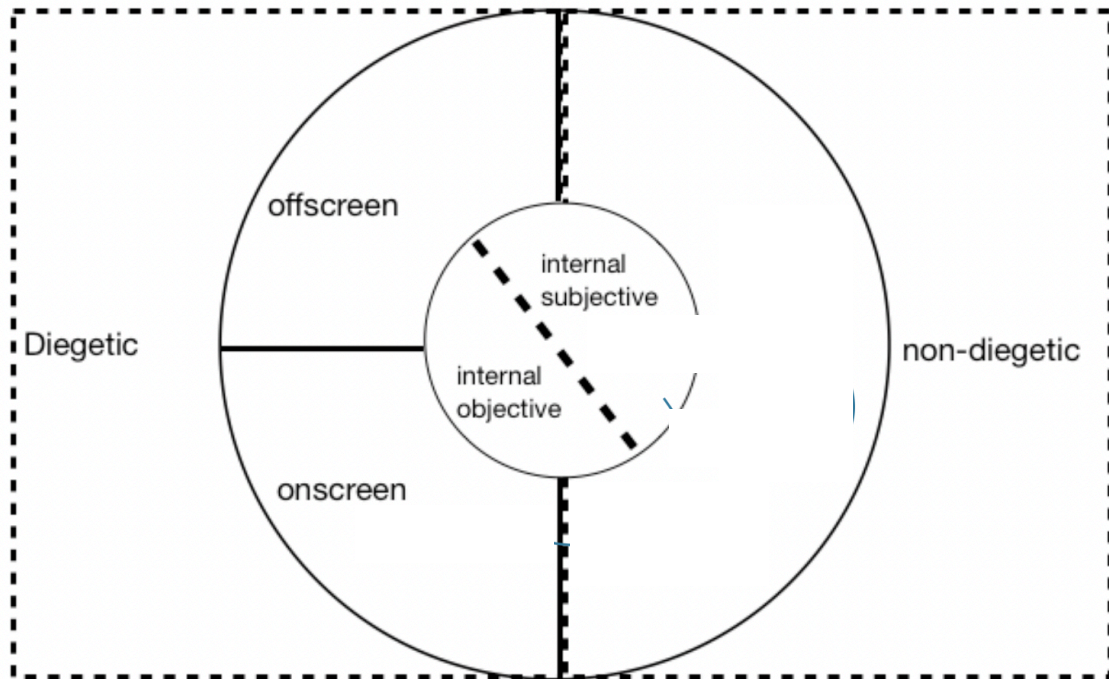


[Video 10] Ilo P. Illeri (dir. Veikko Timonen) - Ending Cue

♩ = 119 **molto rit.**

Extract from the recording score for Ilo P. Illerin Taikatemppu - buildup of the last cue

### 2.3.2 Internal diegesis / psychology



Variation on Michel Chion's diagram of narrative levels including the "internal circle" and its two constituents

We defined earlier how the different layers of narration are described in film sound studies (see [levels of narration](#)). To expand on the basic concepts of diegetic and extra-diegetic, Michel Chion proposes the terms *internal-objective* and *internal-subjective* as the two constituent parts of what Claudia Gorbman calls the *metadiegesis*. We may expand on Chion's diagram of narrative levels of sound to illustrate that "internal circle".

Music's 'internal-circle'-idea is very much based on characters. As Michel Chion describes, it may indicate the interiority of a character both physically and mentally. He calls the physiological sounds such as heartbeats and breaths *internal-objective*. The mental, imagined, hallucinated sounds are then considered *internal-subjective* (Chion, 1990).

Internal-objective sound may describe the inner physiological reactions of characters but also the materiality, the physicality of the diegesis as it is perceived by a character. This may include altered perceptions of reality, and moments in which the diegesis of the scene is transformed by a distorted perspective that does not match the "realism" established by the film.

In the short film *Stay* (directed by Annie Kane, 2022), the main character suffers from PTSD. He experiences painful episodes in which he is submerged by traumatic memories. As we will get back to the sound design chapter, the core idea for the sonic identity of the film was to be based on sounds portraying the physiological reactions linked to such PTSD episodes. Along with the soundscapes of the flashbacks from traumatic war scenes, tinnitus tones and bigger-than-life heartbeat sounds are used to represent the feeling of having a panic attack.



[Audio 9] Early demo for *Stay* involving sampling of tinnitus sounds used in a melodic way

I decided to take those *internal-objective* sounds as the source for the development of the music. Spotting-wise, the score would always come in subtly from under those ringing ear tones and develop from there into more melodic material.

Focusing on the characters of the story can be a powerful tool in determining the film score concept. By putting myself in their place, composing through their perspective and taking into consideration their backstories, physical and psychological characteristics, I can define a unique method for the composition process and narrow down the sonic palette in meaningful ways.

## 2.4. Mythology / Folklore

Some stories are based on or refer to existing mythologies or folklore. As a composer, diving into those original tales can be a greatly inspiring journey and an essential step in finding the unifying concept for the sonic palette of the score.



For the horror short *Seraphim*, directed by Oscar Ramos, the biblical origin of the “seraph” had inevitably to be taken into account when developing the sound of the film. We had discussions with Oscar and with sound designers Ben Grimes and Ophelie Wolf about the references to sound in the biblical texts describing the six-winged angels.

References to the sound of the seraphim can be found in various biblical sources and the director Oscar Ramos pointed out some of those. The film starts with a text from *Revelation 4:8*

*“And the living creature, each of them having six wings,*

*Are full of eyes around and within;*



*And day and night they do not cease to say,  
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord...”*

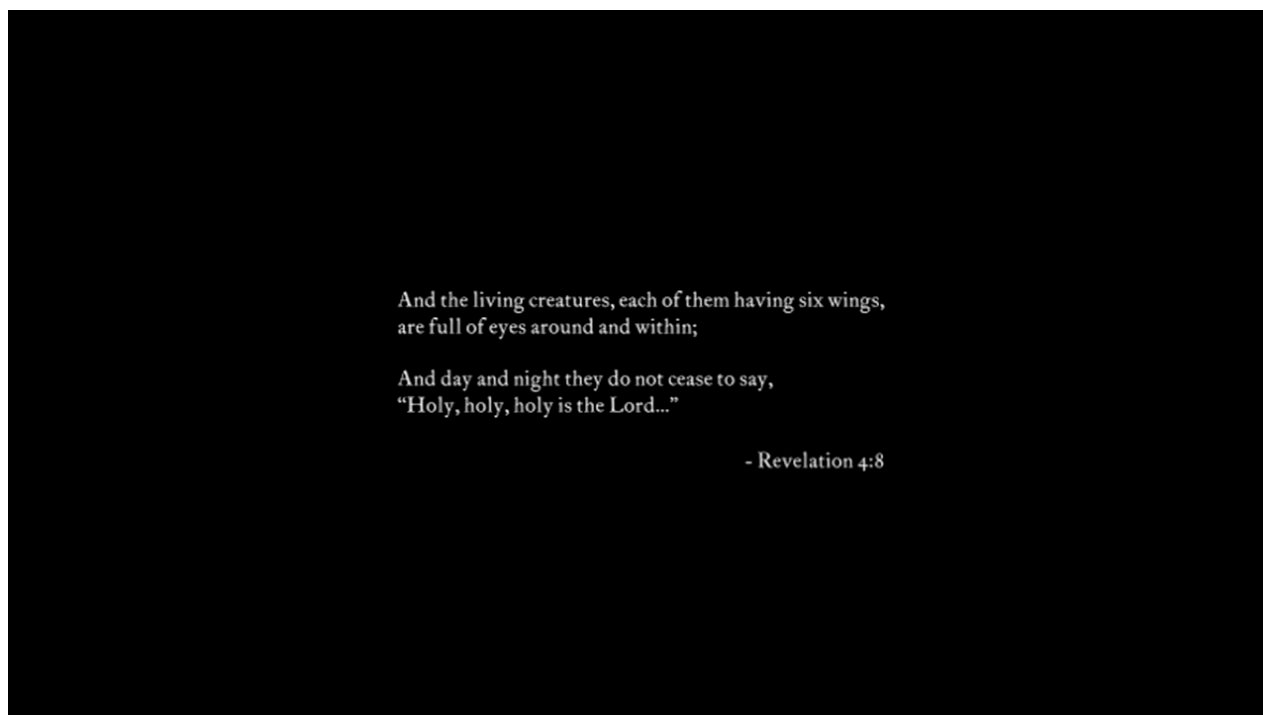
This sense of trinity, things being grouped in threes and words being repeated three times became a core concept for the musical language of the film. The main musical manifestation of the Seraph (a heavily distorted synth-choir chord) is repeated in three distinct sections of the film, and is itself based on a triple repetition of this characteristic sound.



**[Video 11]** Ending Cue of *Seraphim* featuring the three times repeated distorted sound representing the monster

Multiple mentions of the seraphs include allusions to their colossal power and how it is represented through the sounds they produce, both through their singing and through the strong winds formed by the movement of their wings.

The use of the choir became an essential aspect of the score. While using its clerical connotation of evoking the “holy” or the “divine” through more traditional choir writing, it also allowed the



**[Video 12]** Intro Cue of *Seraphim* (2022) directed by Oscar Ramos, introducing the sampled-processed choir sound score to explore various more experimental uses of voice that could help us create unsettling sounds that crossed the bridge between sound effects and music. More about that in the chapter dedicated to sound design.

In the short film *Metsänpeitto* directed by Teresa Siltanen, the sonic representation of the “Entity”, – this looming, ominous spirit of the forest – was at the core of our concept with co-composer Mikael Hakkarainen. The director shared her inspirations from folklore and mythologies surrounding the topics of her film to help us determine the sonic palette of our score. The film opens on a text screen establishing the folklore around the “forest blanketing”: “It is said, that those who wander off into the great forests can face a supernatural veiling, which transports them to another realm.”

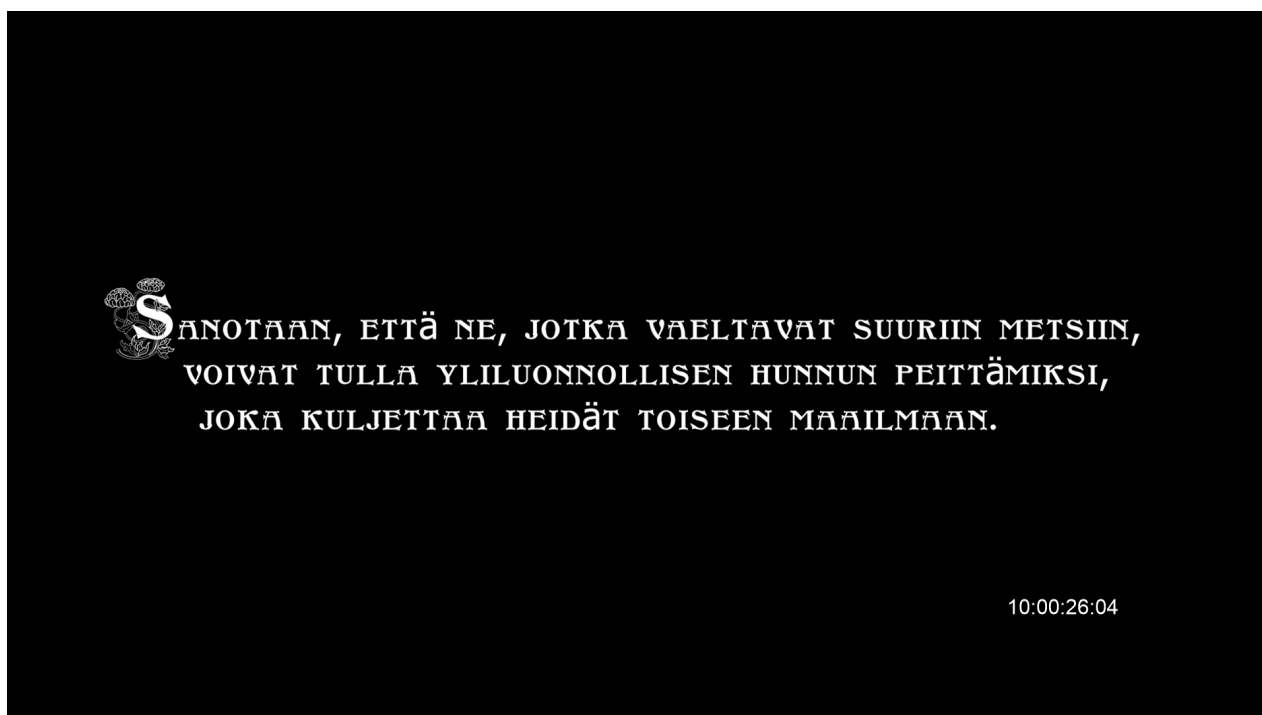
The music formed its concept around two main objectives, one rooted in diegesis and the other in a more traditional use of musical score: creating the sonic identity of the Entity haunting the soundscapes of various scenes of the film, as well as supporting the mythical and spiritual subtext through the use of folkloric melodies.





**[Video 13]** First sonic manifestation of the Entity in *Metsänpeitto* (dir. Teresa Siltanen, 2022)

The sonic manifestations of the Entity are somewhere between diegetic and extra-diegetic (or meta-diegetic if we interpret them as being hallucinations of the characters). The characters react



**[Video 14]** Opening sequence of *Metsänpeitto* (dir. Teresa Siltanen, 2022)

to them but their sonic characteristics such as their spatial information or simply their loudness make them surreal in relation to the spaces in which the action happens.

The traditional Finnish folk string instrument *jouhikko* also became one of the core elements of the score for its reference to Finnish folklore and its nature. The choice of using that instrument brings its fair share of restrictions and specific musical language: traditionally it is played by bowing two strings simultaneously, one serving as a drone while the other can be played with the back of the fingers. Deciding on the tuning for the four strings of the instruments basically defines the harmonic context of the music. Because in this case, it is the instrumental choice itself that matters



Main theme of *Metsänpeitto* for the jouhikko

conceptually, I decided to remain relatively faithful to the traditional uses of the instrument and take inspiration from the traditional jouhikko repertoire in the making of this theme: the drone a fourth down, short motifs with very few melodic jumps that repeat in different registers, odd meters diversifying the bowing pattern...

Folklore and mythology can be used to narrow down the film score concept both in a concrete way by using the meaning held by the instrumental choices themselves, or in a more abstract way by using various aspects of the tales in question to inform the musical language, sound processing, and structural elements of the score.

## 2.5. Narrative structure / Plot

As discussed earlier, the conceptual film scoring method focuses on pre-planning and setting restrictions and rules for the composition process. Although it is tempting to define the concept and restrict the sonic palette only based on the narrative context and premise of the story, a strong film score concept cannot be set without considering the time dimension of the narrative. Arcs, structures and evolutions of storylines are at the heart of storytelling. The film score concept is not only a starting point but also a set of intentions regarding the development and evolution of the music throughout the story. The sonic palette that ensues from the film score concept does not only consist of the set of chosen instruments or sounds, but also of the transformation and processing methods that will be applied to them to express their evolution through time.

### 2.5.1 Transformation



[Video 15] Extract from the making-of video of the *Suoterapia* soundtrack illustrating the use of processing on the “soropilli” instrument as an expressive tool included in the sonic palette of the score.

In the film *Suoterapia*, one of the main purposes of the score was to depict the transformation in the main character's mental state, his path beyond the limit as he goes from a confidence-lacking introverted single dad to a brutal bird-devouring predator. As we have already mentioned in chapter 2.2.1 on how the location influences the choice of sonic palette, we have to also consider the ways in which that initial instrumentation would be altered to depict that transformation musically and whether the sonic elements chosen can express that change when being manipulated. The choice of the ringing rocks and the *soropilli*<sup>11</sup> were also made on the basis of how efficiently they can be manipulated to sound much bigger and more visceral than they initially do. In the case of the soropilli, we go from an innocent, comical-sounding mosquito-like instrument that quietly blends with the natural sounds of the swamp, to this massive distorted horn sound.



**[Video 16]** One of the later cues in *Kuinka huolehtia undulaateista* (2023) where humming is introduced to the instrumentation.

<sup>11</sup> traditional instrument from the Karjala region. A sort of whistle made of cane or straw.





[Video 17] Cue 3 in *Kuinka Huolehtia Undulaateista* (2023), where body percussion is first introduced alongside the flute.

The musical score extract shows three staves for flutes (Fl. 1, Fl. 2, Fl. 3) across measures 64 to 69. Fl. 1 plays a melodic line with eighth notes and rests. Fl. 2 plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. Fl. 3 plays a bass line with long notes and rests.

Extract from the flute score for *Cue 3* of *Kuinka Huolehtia Undulaateista* with thematic variations around the main theme melody.

In the short film *Kuinka Huolehtia Undulaateista* (2023) directed by Roosa Vuokkola, the instrumentation gradually shifts from one realm to the other throughout the story, as the film focuses more and more on the intimacy of its main character. The first time the “main theme” is

Fl. 1

$\text{♩} = 49$

Cue 6

13 14 15 16 17 18

Extract from the flute score for *Kuinka Huolehtia Undulaateista* - Main theme melody

introduced, it is through a diegetic cue of a nature documentary about budgie birds (“undulaatti”), which gives the main character the idea to purchase one for himself. As the story progresses, the music gradually replaces the percussive and bell-like instruments of the first diegetic cue to introduce sounds and instruments closer related to the human body and breath, first through the use of body percussion and wind instruments, and eventually with the introduction of humming and singing in the later cues.

We can also trace this back to the concept of *source scoring* described in earlier chapters and the use of a diegetic cue as the conceptual starting point for the entire score of the film. In order to clearly perceive these changes in instrumental colours, it seemed appropriate to use one main thematic material to vary throughout the short.

This is an example of how the score’s concept may not only include the overall instrumentation at my disposal but also the “rules” according to which I can lay those instrumental colours over the structure and form of the film.

The original concept included the use of whistling as part of the development towards more human-made sounds. But the director and producer brought to my attention the possible lugubrious and suspicious connotations that whistling would bring regarding the interpretation of the main character’s intentions. They described the use of whistling in the final scenes of the movie as giving the character deranged and almost manic traits that were absolutely not intended. Once more, these kinds of unexpected changes have to be seen as new inspirations to define and focus the score’s concept even further and remind us that the concept is not an immutable truth to be systematically followed after it is defined in the early stages of the process.

### 2.5.2 Plot twist and change of narrative focus

Sometimes the storyline goes beyond only evolving narrative elements through transformations. There are stories in which the entire narrative focus is shifted. We may consider this as another opportunity to define more sharply the concept for the film in question, in accordance with its unconventional storyline structures.



**[Video 18]** Cue 5 from *Thank You In Your Language* (dir. Fabian Munsterhjelm, 2022)

To illustrate this, we may draw another example from the short film *Thank You In Your Language* (dir. Fabian Munsterhjelm), in which the narration switches focus towards the end, as the main character realises she has been wrongly assuming the janitor would not be Finnish-speaking. The film then takes a twist where the main character embroils herself in the worst possible situation and desperately tries to get out of it without admitting her mistake.



After this twist, the whole “Flames of Love” aspect of the film is not anymore the main focus of the narrative. The question is then whether the chosen musical concept can take that twist and whether it is flexible enough to still achieve the score’s purpose, even when the narrative focus does not justify that choice in that moment of the film anymore. Since this is the closing scene of the film and the fact that the choice of that sonic palette would have hopefully been justified by previous scenes (especially the “Flames of Love” scene), I decided to keep faith in the concept and see if it would bend enough to suit the scene.

This choice led to a rather exaggerated contrast between image and sound, and dangerously plays around the limits of “wrongness”, lightheartedly ignoring coherence of scale and narrative stakes.

This is another way in which the narrative evolutions of the film may inform the conceptualisation process of the score. It is not enough to envision an interesting starting point for the musical language without considering how it may react to the narrative changes and twists of the storylines. But sometimes, pushing through those drastic turns in the story with the same musical concept throughout can bring surprising and inspiring audiovisual dissonance along with a sense of coherence to the whole.

### 3. REFERENCES / TEMP / GENRE

#### 3.1 References to genre conventions

In some cases, genres and conventions related to them are fundamental sources of information and inspiration for the development of the creative language of the film, in all departments. Without necessarily being considered a “genre film”<sup>12</sup>, references to specific filmmaking styles or nods to existing works may be used as defining elements for the overall cinematic language of the project.

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<sup>12</sup> A film that intends to fit the mould of a well-defined film genre.



**[Video 19]** Neighbour 3 scene from *Pyykkitupa* (dir. Fabian Munsterhjelm, 2021)

In the case of *Pyykkitupa* (EN: *Laundry*), I had to alter my original idea of the score concept to fit the intentions of the team in making references to the spaghetti-western genre. The visual aspect of the film also went towards that reference, using iconic camera movements and shot framings of the style.

This reference to the “western” style was already very early on a cornerstone of the director’s stylistic approach to the project. My original thoughts were to not take this reference too much into account in the score and stick to the washing machine concept as tightly as possible. But it became evident later on that music had to support that reference for it to play out as intended. For these reasons, harmonica and electric guitar were added to the instrumentation of the score. Without going into literal references, I used basic notions of the traditional tones and playing styles of those instruments in the western genre to define my way of using them in the score: clear tones and fast tremolos on the guitar, bends and glissandos on the harmonica...

This is an example of how the film score concept must be adapted to fit the purposes of referencing existing genres and styles and why such ambitions of the director and the team must be taken into account early on to avoid getting drawn too deeply into a musical concept that does not reach all of its intended goals.

### 3.2 Temp music

In Hollywood, temp tracks have become an almost inevitable part of the process. Due to the widespread implementation of *test screenings*<sup>13</sup> as part of the development of a film and usually held before the composer's involvement in the project, temp tracks have become increasingly popular. They are used not only to spare the test audience from the irritating experience of watching the film without music but also as a means for the director to express their musical intentions (in terms of style but also spotting<sup>14</sup>) to the studio and to the composer joining the project.

The use of temp music is probably one of the hottest topics in the field of film scoring, and composers take a liking to state their positions on the matter.

“It has handcuffed the composer. It has taken a lot of the decision-making about the music for a film out of the composer's hands and moved it into the director's, producer's and music editor's hands. 98 percent of the studio films that a composer gets hired on, the composer walks into a situation where everybody has already made up their mind about all the music in the movie. They are not really interested in your opinion. They want their temp score in a way that they can actually release it.” - Joe Kraemer

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<sup>13</sup> Screenings held for a selected audience before a film's release as a way of limiting the economic risks taken by major studios.

<sup>14</sup> A spotting session is the meeting in which the director and composer (and sometimes producer and music editor) decide on the ins and outs of musical cues in the film and their purpose in the scenes.

“I pretty much had to follow the map which had been laid down by the temp. When that came to comedy nobody wanted to stray too far from the thing they all felt safe with or got attached to. It becomes limiting for a composer. It just does.” - Rachel Portman

“If you can't learn something from the temp, it's your fault, not the temp's” - Henry Jackman (Badami and Bernstein 2022)

“With several parties getting used to this pre-existing, “temporary” music, it becomes increasingly difficult for the composer to come up with a personal concept for the score, or even to deliver music that is close enough to the temp tracks without its being plagiarism. As the composer is usually the last creative force to be brought onto a project, it is an inherent problem.” (Eicke 2019)

The temp-music culture is a specificity of the Hollywood industry but, with Hollywood's global influence on all film industries, it inevitably influences the processes of most filmmakers and I have encountered challenges related to temp even in my experience in short films.

In the short film *Stay* (dir. Annie Kane), temp music was used during the editing process as I got involved in the project only after the editor's cut<sup>15</sup> was finished. This did not end up being a big problem for me as the director herself was not very attached to it and considered it more as a tool for the picture editors to work with the right overall mood of the scenes. On the contrary, discussions over what we *did not* want to take from those temps turned out to be very fruitful. Seeing the cuts temped with very romantic piano tunes confirmed my wish to avoid using traditional acoustic instruments altogether. The music used as temp was good a representation of what the generic choice, the option of efficiency over originality, would have been. Those cues effectively played out the basic emotional load of the scenes but did not leave enough ambiguity or subtlety in the expression of more complex emotions the director intended to explore. As we

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<sup>15</sup> The first rough version of the edit, made solely by the editor based on the script and on the director's overall guidelines. It is usually much longer than the final cut, as it serves as the general outline of the film from which the editor will carve out the following edit versions, with a more consistent involvement of the director and more input from other departments such as sound and music.

will discuss in the following chapter, the original intention for the concept of the score would be for it to be largely influenced by the sonic choices of the sound designer. Therefore, I thought a good challenge would be to try to bring that deep emotional content suggested by the temp only with the use of the sonic palette determined by the score's concept (which included only the use of tinnitus-like ringing sounds and imitations of those on the flute). This restriction set by the sound palette would hopefully allow me to write maximally emotional cues without the fear of it turning out too tacky or inelegant as the music would still remain subtle, evocative and ambiguous due to its sonic content.

“The best temp is a mediocre one” – Robert Badami 2022

The core of the score's concept may also be found in the use of pre-existing music used in the film. *The Rover* (dir. David Michôd, 2014) features music by experimental rock band Tortoise, saxophonist Colin Stetson and Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi, around which the original music by Antony Partos and sound designer Sam Petty evolves to create an overall atmospheric and melancholic soundtrack. The interaction between the score and the pre-existing music sometimes creates « unconventional audiovisual combinations » (Kulezic-Wilson 2019), and gives the overall sense of an integrated soundtrack.

## 4. SOUND DESIGN

The relationship between score and sound design is an increasingly eminent topic in discussions around film sound both artistically and technically.

Not only have the musical styles in film largely expanded their horizons towards more sound-based genres<sup>16</sup>, technical evolutions have also brought the two processes very close to one another.

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<sup>16</sup> “Music in which sounds, not notes, form the basic unit” (Landy 2012)

Film composers are nowadays required to have great knowledge of music technology tools and techniques and therefore share a common knowledge base with sound designers. Composers are in control of the sound of their music and must consider how they are produced, recorded and mixed to fulfil their narrative purposes. The palette of the composer has expanded from notes and traditional instruments to include all aspects of sound, from the meaning of its source to the processing of its sonic qualities.

In the last fifteen years, many filmmakers and composers have focused on new ways of approaching music and sound in film and developed methods that aim for deeper interaction between the different elements of the soundtrack, « substituting traditional Hollywood scoring and mixing practices with a more adventurous language and methods that recognize the interconnectedness of all soundtrack elements » (Kulezic-Wilson 2019).

The term « haptic music », introduced by Miguel Mera refers to Laura Mark's concept of visual hapticity as a term describing the scores that « foreground the materiality of sound » and that « slip into or emulate noise through the employment of various compositional and performing techniques or the electronic processing of acoustic sounds » (Kulezic-Wilson 2019).

Composers such as Jonny Greenwood (*There Will Be Blood*, 2007, *The Master*, 2012) and Johan Johannsson (*Sicario*, 2015, *Arrival*, 2016) that are well known for their inventive scores « writing around the sound design » are prime examples of creators focused on the influence of sound design in the development of their scores concept.

Such methods and ideologies based on “blurring the lines between sound design and music” have led to what film music studies tend to call “integrated soundtracks”.

“Although music and sound design are both part of the sonic world and are eventually merged during the final mix for the ultimate print of the movie, they don't always interact during the post-production process.” (Eicke 2019)

There are multiple examples, again mostly from the Hollywood industry, that illustrate a lack of communication between composers and sound designers. *The Fellowship of the Ring* has a famous



example in which the sound design department realised only in the late stages of the post-production that Howard Shore had recorded a massive piece of orchestral music to a scene in which the sound designer Tim Nielsen had developed a concept around the use of silences and subtle nuances in sound effects.

My personal view on the matter is that I wish, as much as possible, to consider the overall “soundtrack” of a film, the combination of its sounding components, as one coherent whole. Michel Chion goes further as he claims the term “soundtrack” ceases to have any other significance than a technical one, once sounds are put in relation to picture. It is for him a term that only indicates the technical ensemble of sonic material, devoid of all significance or meaning as it is artificially separated from the visual (Chion 1990).

There is a tremendous amount of creative input to be inspired from when working closely with a sound designer. and the – surprisingly still widespread – idea that composers and sound designers would be fighting over expressive sonic bandwidth is to be forgotten.

Collaboration with sound designers is perhaps one of the most essential sources of inspiration for conceptual scoring in my opinion. It is with them, that the sonic reality of the film is defined and where the context for all narrative sound and music is set.

#### 4.1 Sonic Themes

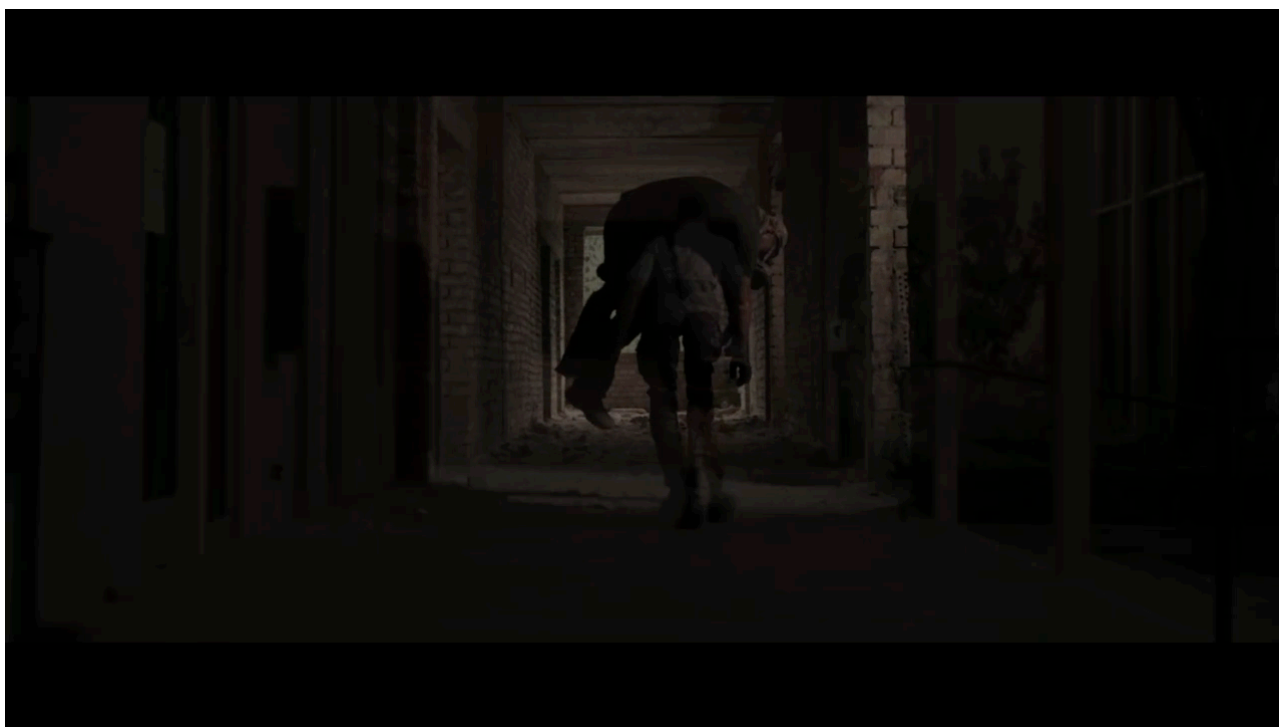
It has in some cases been best to define the sonic palette of the music through the work of the sound designer. “Themes” are often described, in the context of film soundtracks, as melodic identities of particular narrative elements. Often iconic *leitmotifs*, they refer to and evolve with those elements, most often characters, they are assigned to. I here wish to expand this definition to include the idea of sonic themes, which may not only be melodies but also sounds, used and varied upon in equally flexible ways as any musical motif. Themes are obviously not only a tool of the composer.



[Audio 10] Early demo around ideas of using “beating” and tinnitus sounds as the basis for the sonic palette

In the case of the short film *Stay* (directed by Annie Kane), the collaboration with the sound-designers Jackson Daneluk and Dorothy Lee was instigated at the very start of the process. It was clear to me already from the overall themes the film broaches and from the screenplay, that the score would have to be closely intertwined with sound, to depict the mental states and reactions of the main character, to dive inside his mind, his fears and traumas (see chapter 2.3.2 on the internal diegesis). I decided that in this case, the place where I would find the concept for the score would be in the sounds that Jackson would use to create these mental worlds and how he would sonically build those episodes and auditory flashbacks the character is having at multiple instances throughout the film. Spotting-wise, always having those triggering sounds as the in-points for the score would be the most subtle and stylistically appropriate option.

Before even starting to make any demos, we decided that Jackson would send me a list of selected tinnitus and heartbeat sounds that he would be planning to use in the film.



[Video 20] The “war sequence” of *Stay* (2022) directed by Annie Kane

The sampling process of the tinnitus sounds gradually led me on the path of using the flute as an instrumental equivalent. Combining similar sampling processes for tinnitus sounds and high flute notes played with different techniques allowed me to develop a more flexible sonic palette that could be shaped to be used in more expressive ways.

As mentioned earlier, the process for *Pyykkitupa* started for me with the recording of my grandmother's washing machine. This 40 minutes recording of the entire cycle became the basis of both my musical process and sound designer Juho Salaterä's development of sound. The story gave us a unique opportunity to base our processes on the same sound source.

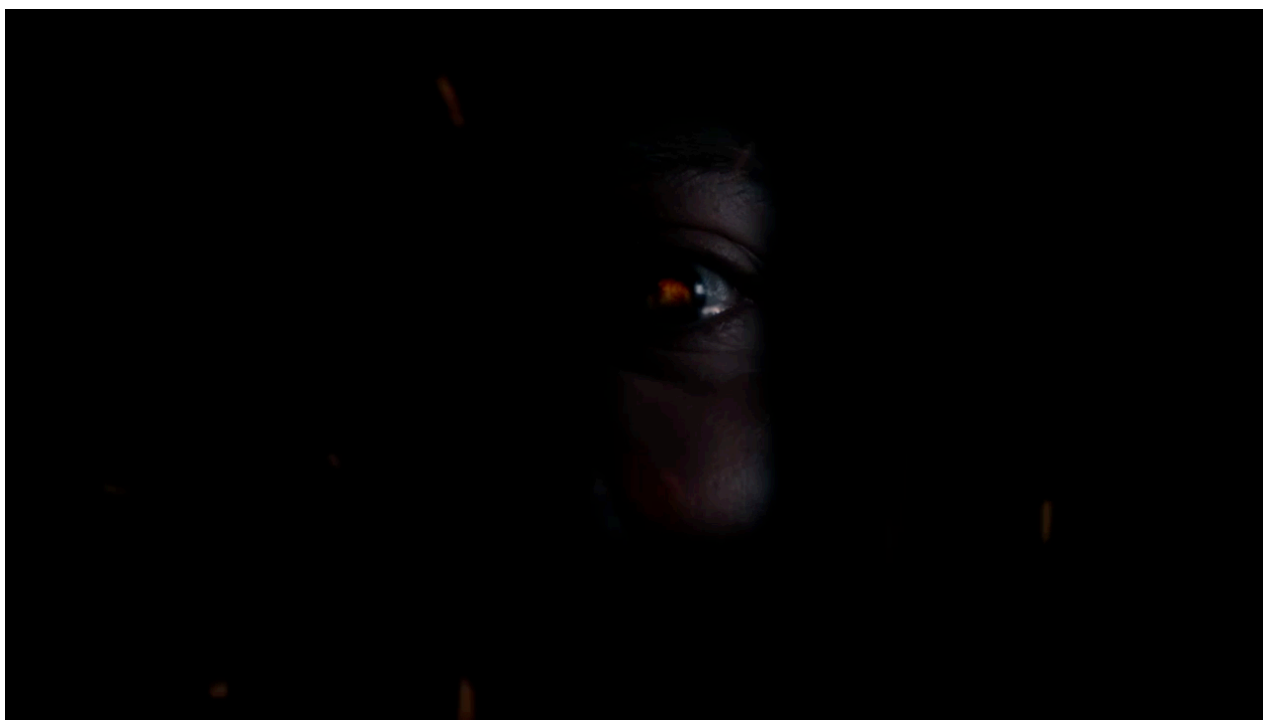
The process was in a way very particular as I had had time to create all sorts of atmospheres and ambiences from the washing machine recording before Juho joined the project. He came to the realisation that I had "pretty much already done the sound design" he had intended to do and therefore expressed his creative input through musical ideas (for instance in the addition of electric guitar to the score, as mentioned in chapter 3.1). Our process has since then formed a long-lasting cooperation where his musical approach to sound design and my sonic angle to film scoring meet in a synergetic way.



[Audio 11] Early demo for *Seraphim* using sounds provided by the sound designers

For *Seraphim* (2022), collaboration with the sound department started without actively considering any distinction between music and sound. We sent sonic experiments to each other and tried to develop the sonic identity of the story.

Because music and sound both developed their sonic language around similar conceptual starting points such as the use of the human voice, sound design and music inevitably met and sonically blended together in some key scenes of the film. Scenes such as the “keyhole scene” – in which the main character looks into the keyhole of the door leading to the basement where the “seraph” is kept – bring sound design and music to a level of synergy that makes their dissociation impossible.



[Video 21] The keyhole scene in *Seraphim* (2022)

We may link this topic about sound design to multiple other chapters of this thesis, such as the relationship of the score to the location and setting: the narrative idea of the swamp and forest in

*Suoterapia* is only a fraction of what actually makes the location a source of inspiration for the score's concept: the sonic representation and presence of those locations is the aspect that inevitably mostly interacts with the music.

Same goes for the score concept of *Pyykkitupa* (see [chapter 2.1.1](#)), which uses the washing machine as the core element of its sonic palette. This can be related to the idea introduced by Martine Huvenne that *musique concrète* would be “the basis of the intertwining of music and sound in film” (Huvenne 2016). She uses Schaeffer's concepts of *sound objects* and *reduced listening* as the pivotal elements between musical composition and sound design. The use of “concrete” elements in direct reference to objects in the diegesis of the film can therefore be a strong way to develop an integrated soundtrack. Further discussions around those topics fall beyond the scope of this thesis, but I find it essential to point out the importance of integrated soundtracks and the creative processes related to them in today's filmic landscape as they can be crucial in the development of score concepts, and certainly are at the heart of my personal interests in conceptual film scoring techniques.

## 5. RESOURCES

A very simple and down-to-earth aspect that may largely define the concept of the score is of course the resources available. I wish to encourage the perception of such limitations as an automatic restriction of the sonic palette and a very concrete but hopefully inspiring need for abstraction and simplification.

For *Circology*, the difficulty to record on-set sound of actors singing pushed us to find other ways to express the musical concept. Approaching the film more like a “musical” would have required the score to have a much larger role in the development of the screenplay, actors would have needed multiple rehearsals to learn their parts and lots of on-set and afterwards recordings would have had to be planned and budgeted. Without these possibilities, I had to rely mostly on non-

diegetic score to express the concept around “air”, “energy”, “community” and of course the “circle”.

In the case of *Suoterapia*, the concept itself may have led to a very different sonic palette had I been working with unlimited budget and time resources. The limitations in those regards forced me to look for ingenious solutions in the instrumentation choices to express the concept of “primitive”, “raw”, “close to nature”...

For lack of possibilities to acquire the oldest possible instruments on earth or to go record ringing rocks on another continent, I had to turn to available options and ask around for people to lend me whistles and other sonic material that would fit into my set of restrictions.

In the case of the short film *Kala* (EN: *Fish*, directed by Elisa Kujala, 2022) time and resource constraints informed the concept before the question of the sonic palette was even on the table. The short film revolves around difficult topics of loss and mourning, the main character visiting her friend in her startlingly empty apartment as flashes of her disappearing interrupt the realism of



[Video 22] Scene from *Kala* (dir. Elisa Kujala, 2022)



the situation. Somewhere between a memory and an anticipation of the tragedy to come, the viewer can never be sure if the events shown have happened already or if her friend is only a ghost of her memory from before she was lost. I had to narrow the concept down as much as possible for the music to be subtle and meaningful with as few distractions and filler elements as possible. I decided to limit the sonic palette of the score to the exclusive use of electromagnetic waves and radio interference. Basing the whole soundtrack on one sonic source allowed me not only to comply with the limitations in resources but also to have a stronger statement and impact through the score.

Limitations in time, budget and available resources can be seen as another set of inspiring restrictions, narrowing down and focusing the musical concept even more.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have gone through multiple ways in which different aspects of filmmaking may become cornerstones in the development of a soundtrack concept. Through the projects I have had the chance to participate in and to share in this paper, I have found that every stage of the filmmaking process and every creator involved in the different departments of its making may become the heart of the film score concept. The art of determining where to place that focus, and where to anchor the elaboration of the sonic palette and the musical language of the film is what stimulates me the most in the highly collaborative craft that is film scoring, and motivates me to continue focusing my career on this path.

The key idea of this scoring method is the sense of musical identity. The conceptualisation process is about establishing the right restrictions and initial conditions for the development of the score in order to find a unique voice for the project in question. My goal is to emphasise the pre-meditation and planning process of film scoring to hopefully get to that unifying idea from which the thread can be pulled to fit music's various roles in the film. The notion of starting on a blank slate for each new project is also a clear outcome of this ideology. By going against default instrumentations or any kind stylistic or methodological expectations dictated by factors outside of the artistic goals of the project in question, I wish to emphasise on the plurality of ways to find new and exciting starting points for the film scoring process that emerge straight from the story and the project and embrace its specificities.

The concentration of the conceptualisation processes to the very beginning of the film score timeline is of course only an ideological ambition of this method, as the reality often is that the concept has to be adjusted and modified along the way, as more and more narrative and external factors of filmmaking get involved in the process and the ambitions of the project get clarified. But those surprises and obstacles may also be considered sources of inspiration for the abstraction process and in focusing the score's artistic direction. The goal is to restrict the musical language as much as possible only to what is meaningful to the project.

### Can conceptualisation go too far?

We must also consider the limits of this way of thinking and working, or at least acknowledge the difficulties encountered if blindly following these principles.

It is easy to forget that over-intellectualising can be a hindrance to the final result. I do not consider conceptual scoring as a means of complexifying the musical language nor inserting highbrow easter eggs for the exclusive pleasure of the analytical ears. Most of what film scores do is speak to the subconscious, evoke visceral and immediate reactions in the audience, or implant connections and subtle narrative information to the back of the listeners' minds, all as only a part of the audio-visual narrative experience that is cinema. Therefore, I see the conceptual process as a way to unify, focus and increase the impact of the statement asserted by the music through the sonic choices of the score.

As Patrick Kirst pointed out in his masterclass, not all films are propitious for conceptual scoring. Music may have a million different roles in a story, and some projects will “only” require it to quietly accompany the visuals or fill in spaces in the soundtrack (Kirst 2022).

Sometimes, trying too hard to define a strict concept for the music/sound goes against the intentions of the director or other decision-maker, who may have a very defined idea of what they are expecting stylistically. And sometimes the reasons for such requests or references are purely personal to the director and do not come from any conceptual thought process. The same goes for the compositional process itself: I don't think that creating elaborate concepts and rules for the soundtrack should ever be considered a prerequisite for a high-quality film score. Although every project I have worked on has always allowed some degree of premeditation and establishment of meaningful restrictions for myself, some projects simply don't call for a deeply conceptual score. Others do not provide the resources or the time to develop such thinking and require more generic efficiency.

In any case, I must insist once again on the fact that the kind of conceptual thinking I endorse in this text only refers to a creative tool for the film-scoring process. The concepts in question are always meant to be challenged, reshaped and remodelled along the way in the complex and deeply

collaborative art of filmmaking. And we have, through the different chapters of this thesis, encountered multiple instances in which the theoretical concept initially put in place for the composition process had to be altered due to a myriad of possible reasons.

### Future prospects

I look forward earnestly to the future projects I will have the opportunity to take part in and anticipate with curiosity the challenges I may face in applying my ideas and processes described in this thesis to larger-scale productions and more commercial purposes.

How differently do the processes of abstraction and restriction have to be carried out to fulfil the narrative needs of longer forms and more complex narrative arcs? Music may have to take on many more roles within the same story in feature films and TV series: will the score concepts have to be more vague and broad to be able to encapsulate the complexity of music's place in the project? Or will there be a need to perhaps consider having sets of multiple complementary concepts for different musical purposes? How does the greater involvement of commercial pressures influence the possibility to stick to an unconventional score concept? Will it be possible to set the balance as I wish regarding which aspects of filmmaking to focus the concept on, or will there be a larger amount of external factors and requests that have to be taken into account?

I hope to find the answers to these questions and many more as I get involved in larger and more complex productions and continue studying and researching theories and methodologies around conceptual film scoring in a wider context.

As I write these pages, the pre-production of my first large-scale TV-series project "Myrkyt" (dir. Max Ovaska, prod. Yellow Films) for a major streaming platform is starting. The series will consist of 8 episodes of 25 minutes each. This project will be a perfect opportunity to test how the ideas and processes I have developed on shorter productions will adapt to the tentacular complexity of a TV series and the higher commercial pressures that come with it.

## BODY OF WORK

*Pyykkitupa (2021)*, directed by Fabian Munsterhjelm

*Suoterapia (2021)*, directed by Santtu Salminen

*Thank You In Your Language (2022)*, directed by Fabian Munsterhjelm

*Conference of the Birds (2022)*, directed by Shamsil Balkis

*Metsänpeitto (2022)*, directed by Teresa Siltanen

*Stay (2022)*, directed by Annie Kane

*Seraphim (2022)*, directed by Oscar Ramos

*Kala (2022)*, directed by Elisa Kujala

*Ilo P. Illerin Taikatempu (2023)*, directed by Veikko Timonen

*Kuinka Huolehtia Undulaateista (2023)*, directed by Roosa Vuokkola

*Circology (2023)*, directed by Tero Peltoniemi

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