

## Shutter/Shudder to Think: Cinema after Cage

Edward Slopek

Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

### Abstract

When invited by Martin Scorsese to compose an original soundtrack for *Shutter Island*, Robbie Robertson, *The Band's* guitarist and Scorsese's long-time collaborator, proposed a selection of works by modern composers instead. Among those were *Root of an Unfocus* (1944) and *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947) by the avant-garde composer John Cage. The first is a prepared piano piece conceived at a pivotal moment in Cage's career as he moved away from composing for percussion orchestra; the second accompanied the color animation sequence in *Dreams that Money Can Buy* by the Dadaist painter and filmmaker Hans Richter. Employing indeterminate methods to "circumvent any conscious or unconscious communication of his own subjectivity through his music," Cage's "aleatory" approach has subsequently been deployed by artists and filmmakers, its anarchic possibilities steadily infiltrating a range of filmic practices. Taking as my point of departure Cage's largely unacknowledged influence on mainstream cinema, I explore the inventive potentials of his methods and consider them in light of Adorno's aesthetic category of the "shudder", a novel concept of spontaneity involving "involuntary and free receptivity before the unknown." I conclude by focusing on cinema after Cage in three geographic regions: Asia, Europe, and North America.

**Keywords:** Shutter Island, John Cage, Theodor Adorno, Cinema, Shudder

### Introduction: Crossing the Great Divide

When invited by Martin Scorsese to compose an original soundtrack for his forthcoming film *Shutter Island* (2010), Robbie Robertson, former lead guitarist and primary songwriter for *The Band* and the director's long-time collaborator, suggested that instead of a traditional score a selection of modern composers be used. According to Robertson, Scorsese had confided that he lacked "any ideas where to start musically" ([https://theband.hiof.no/albums/shutter\\_island.html](https://theband.hiof.no/albums/shutter_island.html)) for his first horror film since 1991's *Cape Fear*. *Shutter Island*, an adaptation of a moody, atmospheric and claustrophobic suspense thriller of the same name by Dennis Lehane, is a masterpiece of visceral emotion. Centered on two U.S. Marshals dispatched to a high-security federal asylum for the criminally insane on a remote and barren island to investigate the implausible disappearance of a patient incarcerated for murdering her three children, it explores the boundaries between delusion, reality, and representation. Scorsese's version, filled with fantasy sequences, flashbacks, and depictions of altered

states, is a powerful, shadowy neo-noir pastiche that tracks the tightly wound central character, Teddy, an ex-soldier haunted by memories of his wife's accidental death-by-fire and his presence at the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, as he spirals into a world of madness and paranoia, in a film that is in the end itself framed by a semidark Calligarian misdirection - with a secret that indulges viewers long after that secret has been divulged.

After reading the script, Robertson, who had previously collaborated with Scorsese as composer, producer, or consultant on a number of his films, including *Raging Bull*, *The King of Comedy*, *Casino*, and *The Departed*, was convinced that in order to add emotional texture to the film that didn't simply function as a cue to the action or to reinforce some plot point, but instead imparted a menacing and uncanny mood of suspense, tension and ambient unease, a soundtrack of mostly modern avant-garde classical pieces was necessary. Robertson, who for decades has been a fan of music residing outside the realm of popular culture - "music that...was never trendy, was never what's happening" (<https://www.theringer.com/music/2019/11/27/20985335/robbie-robertson-irishman-the-band-martin-scorsese>) - subsequently hand-selected a collection of renowned twentieth-century modern composers such as John Cage, John Adams, Morton Feldman, György Ligeti, Gustav Mahler, Lou Harrison, Alfred Schnittke, Max Richter, Nam June Paik, Giacinto Scelsi, and Brian Eno for inclusion in the soundtrack. This opportunity to "show off these brilliant composers" signified what "may be the most outrageous and beautiful soundtrack I've ever heard," according to Robertson. In particular, he "always thought" that John Cage's 1944 piece for prepared piano, *Root of an Unfocus*, "would be great in a movie...[so that]... when Marty [Scorsese] sent me the script, this is just where it went." (<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/02/shutter-island-as-a-new-music-paradise.html>) Another Cage work, *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947), was also selected. The first piece is a work conceived at a pivotal moment in Cage's career as he was moving away from composing for percussion orchestra. Ostensibly about fear, *Root of an Unfocus* is a piece that almost exclusively features Cage's percussive prepared piano. Its distinguishing compositional characteristic however is a temporal structure not tied to the movement of emotional meaning, thus allowing Cage to work independently, freeing him from "fitting one thing to another". The second piece (*Music for Marcel Duchamp*) accompanied the color animation sequence in a film by the Dadaist Hans Richter, *Dreams that Money Can Buy*.

As a musician, writer, performer, and theorist, Cage's impact on contemporary art practices has been extensive. At the forefront of developments in both acoustic and electronic music, Cage employed the use of chance operations, a mix of indeterminate methods and rigorously structured means for producing sounds so as "to circumvent any conscious or unconscious communication of his own subjectivity through his music" (1998, 253). But more on Cage later. For the moment, the most striking thing about the inclusion of these two works of his in the soundtrack to *Shutter Island* is, more tellingly, the unintended problematization of the relationship between the contemporary neo-avant-garde and popular culture.

Disputes over cultural distinctions, instantly evoking a now familiar and pervasive cultural divide marked by an increasing split - high/low, elite/popular, modernism/mass culture, fine art/craft, art/entertainment - have, since the heyday of the avant-garde, hardened to the point that room to maneuver between these poles is typified by three general attitudes: (1) *elitism*, the view that some artistic practices are more valuable, even morally superior, on the whole; (2) *populism*, the belief that, contrary to the elitist stance, the popular arts are more alive, meaningful and authentic to the average person, and; (3) *pluralism*, the ecumenical sense that the interweaving of popular and high art forms possess greater artistic value and desirability. Trading on elitist presumptions based on the existence of a superior type of culture (i.e., the Enlightenment, the Renaissance), the precursors to the modern system of the arts were grouped together into separate, coherent, and distinctive categories of activities and artifacts, with the fine arts distinguished from the crafts. Furthermore, since their inception in the 18th Century the fine or "high" arts have actively aspired to exclude the artifacts of popular media from membership by the very nature of such a hierarchical division. In seeking a "necessary brokerage" between high and low cultural forms, the borrowing and relocating of images from popular culture to reinvigorate its own idioms as well as to forge alliances with other subcultures (think North American 'Pictures' artists such as Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Dara Birnbaum, or Pipilotti Rist's later hallucinatory work, appropriating images from mass culture to carry out subversive critiques), the flow of appropriations has primarily moved in one direction - from mass culture to neo-avant-garde. As Crimp states:

Instead of relying upon references to the conventions of modernist art, these young artists seek their authority in a wide range of conventions stemming from film and television. They borrow images and procedures from these mediums as material for their own investigations of what a picture is. (2019, 272)

Even if implicitly the two sides of the distinction do not possess equal footing, modernism and mass culture, according to Huyssen (1986, 44), have since their emergence in the 19th century engaged in a compulsive *pas de deux*, through the neo-avant-garde's pressing desire to incorporate

the expressions of vernacular culture. In a famous often-quoted letter responding critically to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Adorno offers a subtle take on this "great divide" in his plea for parity. Even if he has often been dismissed as a miserable elitist who condemned and resisted popular culture in the name of "high art", it would be, he nonetheless argues, a mistake to romanticize the new mass forms (Benjamin's position) as it would be to do likewise with the bourgeois tradition for "both (cinema and the great work of art) bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change...both are torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one for the other" (Fracina, 1999). Thus, contrary to his elitist image, this statement belies the conviction that he was solely intent on valorizing modernist high art and conversely denigrating popular forms of entertainment.

Insofar as the neo-avant-garde has continued to discover and renew itself through its professed involvement with the materials of low and mass culture, calling upon reputed low cultural forms to displace and defamiliarize given contemporary practices, it has transgressed the limits and boundaries of high art practices (e.g., Cubism's interweaving of high and low; Pop art's wholesale incorporation of popular imagery). Accordingly, the result has been a productive - and pluralist - confusion within the normal hierarchy of cultural prestige, calling that hierarchy into question by breaking down past artistic authority, with traditionalists defending the claim of a hierarchy of artistic value, while populists (or relativists) denying it. Even so, the tension between moments of negation and moments of accommodation arising from this implosion of categories within today's liberated contemporary art system still leaves intact the two properties that are conferred upon lower artistic status: namely, that the two primary aims of the lower arts are (1) to provide entertainment and (2) to produce basic bodily responses (i.e., physical, emotional reactions). Perceived through the lens of the neo-avant-garde, the "lower" personal, expressive appeals to sensory experience are seen ultimately to legitimate state and institutional ideology. According to Benjamin Buchloch,

Abandoned modes of perception (and aesthetic production) seem to linger around in history like deserted tools of a formerly potent force, ready to be reintroduced at any given moment by the artists who voluntarily accept the limitations of being nothing but the blind instruments and timely executors of a reactionary legacy. (2003, 122)

In an ironic, yet sincere, reversal, Robertson and Scorsese loot the concert halls and parlors of contemporary modern music, removing key works from the often rarified and isolated pedestal of high art and high culture and transferring them into the domain of mass consumption, in the course of doing so the move challenges the privileged spaces of "the Great Divide" that set apart modernism. I would contend that, beyond

Cage's appearance on Italian television in 1958 where he won a mushroom-identification contest, and the American television game show, *I've Got a Secret*, which aired in 1960, and not since *O Superman*, Laurie Anderson's 1982 vocoder-led looping riff on an aria by Jules Massenet performance piece about American imperialism and the global traffic in arms, had become a surprising Number One cross-over hit, has a work of neo-avant-garde lineage, such as Cage's two *Shutter Island* pieces (*Root of an Unfocus*, *Music for Marcel Duchamp*), migrated into the sphere of mass-produced pleasure and enjoyed a wide audience. With *Shutter Island* earning nearly \$300M worldwide on an \$80M production budget, scoring Scorsese's second highest-grossing film, even if occupying a middling 68% aggregate among critics, Cage, while still not making him a recognizable household name, secured his broadest international audience to date. This merging of "advanced" art and mass culture stands in sharp contrast to the "niche-garde" of geographical and conceptual places where groups, artists, and spectators gather in venues ranging from expensive lofts to small claustrophobic theaters to living rooms. Regardless, it was in these spaces that Cage revolutionized modern music, changed the approach to composition, and redefined the way modern audiences experience music and, most significantly, sound. Indeed, according to architect Frank Gehry, Cage's extent of influence is, even if uncredited, immeasurable (as we shall see below). Gehry writes:

I think John was questioning conventions and in questioning them he was questioning our lives and our world around us. They were very profound questions and they resonated profoundly in the art world and the music world...and every body else's world who touched it. And I think it's had its impact on the general public... whether they know it or not... It's been absorbed and subsumed into the mass culture. (Gehry, 2012)

Cage's influence on music, along with nearly every other art form including dance, literature, visual art, and theatre is by and large secure, giving rise to the epithet, "The John Cage Century". With respect to experimental cinema, he was certainly no stranger, having apprenticed in 1937 with the German animator Oskar Fischinger; made a brief appearance in Maya Deren's 1944 film *At Land*; composed *Music for Marcel Duchamp* for the already-mentioned segment in Hans Richter's 1947 portmanteau film *Dreams That Money Can Buy*; that same year collaborated on Sidney Peterson's film *Horror Film* which dealt with the "choreographed interpretation of a dancer's anxiety before starting her theater routine"; provided music for Herbert Matter's 1950 *Works of Calder*; gave permission in 1954 to Stan Brakhage to incorporate *Sonatas and Interludes* into a soundtrack for Brakhage's film *Interim*; with the sculptor Richard Lippold co-directed *The Sun Film* in 1956; directed *Chessfilmnoise* in 1988, and produced his only feature-length film, *One 11 and 103*, shortly before he passed away in 1992. Notwithstanding the effect these films have had within

the confines of the artworld subculture, these works were, as Wartenberg indicates,

made for a small audience, not for the huge audience that Hollywood films aim to reach. As a result, they are more hermetic, harder to watch and understand, and call for a very different type of attention than do standard fiction films. (2007, 117)

Unlike his influence in the foregoing esoteric circles, and despite what can be best described as his covert impact on popular film, Cage's effect on Hollywood and mainstream cinema has mostly gone relatively unnoticed. Though, as Bruhn has noted, in the case of *Shutter Island* (though, not referencing Cage specifically),

the meeting of avant-garde and popular music contributes to the bewildering musical mood of the film and therefore perfectly fits what has been exemplified with numerous films and described as the 'strange genre that occupies the uncanny realm between horror and film noir. (2013, 333)

Such contributions still however remain, especially with regard to Cage, regrettably absent in the literature and discourse surrounding popular, Hollywood-driven films. To redress this situation and, in tandem, to advance a model of my own that seeks to enhance and deepen the role played by Cage, I will next enlist elements of the interpretive framework associated with Theodor Adorno, in particular his concept of the *shudder*, to address the issues raised above.

## With Adorno

A German-Jewish cultural critic, philosopher, musicologist, classically-trained pianist, as well as major theoretician of the "Great Divide", Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) was a leading member of the Frankfurt School, an autonomous collective of scholars associated with the Institute of Social Research whose practices are considered virtually synonymous with Critical Theory. Over the course of his prolific career, he wrote some twenty-three volumes spanning topics from metaphysics to analyses of Hegel's philosophy to musicology and jazz to contemporary mass culture. In such influential works as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951) and *Philosophy of Music* (1973) he engaged in a rigorous analysis of post-war capitalist culture besides coining the term "culture industry". While his output is without doubt impressive in addition to being quite difficult, in view of the fact that it is often written in a stylistically nonlinear and idiosyncratic manner, an examination of its many bold substantive claims is not of interest here. For reasons of brevity, I will only take into account his broader concept of art articulated in his unfinished and most ambitious book, *Aesthetic Theory*, namely, art constitutes that which is "located in a historically changing constellation of elements... [that]...refuses definition" (1997, 11). A defence of the autonomous, primarily dissonant, artworks of the modernist movement, it was posthumously published

at the almost exact moment when high modernism was being programmatically dismantled, displaced and challenged by new developments in the arts, movements such as minimalism, pop art, *arte povera*, installation and conceptual art. On this point, Isabelle Graw figures that

Assuming one wished to speculate, I think there is a reason to suppose that he [Adorno] would probably have responded with alienation to the conceptual practices of the late 1960s, which declared their submission to a system and the elimination of the subject as their program. (2003, 15)

This is hardly surprising, given Adorno's paradoxical allegiance to high modernism, disdain for mass culture, and, it must be acknowledged, his lack of interest at all in art *exhibitions*. For a text that has been declared obsolete, anachronistic, and of a bygone age of modernism since nearly its moment of publication, the theoretical impact of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* cannot be overestimated. And this is due primarily to the relevance and continued reliance on a battery of fundamental concepts introduced there, such as, for instance, autonomy, mimesis, truth content, heteronomy, form, and the shudder.

It is the last concept - the somewhat mysterious *shudder* - that will serve as a guiding thread throughout my analysis of John Cage's impact on cinema. Though modern art may have gone elsewhere since the high point of modernism and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* "in many respects, seems to belong to a past that is moving away from us at increasing speed" (Wallenstein, 2021, 177), I argue that Adorno's concept of the *shudder* as a kind of primordial and visceral experience - as will be explained shortly - provides a singularly useful optic through which we can gauge Cage's range of cinematic influence.

## And a Shudder

Reacting against the absolutism and severity of Austro-German classical music, John Cage resisted the approach to music as "rational discourse," developing instead a variety of methods to circumvent conscious or unconscious communication of his subjectivity through his music, increasingly using chance mechanisms to generate musical works. "Any composing strategy which is wholly 'rational,'" Cage declared in 1949, "is irrational to the extreme" (Ross, 2008, 404). Such is Cage's veiled critique of the baleful legacy of the Enlightenment, where the boundlessly optimistic and privileged values of objective and value-free, operational and testable, science and moral thought have become a prison-house as opposed to a means of escaping detention, serving to extend calculating instrumentality, inevitably leading to the domination of humanity and mastery of nature within a totally administered society. Originally an assault on religious dogmatism, the Enlightenment was meant to be, as expressed by Kant, "the end of the intellectual immaturity of humans" that accompanies the rise

of the Age of Reason. However, in the subsequent ascent of instrumental reason, it has abandoned its quest for meaning and led to not only the "dissolution of myths and substitution of knowledge for fancy... [but to the]...disenchantment of the world," as Adorno and Horkheimer proclaim in the opening pages of their classic, much-celebrated *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Though not always in agreement with Cage's philosophy of music, viewing his work at one point as an "ineffectual revival of Dadaism" (Branden, 2011, ), troubled by and critical of Cage's insistence on letting sounds be themselves, on "the hypothesis that the note 'exists' rather than 'functions' [being] either ideological or else a misplaced positivism," Adorno in the final analysis *does* credit Cage's music with acting as "a protest against the dogged compliance of music with the domination of nature" (Branden, 2016, 169). Indeed, Adorno echoes Cagean ideas on the strength of his belief that "the task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects" and that by "crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself," art's autonomy, its very sociality, results in an antinomic way in the "determinate negation of a determinate society" (1997, 225-6). For Adorno, as for Cage, autonomous works of art give voice to the victims of the domination which Adorno re-brands *second nature*, that field of forces or mechanisms of collective constraint within which individuals replicate their own forms of oppression. As Cage once said, "I try to get it so people realize that they themselves are doing their experience and that it's not being done to them" (Kostelanetz, 2013, 109). No longer burdened by an *aesthetic comportment* equipped with psychological intentions, sounds are just sounds, music is heard (for the first time) without the need to be understood. Alternately, Adorno defines aesthetic comportment as the capacity to *shudder*. "Ultimately," he claims,

aesthetic comportment would be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image. What is later called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder, in which subjectivity stirs without yet being, is however being-touched-by-the-other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins love and knowledge. (1997, 331)

In this and related passages throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno understands *shudder* in two different, but interlacing, senses: the first sense, *Erschütterung*, describes a physical tremor or vibration, convulsion, traumatic breakdown, concussion, or physical or psychological shock; while the second sense, *Schauer*, translates as shudder, shiver, quiver, palpitate, or thrill, and is connected to a physical and emotional experience, that of cold and fear. By way of an

artwork's combined threefold (emotional, somatic and cognitive) effect, the *shudder* generates in the recipient a type of primordial visceral encounter with terror and strangeness, a feeling of powerlessness, of being fearfully overwhelmed, by a once threatening nature. In that respect, the *shudder* shares commonalities with both the Freudian *uncanny* and the Kantian *sublime*. According to Wellmer,

The sublime appears as shocking, shattering, moving, overpowering. If one understands the moment of aesthetic experience as one of a condensed presence, through which the temporal continuum of ordinary experience is suspended, the experience of the sublime may be characterized by an additional element of violence, a violence that bursts into the interior space of the aesthetic distance, shaking up, dislodging or disquieting the subject, generating a tremor, a vertigo, loosening the confines of the experiencing ego. To be sure, this happens *under conditions* of aesthetic distance: the shaking up of the subject, its stepping outside of itself, is part of an *aesthetic* experience only where the subject at the same time remains within its own boundaries in a state of utmost concentration. (1998, 163)

Appearing at first glance to be a species of the *aesthetics of effect*, not unlike Tolstoy's theory of art in which "the same artistic impression" (1996, 38) is reproduced in every recipient by means of *infection*, on closer examination it can be seen that Adorno distances himself from this kind of isomorphic aesthetic experience by introducing a cognitive dimension that both confirms as well as negates the comprehending subject. "Shudder," he writes, being radically opposed to the conventional idea of experience, provides no

particular satisfaction for the I; it bears no similarity to desire. Rather, it is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude. (1997, 245)

The experience of *shudder*, as realized in the act of listening to 4'33", Cage's notorious "silent" piece, presupposes a cognitive moment that transforms its subject (as it did Cage in his study of Zen Buddhism and eastern philosophies), in that

Most of us have all been in a situation where complete quiet is required. Typically these situations (i.e. during a solemn occasion) can make us feel rather awkward. People feel uncomfortable because they try not to 'break the silence' with a cough or attract attention by some bodily movement. (Olivieri-Monroe, 2011)

The *shudder*, in not mimicking its object, instead interrupts or defamiliarizes its object with awe, respect and fear. It does so by breaking with reproducibility and providing infinite simulations, hence unsettling its audience. Bypassing the ego, taste and expression through the application of chance procedures, Cage's 'silent piece' releases a *shudder*, an echo of that archaic dimension of experience of the audible world around us where absence (silence) is as equally

important as presence (sound). For Adorno, as for Cage, the shudder shocks the aesthetic subject, forcing an encounter with non-identity, with the other. In doing so, instrumental rationality is undermined, overwhelmed by the shudder's memory. "Under patient contemplation," Adorno concludes, "artworks begin to move. To this extent they are truly afterimages of the primordial shudder in the age of reification (1997, 79)... Artworks remain enlightened because they would like to make commensurable to human beings the remembered shudder" (80). Having established the crux of what is meant by *shudder*, I will return to my original thesis, now situated within Adorno's compelling concept: namely, that while Cage's trajectory crossed and intersected with a number of aesthetic practices by which several generations charted, modeled, and engaged the discourses underpinning filmmaking, this Cagean movement in the extant canonic histories of the movies has been relatively overlooked or eclipsed. To pursue this will require an investigation of the contiguous labyrinth of affinities, influences, networks and discursive interconnections over against which Cage stands at its center.

## A Labyrinth of Linkages

Art is related to its other as in a magnet to a field of iron filings.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1997, 7)

If what has happened in the one person were communicated directly to the other, all art would collapse, all the effects of art would disappear

Valéry, *Reflections*

In one of a series of interviews, Richard Kostelantz asked Cage whether or not he perceived a possible "Cagean" influence present in conceptual art. Cage responded negatively, maintaining instead that ideas are equally available to us and "what appears to be my influence is merely that I fell into a situation that other people are also falling into" (Kostelantz, 2013, 208). Cage may have humbly shied away from the matter of influences, but as Cage biographer Kay Larson effused, quoting from Kyle Gann's obituary: "Cage was the river that dozens of avant-garde tributaries flowed into and from" (2012, xiii). The most influential figure in post-war music, he has continued to cast a long shadow as not only the unchallenged father figure of American experimental music, but as an influence extending far beyond our understanding of sound alone. Composer, inventor, philosopher, facilitator, agent provocateur, shaman, clown, fool, and guru, Cage strove to relinquish a composer's control through the pioneering use of "chance operations" and "indeterminacy" - "Giving up control so sounds can be sounds" (1961, 73). In so doing, he profoundly influenced all the arts, establishing himself as figurehead to such movements in the arts as Pop art, Happenings, performance art, installation art, process art, and Minimalism. Indeed, the Fluxus movement arose out of the classes taught at the New School in New York. The founder of Fluxus, George Maciunas, observed, "Wherever John Cage

went he left a little John Cage group, which some admit, some not admit his influence. But the fact is there, that those groups formed after he left.” According to Brian Eno, Cage prepared the ground for the emergence of ambient music with his 1948 composition, *In a Landscape*. Leading experimental composer George Crumb called Cage “a liberating influence for all kinds of composers throughout the world”; Ray Duncan described him in 1964 as the “most intriguing and most infuriating composer in the world”; Yoko Ono claimed that “What Cage did for us on an artistic level was to tell us that we were all right”; and Cornelius Cardew not only stated that Cage’s work “represents unquestionably the most important development in musical composition since the war...[but]...will exert more influence on future evolutions and changes in composition.” Over and above that, Cage’s reach has extended well beyond the art world subculture, to The Beatles, Sonic Youth, Wilco, Throbbing Gristle, Aphex Twin, and Stereolab, among others.

In 2016, the same year that Linda Ronstadt, Run-D.M.C., Herbie Hancock, Celia Cruz, and Jefferson Airplane were given Lifetime Achievement Awards, Cage received a Trustee Award from the Recording Academy (the Grammys) for his significant contributions to the entire music industry. In a speech honoring Cage at the ceremony, Sonic Youth co-founder Thurston Moore cited Cage’s compositions as the “true template for all that is radical and challenging in music and art today.” At the close of the 1980s, the choreographer/filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, who in her turn translated Cage’s theories into an *aesthetic of difference* mobilized around the principles of openness, contingency, multiplicity, and nonhierarchical structures, announced that Cage had opened a “veritable Pandora’s Box, an act that launched in due course a thousand dancers’, composers’, writers’, and performance artists’ ships.”

Since his death in 1992, John Cage the person has been displaced by “John Cage” the legend, with his influence unassailable. While the “Gagean effect” has become endemic to contemporary culture, one aspect of Cage’s influence has been neglected - that is, his effect on mainstream cinema (even if Cage never went to the movies, preferring live performances instead). Indeed, beyond Richard Brown’s book-length examination of Cage’s involvement with avant-garde and experimental filmmakers (2019), nothing substantial has been written on this topic. This shortfall needs therefore to be amended, not so much to demonstrate cause - which the Czech-American literary critic and humanist René Wellek declared could not in fact be shown (1970, 35) - as to establish both *influence* in the form of “irreducible dynamisms drawing lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 237) and *affinities* consisting of resemblances in structure, style, mood or idea between works. I will do so by situating his effect on cinema by focusing on a selection of key films from the standpoint of his successors and contemporaries in three international contexts: 1) Cage and Asia; 2) Cage and Europe; and 3) Cage and America.

## 1) CAGE AND ASIA: *Kwaidan* (1964)

Prior to 1962, Cage had never been to the East. It was only upon receiving an invitation from Toshi Ichihyanagi and Yoko Ono, both of whom had been students in his New School for Social Research class in experimental composition and had since remained friends, that he embarked, along with the pianist David Tudor and Peggy Guggenheim, on a thirty-day performance tour of Japan sponsored by the Sogetsu Art Center. Cage’s visit yielded a cultural exchange that offered an alternative to the Germanic serialist austerity then embraced by the Japanese avant-garde and for many Japanese composers it represented a turning point in their understanding of music and aesthetic theory. The result was designated by the press as the “John Cage Shock”.

Upon his return to Japan two years later, Cage met with the film composer Takemitsu Toru. This meeting had a profound impact on Takemitsu, whose major influences on his musical language at the time were those of Debussy and Olivier Messiaen. Inspired by Cage to re-examine Japanese aesthetics and to take a positive and renewed view of Japanese tradition, Takemitsu gained an appreciation of traditional Japanese theater and instruments. “I got a shock,” he remarked, “I suddenly recognized I was Japanese...[and]...I came to recognize the value of my own tradition.”

One of the great Japanese film composers, Takemitsu has scored over one-hundred films, including major works by Kurosawa, Nagisa Oshima, Masahiro Shinoda, and Shohei Imamura. The influence of Cage is, however, most readily apparent in Masaki Kobayashi’s masterpiece, *Kwaidan*, a four-part adaptation of Lafcadio Hearn’s ghost stories, especially in Takemitsu’s now famous dream-like *biwa* (Japanese lute) score. Tapping into the native tradition of ghost stories such as Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* and standing in contrast to the ‘creature’ films of the 1950s and 1960s, Takemitsu has stated that, “I wanted to create an atmosphere of terror. But if the music is constantly saying, ‘Watch out! Be scared!’ then all the tension is lost. It’s like sneaking up behind someone to scare them. First, you have to be silent. Even a single sound can be film music” (DVD Criterion Collection liner notes). Produced using real objects, recorded sound effects, *prepared piano* and electronic sound modification, the nightmarish unworldly atmosphere created calmy swallows the viewer in “great gulps of empty space” defined not only by the “creaks and cracks and muffled slams and whooshes of wind” in Takemitsu’s soundtrack, but its boundless - and Cagean - silence.

## 2) CAGE AND EUROPE: From *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) to *Funny Games* (1997)

Shortly after the end of World War Two, in a period of unprecedented international cultural exchange

the first of an ongoing summer events devoted to contemporary classical music was held in Joseph Maria Olbrich's Exhibition Hall in Darmstadt, West Germany. Running yearly from 1946-1961, the *Ferienkurse für Internationale Neue Musik* (International Holiday Courses for New Music) established not only the Continental school of multiple serialism buttressed by an ideology of quasi-mathematical predetermination but under the auspices of the US State Department and the US High Commissioner introduced an American experimental tradition (Amerikanische Experimentalmusik) to European audiences, which included composers such as Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and Edgard Varèse. When the French composer Pierre Boulez abruptly cancelled his participation in the 1958 summer course, the academic director Wolfgang Steineche with little hesitation invited John Cage to step in for Boulez, thus turning what was to be a "Boulez year" into a highly contentious though formative "Cage year".

In hindsight, as Heinz-Klaus Metzger notes, Cage's arrival in Darmstadt represented a watershed moment, "a point where one epoch ended and a new one began" (1996, 250). Under the shadow of Adorno, then a central figure in Darmstadt, Cage's entrance in 1958 set off a series of shocks culminating in, as fellow composer Earle Brown remembered, "a high time of collision between a kind of American iconoclastic attitude and the European elitist intellectual organizational thing and it was really exciting" (quoted in Beal, 2007, 79). Exciting indeed for the students, among them a 30-year old jazz trumpeter and arranger by the name of Ennio Morricone. Simultaneously disoriented and galvanized by Cage's live performances and lectures on the role of chance and indeterminacy in musical composition, he admitted it was then that "I really understood what it was to write contemporary music." Morricone furthermore declared, "I had been compelled to react both to Cage's provocations and to the tendency toward an increasingly undetermined (often unnecessary) notational system, which many of my colleagues were adopting in the name of musical progress" (2019, 207). Eventually this shift in attitude served to constitute the conceptual backbone to the *Gruppo d'Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza*, a collective engaged in the production of 'anti-music' based in some measure on the Cagean principle that all sounds can belong to the realm of music.

Since 1961, Morricone has scored over 400 films. Though it was his close partnership with director and former school-mate Sergio Leone, beginning with *A Fistful of Dollars*, that catapulted him to world renown. Of that creative partnership, Morricone has said "Leone wanted more from music than other directors – he always gave it more space."

Loosely inspired by Kurosawa's *samurai epic Yojimbo*, *A Fistful of Dollars* overhauled the Hollywood Western by turning it into a brutal and realistic fairy tale, yet mythic to the core. Blending Eastwood's

pared-down acting and Leone's Italian cynicism toward traditional values of community, duty, and civilization, layered and lush with references to the Hollywood classics, its soundtrack unevenly punctuated with whipcracks, bells, chanting, whistles, incomprehensible lyrics and Fender Stratocaster riffs, *A Fistful of Dollars* revitalized the Western genre.

Working against conventional expectation, stylistically there is little use in the film of rhythmic montage, with the rhythm being primarily animated within the shot rather than in the cutting. In fact, it is Morricone's score that determines the pace at which characters move within the space of the shot. Here, Morricone echoes the structural importance of time granted by Cage. As Cage explains in his 1949 essay *Forerunners of Modern Music*, "Of the four characteristics of sound, only duration involves both sound and silence. Therefore, a structure based on durations (rhythmic: phrase, time lengths) is correct (corresponds with the nature of the material)" (1961, 63). While montage is usually considered to be a means to shorten time, of cutting out minutiae so as to speed up real time, Morricone and Leone lean more toward "savoring the moment, stretching it, protracting real time by long takes and 'slow' montages...[in making]...the simultaneous become sequential, and thereby com[ing] as close as anyone can to making time stand still" (2008, 145). On the question of time, Morricone insists that, before their meaning, before their will to mean anything, "film and music are paired first and foremost by a particular employment of time... [through]...a controlled distribution of information within a specific time unit, which is shared on both the sender's and the receiver's ends" (2019, 98).

If Leone and Morricone draw-out time to an almost unbearable degree, the Austrian director Michael Haneke's sparse, minimalist, and achingly slow, long takes are positively glacial in contrast. While sharing the long-take cinematographic ambitions of such directors as Tsai Ming-Liang, who allows time to slowly develop in a manner not unlike Cage's "composite of aleatory audience sound and, to Cage, emptiness" (Margulies 1996, 50), Haneke, one of the most significant directors in world cinema, indulges in an aesthetic of silence that not only intensifies the audience experience but makes time conscious through its notable lack of non-diegetic music, the prominence of noise, and minimal dialogue. For instance, in a film-within-a-film sequence in his film *Code Unknown* (2000), one of the characters is escorted into a soundproof room and encouraged (in an episode comparable to Cage's now legendary account of not hearing silence in an anechoic chamber, a reverberation-free room at Harvard University) to "hear the silence". Foregrounding the act of listening in this manner, silence is no longer perceived as constituting an absence of sound but rather is made present as a palpable essence itself. With his signature style in full display, Haneke proves himself to be the master of silence.

But Haneke strives to do more than have his audience merely “hear the silence”. Within his reputed “Cinema of Cruelty” extreme acts of violence are followed by long silent interludes with a rhythmic monotony and deadpan detachment in a calculated critique of the popular Hollywood horror genre. Haneke refuses to diminish the viewer’s encounter with the victims’ pain, as depicted in the shockingly offensive and provocative *Funny Games* (1997) in which (in a scene reminiscent of Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*) two mindlessly sadistic adolescents torture a family just for sport, with the mother tied up and bound on the floor beside her murdered son’s body - the extended silence that follows is deafening.

According to Eugenie Brinkema, *Funny Games* is Haneke’s most Cagean piece replete with its “aesthetic of distinctions, differences, effects that precede their cause, and images that convey intensity over signification...marked by digressions, interruptions, even an invitation to abandon diegesis altogether – and, also, yes, a playfulness that shocks” (2010, 361). Makes one shudder to think.

### 3) CAGE AND AMERICA: From *The Forbidden Planet* (1956) to *The Godfather* (1972)

On the 25th of August, 2006, a *50th Anniversary Tribute to the Sounds of Forbidden Planet* was held at the Rudolf M. Schindler House in West Hollywood with four young composers - Thomas Dimuzio, Tom Grimley, Sukho Lee and David Rothbaum - celebrating the work of Louis and Bebe Barron, avant-garde electronic music pioneers.

Owing to their experience with the earliest available Telefunken and 3M tape recorders in the late 40s, the husband and wife duo were hired by MGM to produce an all-electronic score - the first of its kind - for *Forbidden Planet*. Loosely fashioned after Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* with a Freudian subtext (the “monster from the id”), *Forbidden Planet* was the most expensive American sci-fi movie produced in the 1950s. On a \$2M budget and a return of \$210,000 the film was at best a marginal success. However, given its daring experimental soundtrack, dazzling special effects, and subsequent influence on the space opera genre (e.g., *Star Wars*) it has since been entered into the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry as a “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.” At the time, though, audiences cheered at the palatial flying saucer controlled by “quanto-gravitetic hyperdrive and postonic transfiguration” landing to the accompaniment of interstellar gulps and burbles.

At the 29th Academy Awards in 1957 the effects team won the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects, the Barrons on the other hand were excluded from consideration so as to avoid a lawsuit by the American Federation of Musicians, which did not consider their contribution music. As a result, they were

credited as “creators of electronic tonalities” rather than composers.

Prior to their critical cross-over success with *Forbidden Planet*, the Barrons, after marrying in 1947, had relocated from Monterey, California to New York City’s Greenwich Village. Once there, they opened one of the first private electronic sound studios in America. Soon after their arrival, they began designing electronic circuits to generate sounds modeled on the cybernetic circuits detailed in the writings of Norbert Wiener. The resulting circuits, once adapted to sound production, were unpredictable, capricious, and prone to self-destruction. “Those circuits were really alive,” Bebe protested. “They would shriek and coo and have little life spans of their own.” Before long, their inventive and unprecedented experiments came to the attention of New York’s avant-garde. They soon met Cage at one of the monthly gatherings of the Artists’ Club on 8th Street, thus striking up a fruitful and collaborative relationship. As Bebe recalled, “Cage would bring all these fabulous composers into our studio: Pierre Boulez, Stockhausen... Edgard Varèse spent a lot of time at our place; we were the only ones who had a real studio for doing this sort of thing.”

With the philanthropic support of the architect Paul Williams, Cage in 1951 had organized the *Project of Music for Magnetic Tape*, commissioning Louis and Bebe to work with him and others to investigate the nature of sonic perception. Under Cage’s direction, the pair built a library of sounds comprising 600 recordings that were spliced together in tiny fragments to form the seminal four-and-a-quarter minute work, the *Williams Mix*, a musique concrete composition for eight simultaneously played independent quarter-inch magnetic tapes laboriously derived from a 192-page graphic score.

Working with Cage, who encouraged them to pursue their involvement with electronic music, convinced the Barrons that their early efforts were indeed music. As Louis later recollected, “You pick up a great deal of enthusiasm working with someone like John Cage. And you realize that you don’t have to be restricted by the traditions, or the so-called laws, of music. So we began exploring, and I began developing my circuits.”

Despite the fact that Cage considered the *Forbidden Planet* soundtrack “disgustingly orchestral and musical,” and notwithstanding that the Barrons would never score another film, their Cage-inspired efforts nevertheless engendered in others a forward thinking in even the most commercial of film projects whereby new sounds usher in new sights.

On March 27th, 2022, sixteen years after *Forbidden Planet* was independently saluted, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences paid a 50th anniversary tribute to yet another cinematic masterpiece, *The Godfather*. An epic account of the Corleone family it was at the time portrayed by *The*



*New York Times* as "One of the most brutal and moving chronicles of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment." With its quotable lines ("an offer you can't refuse") and recognizable set pieces (recall the horse's severed head at the foot of Woltz's bed), the film not only promptly entered the collective consciousness of an entire generation of filmgoers but Coppola's commanding technique served to decisively shape 70s cinema.

On the Oscar stage that evening, Coppola, flanked by Robert de Niro and Al Pacino, thanked Mario Puzo, upon whose novel *The Godfather* trilogy is based, and Robert Evans, the legendary producer and studio executive who greenlit the film. As he spoke, I couldn't help but think of the Oscar-winning and highly respected film editor and sound designer Walter Murch and the importance of the avant-garde in the making of the film. For, as Murch reveals in an interview in the documentary film, *Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound*, the avant-garde inventions of John Cage played a key part in his contributions to *The Godfather*. When asked in another context by Michael Ondaatje about Cage, Murch recounted how his father, a painter tangentially involved in the Cage circle of artists, would take him to Cage concerts. While he was appreciative of them, he points out that he was intrigued more "by the *idea* of what he was doing - that by taking humble sounds out of their normal context you could make people pay attention and discover the musical dimensions in them."

As an explicit example of Cage's impact on his editing practice, he describes a pivotal scene in *The Godfather* when Al Pacino's Michael Corleone prepares to kill Virgil Sollozzo. While Pacino's face runs through a gamut of emotions, what unconsciously shapes our understanding of the scene is the wailing of the elevated train heard in the background. As the camera closes in on him and the grinding sound becoming increasingly louder, Murch notes that "what you're listening to are Michael's neurons clashing against each other." From Cage's perspective, those noises, those imputed firings of neurons, are sounds that have not yet been intellectualized, they cannot be fitted into abstract preconceptions.

## Conclusion: Shutter to Think

In Andrew Clements' view, John Cage is

in many ways...the most influential figure in post-war music, one whose ideas ramified across the avant-garde arts...his significant position among the convolutions of music in the second half of the 20th century is secure...Cage's intentions...subversive in the best sense of the word...provided a necessary corrective to over-insistent dogmas of the post-war years and can take much of the credit for the polyglot musical world in which composers today can work. (1992)

In Cage's worldview silence constitutes not so much the absence of sound, but rather the "multiplicity of activity that surrounds us" (quoted in Waddington, 1972). His use of chance operations and indeterminacy - which he considers to be among the basic characteristics of his work - generate unpredictable outcomes that lead, as Cage writes, to the "possibility of a unique form." In its evocation of the shutter, the basic mechanism of a film projector, as it snaps and jitters, with the lighthouse serving as the projector, *Shutter Island* functions as a metaphor for cinema in not only shutting the gate or bolting the door but, in the 16th century sense, setting us free to confront the possibility of a unique and "highly reflective consciousness of cinematic spectatorship" (Sinnerbrink, 2016, 70) as avant-garde and popular art and music meet and shudder in delight. Cinema has been Cage'd.

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