

The Musical Flow of Shane Carruth's Upstream Color

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Abstract

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Welcome back to **Sculpting the Film Soundtrack**, **SO!**'s new series on changing notions about how sound works in recent film and in recent film theory, edited by **Katherine Spring**.

Two weeks ago, **Benjamin Wright** started things off with a fascinating [study of Hans Zimmer](#), a highly influential composer whose film scoring borders on engineering — or whose engineering borders on music — in many major Hollywood releases. This week we turn to the opposite end of the spectrum to a seemingly smaller film, Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color* (2013), which has made quite a few waves among sound studies scholars and fans of sound design, even earning a Special Jury Prize for sound at Sundance.

To unpack the many mysteries of the film and explore its place in the field of contemporary filmmaking, we are happy to welcome musicologist and film scholar [Danijela Kulezic-Wilson](#) of University College Cork. Listen to *Upstream Color* through her ears (it's currently available to stream on Netflix) and perhaps you'll get a sense of why you'll have to listen to it two or three more times. At least.

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When Shane Carruth's film *Upstream Color* was released in 2013, critics described it in various ways—as a body horror film, a sci-fi thriller, a love story, and an art-house head-scratcher—but

they all agreed that it was a film “not quite like any other”. And while the film’s cryptic imagery and non-linear editing account for most of the “what the hell?” reactions (see [here](#) for example), I argue that the reason for its distinctively hypnotic effect is Carruth’s *musical* approach to the film’s form: he organizes the images and sounds according to principles of music, including the use of repetition, rhythmic structuring, and antiphony.

The resulting musicality of *Upstream Color* may not be surprising given that Carruth composed most of the score, and also, as [Jonathan Romney has noted in *Sight & Sound*](#), Carruth has said on many occasions that he was hoping “people would watch this film repeatedly, as they might listen to a favourite album” (52). In this sense, Carruth (whose DIY toolkit also includes writing, directing, acting, producing, cinematography, and editing) joins the ranks of filmmakers such as Darren Aronofsky and Joe Wright who recognize that, despite our culture’s obsession with the cinematic and narrative aspects of “visual” media, music governs film’s deepest foundations.

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Upstream Color is a story about a woman, Kris, who is kidnapped by a drug manufacturer (referred to in the credits as Thief) and contaminated with a worm that keeps her in a trance-like state during which the Thief strips her of all her savings. Kris is subsequently dewormed by a character known as the Sampler, who transfers the parasite into a pig that maintains a physical and/or metaphorical connection to Kris. Kris later meets and falls in love with Jeff who, we eventually discover, has been a victim of the same ordeal. Although the bizarreness of the plot has encouraged numerous interpretations, the film’s unconventional audio-visual language suggests that its story of two people who share suppressed memories of the same traumatic experience shouldn’t be taken at face value, but rather serves as a metaphor for existential anxiety resulting from being influenced by unknown forces.

Such an interpretation owes as much to the film’s disregard for the rules of classical storytelling as it does to a formally innovative soundtrack, one that uses musicality as an overarching organizing principle. The fact that Carruth wrote the score and script simultaneously (discussed in the video below) indicates the extent to which music was from the beginning considered an integral part of the film’s expressive language. More importantly, as the scenes discussed in this post suggest, the musical logic of the film is even more pervasive than the style, role, and placement of the actual score.



<https://youtu.be/l7uChRJqE0s>

Whereas feature films traditionally assign a central role to speech, allowing music and sound effects supporting roles only, *Upstream Color* breaks down the conventional soundtrack hierarchy, often reversing the roles of each constitutive element. For example, hardly any information in the film that could be considered vital to understanding the story is communicated through speech. Instead, images, sound, music, and editing—for which Carruth shares the credit with fellow indie director [David Lowery](#)—are the principal elements that create the atmosphere, convey the sense of the protagonists' brokenness, and reveal the connection between the characters. At the same time, characters' conversations are either muted or their speech is blended with music in such a way that we're encouraged to focus on body language or *mise-en-scène* rather than trying to discern every spoken word. For example, Jeff and Kris's flirting with one another during their initial meetings (at roughly 0.44.20-0.47.00 of the film) is conveyed primarily through gestures, glances, and fragmentary editing rather than speech, which would be more typical for this sort of narrative situation.



Further undercutting the significance of speech across the film is how the film has been edited to resemble the flow of music. For example, non-linear jumps in the narrative are often arranged in such a way as to create syncopated audio-visual rhymes. This technique is particularly obvious in the montage sequence in which Kris and Jeff argue over the ownership of their memories, whose similarities suggest that they were implanted during the characters' kidnappings. In this sequence, both the passing of time and the recurrence of the characters' argument is conveyed through the repetition of images that become visual refrains: Kris and Jeff lying on a bed, watching birds flying above trees, touching each other. Some of these can be seen in the film's official trailer:



<https://youtu.be/d0Ue7v6o6zc>

The scene's images and sounds are fragmented into a non-linear assembly of pieces of the same conversation the characters had at different times and places, like the verses and the choruses of a song. Importantly, the assemblage is also patterned, with phrases like "we should go on a trip" and "where should we go?" heard in refrain. The first time we hear Jeff say "we should go on a trip" and suggesting that they go "somewhere bright", his words are played in sync with the image of him and Kris lying on the bed. The following few shots, accompanied only by music, symbolize the "honeymoon" phase of their relationship: the couple kiss, hold hands, and walk with their hands around each other's waists. A shift in mood is marked by the repetition of the dialogue, with Jeff again saying "we should go on a trip" – only this time, the phrase plays asynchronously over a shot of Jeff and Kris pushing a table into the house that they have moved into together. Finally, the frustration that starts infiltrating the characters' increasingly heated arguments is alleviated by the repetition of the sentence "They could be starlings." As it is spoken three times by both characters in an antiphonic exchange, the phrase emphasizes the underlying strength of their connection and gives the scene a rhythmic balance. Across this sequence, the musical organization of audio-visual refrains prompts us to recognize the psychic connection between Kris and Jeff, and even to begin to guess the sinister reason for it.

While speech in *Upstream Color* is often stripped of its traditional role as a principal source of information, sound and music are given important narrative functions, illuminating hidden connections between the characters. In one of the most memorable scenes, the Sampler is

revealed to be not only a pig farmer but also a field recordist and sound artist who symbolizes the hidden source of everything that affects Kris and Jeff from afar. As we hear the sounds of the Sampler's outdoor recordings merge with and emulate the sounds made and heard by Kris and Jeff at home and at work, the soundtrack eloquently establishes the connection between all three characters while also giving us a look "behind the scenes" of Kris's and Jeff's lives and suggesting how they are influenced from a distance.



In one sense, by calling attention to the very act of recording sound, the scene exposes how films are constructed, offering a reflexive glimpse into usually hidden processes of production. The implied idea here—that the visible and audible are products of not-so-obvious processes of formation—refers not only to the medium of film but also to the complexity of the inner workings of someone's mind. Thus the Sampler's role, his actions, and his relationship to Kris, Jeff, and other infected victims can be interpreted as a metaphor for the subconscious programming – all the familial, social and cultural influences – that all of us are exposed to from an early age. The Sampler is portrayed symbolically as the *Creator*, a force whose actions affect the protagonists' lives without them knowing it. The fact that he is simultaneously represented as a sound artist establishes sound-making and musicality as the film's primary creative principles.

Considering Carruth's very deliberate departure from the conventions of even what [David Bordwell](#) calls "intensified" storytelling, it is fair to say that *Upstream Color* is a film that weakens the strong narrative role traditionally given to oral language. What is intensified here are the musical and sensuous qualities of the audio-visual material and a mode of perception that encourages absorption of the subtext (in other words, the metaphorical meaning of the film) as well as the text.

The musical organization of film form and soundtrack is no longer limited to independent projects such as Carruth's *Upstream Color*. As I have shown elsewhere, musicality has become an extremely influential principle in contemporary cinema, acting as an inspiration and model for editing, camera movement, movement within a scene and sound design. Some of the most interesting

results of a musical approach to film include [Aronofsky's "hip hop montage" in *Pi* \(1998\)](#) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), Jim Jarmusch's rhythmically structured film poems (*The Limits of Control*, 2009; *Only Lovers Left Alive*, 2013), the interchangeable use of *musique concrète* and environmental sound in [Gus Van Sant's *Death Trilogy*](#) and [films by Peter Strickland](#) (*Katalin Varga*, 2009; *Berberian Sound Studio*, 2012); the choreographed *mise-en-scène* in [Joe Wright's *Anna Karenina* \(2012\)](#); the musicalization of language in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012); and the foregrounding of musical material over intelligible speech in Drake Doremus's *Breathe In* (2013). Given the breadth of these examples, it's no exaggeration to say that filmmakers' growing affinity for a musical approach to film is changing the landscape of contemporary cinema.

Danijela Kulezic-Wilson teaches film music, film sound, and comparative arts at University College Cork. Her research interests include approaches to film that emphasize its inherent musical properties, the use of *musique concrète* and silence in film, the musicality of sound design, and musical aspects of the plays of Samuel Beckett. Danijela's publications include essays on film rhythm, musical and film time, the musical use of silence in film, Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*, *P.T.* Anderson's *Magnolia*, Peter Strickland's *Katalin Varga*, Gus Van Sant's *Death Trilogy*, Prokofiev's music for Eisenstein's films, and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. She has also worked as a music editor on documentaries, short films, and television.

All images taken from the film.



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