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LOVE, MUSIC AND WAR IN PIERRE BOUTRON'S "THE SILENCE OF THE SEA" AND IN ROMAN POLANSKI'S "THE PIANIST"

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Abstract

The present article examines the relationship between love and music in two famous war films: Pierre Boutron's "The Silence of the Sea" (2004) and Roman Polanski's "The Pianist" (2002). In the first movie, music allows two lovers who cannot confess their forbidden passion to express their feelings via Bach's pieces. In the second film, Chopin's work opens a channel of communication between a Jewish musician and a Nazi captain, awakening compassion in the latter's heart.

Keywords: music; war; love; eros; agape; compassion

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1. Introduction

Many well-known movies, such as Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List"² (1993) or Roberto Benigni's "La vita è bella"³ (1997) have shown the atrocities of The Second World War, but also the importance of love in rescuing people. Some famous war films have even associated love with music, depicting the ways in which music can bring closer otherwise irreconcilable enemies. Among these movies, two are particularly moving, for they show how love and playing the piano can sometimes save lives. These films are Pierre Boutron's "The Silence of the Sea" (2004)⁴ and Roman Polanski's "The Pianist" (2002)⁵. The present article will explore the relationship between love and music in these two acclaimed dramas which depict the horrors of World War II.

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² In the movie, Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist, rescues 1,100 people from the Holocaust by bribing Nazi officials.

³ In "La vita è bella", Benigni plays Guido Orefice, a father who makes use of his imagination in order to protect his son, Giosuè, from the cruelties of a Nazi concentration camp.

⁴ This French-Belgian drama, which starred Julie Delarme, Thomas Jouannet and Michel Galabru, was broadcast by the television channel France 2. It won three awards at the "Saint-Tropez Fiction Festival 2004": the award for the best TV film, the award for the best female performance (Julie Delarme) and the award for the best music (Angélique and Jean-Claude Nachon). ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Silence_de_la_Mer_\(2004_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Silence_de_la_Mer_(2004_film)))

⁵ This Holocaust war drama, which was a coproduction by France, Poland, the United Kingdom and Germany, premiered at the "2002 Cannes Film Festival" and won the "Palme d'Or". At the "75th Academy Awards", the film won for the "Best Director" (Roman Polanski), the "Best Adapted Screenplay" (Ronald Harwood) and the "Best Actor" (Adrien Brody). In 2003, it won the "BAFTA Award for Best Film" and the "BAFTA Award for Best Direction". It also won seven French "Césars". In 2016, the movie was included in "BBC's 100 Greatest Films of the 21st Century". ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pianist_\(2002_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pianist_(2002_film)))

The paper will approach the complex concept of love from two different perspectives, by taking into consideration Nygren's theories: love as "eros", conceived as a passion that is dependent upon the qualities of its admired object (Nygren, 1953, viii), and love as "agape", which is distinguished from eros because it is "neither kindled by the attractiveness nor quenched by the unattractiveness of its object". (Nygren, 1953, ix) As Nygren affirms, "agape does not recognize value, but creates it. Agape loves, and imparts value by loving." (Nygren, 1953, 78)

2. Eros and music in "The Silence of the Sea"

2.1. A few details about the film

The film "The Silence of the Sea" is based on two short stories by Jean Bruller: "Le silence de la mer" (1942)⁶, which shows how an uncle and his niece react to the presence of a Nazi officer in their home, and "Ce Jour-là" (1943), which explores the dangerous lives of resistance fighters. The intrigue of the movie is simple. During the Second World War, the music teacher Jeanne Larosière (Julie Delarme) lives with her grandfather, André Larosière (Michel Galabru), in an old farm on the outskirts of a village occupied by the Germans. Their lives are disrupted the day their house is requisitioned to accommodate a Nazi officer, Werner von Ebrennac (Thomas Jouannet).

The military officer arrives and introduces himself, apologizing for the situation, but his hosts are determined never to say a word to him. The officer understands the meaning of their silence and, in the following months, he tries to get closer to them. He talks to them about his ideals and passions, and even expresses his admiration for French culture and its talented writers: "Balzac, Beaudelaire, Corneille, Descartes, Molière ... and all the others. French writers are so many, one does not know where to start. What greatness! What a great people!" (Boutron, 36:25-36:44)

Jeanne and Werner begin to have feelings for each other. However, their romantic dreams are shattered the day two German officers come to visit Werner and reveal to him the true intentions of the Nazis. Realizing that their love is doomed to fail because of the circumstances, the two young people experience the greatest disillusionment. Werner leaves for one of the toughest fronts of the war, while Jeanne joins the resistance.

2.2. Eros in "The Silence of the Sea"

The success of the movie "The Silence of the Sea" is due to the fact that it contains a captivating theme, that of an impossible love between two enemies. What Jeanne et Werner come to feel for each other is eros (Nygren, 1953, viii)⁷, a troubling passion that is all the stronger since it cannot be confessed in words. The film presents in detail the birth of this forbidden love, playing on the struggle between feelings and duty.

Right from the beginning, Werner feels drawn to Jeanne, this proud, beautiful French girl whose quietness conceals powerful and deep emotions. For him, her silence represents a challenge, for she is just like the sea, strong and mysterious: "How lucky you are to be living by the sea. What I like most... about the sea... it is its silence. [...] I am talking about... what is hidden... what one can perceive underneath... The sea is silent... But one must learn to listen to it... I am very happy to have found here [...] a young lady who is silent (Boutron, 43:30-44:42)." Werner's veiled words and suggestive glances reveal the intensity of his feelings. The gestures that he makes towards the girl during the film are also full of courtesy and warmth: he offers to drive her home when he sees her on the street, he runs to save her when she is in danger and he goes to meet her on the bridge when he

⁶ "The Silence of the Sea" is the most famous short story of the French Resistance. It was clandestinely published by Jean Bruller under the pen name "Vercors" at the Editions de Minuit. The book was initially circulated discreetly, then widely distributed by the Resistance, and even airdropped by the Royal Air Force.

⁷ "Eros is an appetite, a yearning desire, which is aroused by the attractive qualities of its object". (Nygren, 1953, viii)

realizes she loves him, too. Although Jeanne refuses to say a word to the officer and tries to ignore his existence, she is torn by conflicting feelings. The young woman experiences hatred towards the enemy and towards the part of herself that is drawn to a Nazi soldier, but, at the same time, she feels love for the sensitive and cultured man who cares deeply about her. (Toma, 2023, 164) When she learns that he is going to leave for one of the toughest fronts of the war, she cannot help but run after him to say “Farewell” (Boutron, 1:28:56-1:28:57). This single word she utters paradoxically brings a smile to the officer's lips, for it represents the confession of an impossible and painful love.

2.3. Music in “*The Silence of the Sea*”

When Werner arrives to take possession of the room, Jeanne plays Bach's s “Prelude No. 1”, with its exquisite harmonies and graceful progressions.⁸ Werner, who is also a musician, is captivated by the girl's elegant performance, and we may deduce that his falling in love with her dates back to this first encounter, when he acknowledges her as a kindred spirit.⁹ However, the young woman abruptly stops playing as soon as she perceives the presence of the Nazi soldier in the house, and decides never to play anything on the piano as long as he remains in their home.

Later in the film, it is the officer who performs Bach's s “Prelude No. 1”, as a Christmas gift for Jeanne: “The day I arrived... you were playing Bach's Prelude. It is the most beautiful, the purest...it is the one I like most”. (54:05-54:23)¹⁰. This gentle piece of music, that weaves intricate emotions into a tranquil musical landscape, represents the most wonderful gift Werner could offer, for it allows the two young people, who cannot confess their feelings directly, to experience a profound dimension that unites them. Close-ups on the faces of the two characters allow the viewer to grasp the intense emotion that the protagonists feel in the presence of each other at the sound of this diaphanous, lyrical and captivating musical composition. When the officer finishes playing, he touches the chair on which the girl is sitting, gesture that reveals his passion for her. By the end of the movie, Jeanne also plays for Werner Bach's s “Prelude No. 2” to draw his attention and thus prevent him from getting into a car loaded with explosives. Unable to communicate verbally with him, she relies on his passion for music and on his love for her in order to save his life.

3. *Agape and music in “The Pianist”*

3.1. A few details about the film

Polanski's movie represents an adaptation of the memoirs of the Polish-Jewish pianist and composer Władysław Szpilman,¹¹ which present his traumatic survival as a Jew in Warsaw during World War

⁸ In Vercors' story, Jeanne never plays the piano while Werner stays under their roof. It is only Werner who plays once Bach's “Prelude No. 8” after discovering that the girl used to practice it. (Vercors, 1994, 26)

⁹ Professional musicians live in a world of their own. As Stein affirms, “there are a number of elements that can be understood as distinct to the professional musician. The most significant of these may be the language of music itself, which in its written notation, formal structure, grammar and syntax is accessible only to those trained in it despite being something to which anybody can listen appreciatively. Other important components, to mention but a few and which are further specific to performers, include exceptional levels of discipline; a heightened toleration for isolation and waiting deriving from the intensive rigors of daily practice and concertizing [...]; augmented powers of concentration and recall memory; an effective sublimatory capacity to split off from real or imagined feelings of anxiety or threat and to remain at least superficially poised during moments of duress; and the capacity to ‘lose’ one's self, so to speak, within the imaginative act of internal music-making.” (Stein, 2004, 761)

¹⁰ In Vercors' book, Werner considers Bach's music to be inhuman and states that, as a composer, he would like his own music to be closer to the human heart. (Vercors, 1994, 27)

¹¹ In 1946, Szpilman published his memoirs under the name “The Death of a City”. However, the book was censored by the Polish Communist authorities and had to wait fifty years before it was translated and published again. According to Stein, “Almost immediately withdrawn from circulation by Polish factions of the Stalin regime, Szpilman's book languished in relative obscurity for decades. Not until Szpilman's son Andrzej shepherded the manuscript to

II.¹² As Kabalek notices, the film can be divided into two parts: the first part shows Szpilman's life together with his parents, sisters and brother from the days before the occupation of Warsaw until the moment the pianists' family is forced to leave, while the second part of the movie depicts Szpilman's suffering and struggle to survive alone in the Ghetto and outside of it. (Kabalek, 2007, 63)

3.2. Music in "The Pianist"

In the opening shots of the film, Szpilman plays Chopin's "Nocturne in C# minor" in the Warsaw Radio broadcast centre. As Stein affirms,

A listener intuitively recognizes this as a work by Chopin from its distinctive emotional, melodic and harmonic features. The music quietly urges forward, restlessly searching, yearning it seems for something, perhaps consolation, even as it continually repeats itself and returns to its own beginnings. (Stein, 2004, 760)

However, this exquisite performance is precipitously interrupted by explosions that catapult Szpilman from the keyboard. This brutal experience represents the beginning of a painful journey, during which the musician's life will be saved by his exceptional talent as a pianist.

As Kabalek notices, music mirrors the different stages in Szpilman's experience of the war. (Kabalek, 2007, 66) Thus, when he still lives with his family, he plays the piano in a ghetto café, where his performance is disregarded by the uninterested audience. The reason for this dismissive behavior may be that the pianist's touching music-making is "too full of feeling, a too-searing and too-real reminder" of the things that have been "irretrievably lost". (Stein, 2004, 763)

Later in the movie, when he has lost his family and he quietly hides in a room in order not to be discovered, all that Szpilman is left with is the music from his own head and the movement of his fingers in the air, miming a performance at the piano. In his mind, the musician plays "Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise, Op. 22", one of the few pieces of Chopin that is not for the solo piano, and the choice of this work conveys the pianist's desperate need to interact with others in order to cope with his inner pain, fear and isolation.

In a powerful scene towards the end of the film, the musician, who is unwittingly hiding in a building about to be occupied by the Nazis, is found by Captain Wilm Hosenfeld. When the German officer asks him about his occupation, Szpilman answers "I am...I was a pianist" (Polanski, 2.02.35-2.02.39), answer that reflects his identity crisis. As there is a piano in the room, he is invited to perform for, as he reasonably thinks, his very life.

The musician plays Chopin's "Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Op. 23",¹³ a complex work filled with dramatic moods in which extreme tension ultimately gives way to deep emotional relief. This performance helps him not only to recover his identity as a pianist, but also to connect with a receptive other, to someone who, after such a long time of loneliness and despair, actually listens to his music. Indeed, the captain, who initially stood next to the piano, retreats and sits down. The camera resting on Hosenfeld's face shows the profound change that Szpilman's exquisite music triggers within him. The film seems to suggest that music awakens a compassionate love in the heart of the German soldier, transforming an enemy into a saviour.

translation and republication did it finally appear in English, in the late 1990s, retitled *The pianist: The extraordinary story of one man's survival in Warsaw, 1939–1945.*" (Stein, 2004, 755)

¹² Polanski, whose parents were Polish-Jewish, chose this topic because, as a child, he experienced similar situations in the Krakow Ghetto, before escaping and then surviving with the help of a Polish Catholic family.

¹³ In the book, Szpilman plays "Chopin's C# minor Nocturne", which "seems simply to exhale until there is no more air." (Stein, 2004, 764) As Stein affirms:

"Tonally, the piece has ended where it began, save for the breathtaking modulation from minor to major, a shift as subtle as it is profound, and which allows us to imagine, as Władysław Szpilman must also have, a next inhalation to come. It is not the final gasp of death, but another breath taken in a life being lived." (Stein, 2004, 764)

After the war, Szpilman performs on the Polish radio “Chopin’s C# minor Nocturne”, the piece that had been abruptly interrupted by explosions five years before. It is a reparative act that shows the continuation of life despite all vicissitudes. At the end of the film, he also performs, accompanied by full orchestra, Chopin’s “Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise, Op. 22”, the work he had mimed playing during the war. It is a triumphal performance in a great concert hall, that shows that he has finally reconnected to his receptive listeners.

3.3. *Agape in “The Pianist”*

In the movie, Szpilman is often saved in dangerous situations by people who risk their life to help him simply because they feel agape¹⁴ (Nygren, 1953, 75) for him, as a fellow human being (for example, Dorota and her husband). Szpilman survives because there is always someone whose “spontaneous”, “unmotivated” love (Nygren, 1953, 75) is awoken by his miserable situation. Even in the case of the German officer, we may safely affirm that music is not the only reason for his saving the Jewish pianist in distress. The Nazi captain not only spares Szpilman’s life, overlooking his hiding in the building, but he also brings him food until the war is over. Wilm Hosenfeld’s gratuitous, generous decision to help comes from the deep-rooted inner conviction of a compassionate man who feels agape for another person.¹⁵

4. *Conclusions*

In the two war movies taken into consideration, music is associated with love and plays a central role. In “The Silence of the Sea”, where Jeanne et Werner are bound by a forbidden eros, the playing of the piano offers the lovers the opportunity to share their feelings and to open their hearts to the possibilities of romantic love. It also allows the young French woman to save the life of the German man she is enamoured with.

In “The Pianist”, music opens a space for communication between the two men, despite the adversities of a cruel war. It gives Szpilman the opportunity to find his voice again as a musician and to meet the attentive ears that he has been missing during his moments of loneliness, pain and fear. It also helps Hosenfeld live a transformative experience and feel agape again. Where love and music reside, there is no place for enmity.

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¹⁴ According to Nygren agape “is a love that loves to give, freely, selflessly”. (Nygren, 1953, viii)

¹⁵ As Kabalek notices, this interpretation is also supported by the published excerpts from the diary of Wilm Hosenfeld and by Szpilman’s book. In the diary, the German officer appears as a man with profound Christian humanist motives. In Szpilman’s book, the captain even declares he is ashamed of being a German and warmly shakes hands with the Jew. (Kabalek, 2007, 69)

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