Obtrusive Film Music in Godard’s *Une femme et une femme*

In 1945, André Bazin asked, “What is cinema?” This question is as relevant today as it was during the formation of the French new wave that used his cinematic philosophies as their standard. This question inevitably arises during any discussion of music and its role in the cinema. Is it an equal combination of image, music, and text, or is it a primarily narrative art? Aaron Copland and Hanns Eisler are locked in a binary opposition between musical subservience and musical domination respectively.

Hanns Eisler and Aaron Copland each provide interesting insights into the art, or lack thereof, of film scoring. Eisler is clearly the idealist, constantly wishing for a more intelligent and important use of music in film, while Copland displays a more practical approach, including a thorough acceptance of music’s subservience to the image and narrative. Both provide excellent points and raise important issues, but who is correct? The answer is entirely dependant upon one’s personal definition of film and its purpose.

To examine these two critical stances, there is, perhaps, no one more dedicated to the idea of “pure cinema” than Jean-Luc Godard. His second feature film, *Une femme et une femme*¹ (A woman is a woman), poses some interesting questions as to the nature of music, film, and their interaction. In this essay, I plan to compare and contrast Copland and Eisler with Godard’s film to find who shares more with one of the cinema’s greatest auteurs.

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¹ *Une femme et une femme*, DVD, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1961; Paris, France: The Criterion Collection, 2004).
Background on Godard

Jean-Luc Godard is truly in his own class. His films, though varied in style, look like nothing that has come before or will come after. Though not all of this films received critical acclaim, he is seen as the face of the French new wave thanks both to his prolific output and his frequent writings in *Cahiers du Cinema*. It is perhaps also due to the radical nature of his films. Other new wave directors like Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol directed groundbreaking films, but none left the conventions of cinema as far behind as Godard. Even from the beginning, he was much less concerned with telling a story than experimenting with form and presentation. He has said that a bad story turns into the best movie, meaning that once the audience is released from concentrating intently on the plot, they are free to examine the language of cinema itself. The common thread through his vast oeuvre is the struggle of an artist to present his personal vision without control and commodification by external sources. He has films in all periods that illustrate this from *Contempt* (1963) and *Tout va Bien* (1972) to *Passion* (1982) and *For Ever Mozart* (1996).

Godard’s career fits into five chronological categories. The first is the nouvelle vague period with films such as *A Bout de Souffle* (1960), *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), and *Vivre sa Vie* (1962). They are lively, clever and above all, optimistic. The second phase is known as the Dziga Vertoz period after the great Russian documentary filmmaker. The idea was to make political films politically. Most consider these films, including *Le Gai Savoir* (1968), *Vent d’Est* (1969) and *Tout va Bien* to be unwatchable, but I believe they are fascinating studies showing someone playing with the very edges of cinema. Godard’s third phase involved much experimentation with video (as opposed to film)
with his partner Anne-Marie Mielville and resulted in controversial works such as *Numero Deux* (1975) and *Hail Mary* (1985). The fourth phase saw Godard return to film with pictures like *Passion* and *Nouvelle Vague* (1990). This period was seen as a return to conventional filmmaking complete with a loose narrative and slightly more formal structure. Of course that is not to say that these movies look conventional in any way.

The fifth phase began in the nineties with *For Ever Mozart*, *In Praise of Love* (2001) and most recently *Notre Musique* (2004). These films are beautifully photographed and are built on the pretense of a narrative, but quickly digress into meditations on the creative spirit and how it must triumph over the commercialization of modern popular cinema.

*Une Femme* is Godard’s third feature and is unique in its lack of cynicism, both artistically and politically. Godard was firmly established as a filmmaker of international acclaim and had published many influential pieces for *Cahiers du Cinema*. He was in the beginning stages of his relationship with actress Anna Karina, the female lead, and had a very promising career in front of him. His camera dotes on Karina in a way it never would again, even when filming Bridget Bardot in *Le Mepris*. The film is full of bright colors, carefree characters, and a joyous fascination with the artificial nature of the cinema. Some critics dismissed this film upon release, probably due to the expectation of a more serious effort. It is highly probable that if *Une Femme Et Une Femme* weren’t wedged between *A Bout de Souffle* and *Vivre sa Vie*, two of Godard’s most critically successful films, it would have received a much warmer reception. Regardless, it’s a highly inventive film that uses music in an unusual way.
Godard’s Obtrusive Music

A major area of controversy is the idea of unobtrusive music in film. Both Eisler and Copland interpret this idea in different ways. In Composing for the Films, Eisler rails against this, calling it a “widespread prejudice in the motion picture industry [based on] the premise that the spectator should not be conscious of the music.” He goes on to say that “the philosophy behind this belief is a vague notion that music should have a subordinate role in relation to the picture.” If Eisler complains about music having a subordinate role, it implies that he would like music to, at least occasionally, claim the lead role in a film. Before examining the implications of this idea, it is interesting to note how Copland interprets the idea of unobtrusiveness and imaginal subservience.

In Music and the Movies, Copland explains this unobtrusive music as “a kind of neutral background filler.” This very definition seems to have a negative connotation. However, it is described as the most difficult task and something that may yield private satisfaction to the composer, when skillfully realized. Copland’s definition doesn’t take issue with the relegation of music to the background in these instances but instead sees it as a compositional challenge. Most conventional films strictly adhere to the idea of narrative dominance, and in those cases, Copland has the correct approach. Eisler’s idea of music equality between music and narrative would seem very obtrusive.

Jean-Luc Godard and Michel Legrand worked to create an unusual score that seems to have a mind of its own. At times, the music is totally cut so that we can hear dialogue while, at other times, the music overpowers the dialogue, rendering the speech

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unintelligible. Eisler would be happy with some of Godard’s decisions. For instance, any time we hear Angela’s leitmotif (the use of which is a different debate entirely), Godard lets it play to completion, even if it obscures some dialogue. He sees it as a rich musical signifier carrying lots of information about the character and her state of mind. It lets us know what Angela is thinking without her having to tell us. Furthermore, it may provide information about her that she would be unable to express verbally in a natural way. Though the music is still serving the narrative, it is actually replacing some of the text.

This seems to be outside of Copland’s paradigm. He lists ways that music “serves the screen”\(^5\), but doesn’t take into account the idea of music replacing the text in propelling the narrative forward. He says that music can serve as a convincing atmosphere, a neutral background filler, a continuity aid, and a highlighting of the theatrical build-up of a scene. Copland is completely fine with the idea of unobtrusive music.

The first instance of obtrusive music occurs early in the film (0:04:40) when Angela and Emile are talking at the newsstand where he works. The music enters under their dialogue at a high volume, but not so high as to obscure their words. Angela leaves the newsstand and the music continues, slightly louder drowning out all ambient noise. She’s walking along a busy street, but nothing is heard in the way of automobiles or people. The musical cue ends (0:05:01) and total silence follows for three seconds before the ambient noise finally enters (0:05:04). At this point, Angela’s leitmotif has already been heard once. After talking to Emile, she’s disappointed that he is unable to understand how she feels. The music reflects this via re-orchestration and a move to

minor. The melody moves to the trombone section and the whole character reflects her flagged spirits. Godard could have easily had her meet up with a friend on the street to deliver an obvious line such as, ‘Emile never understands me.’ However, he lets the music do the talking, directing our attention to it through the removal of all other sound. It is this removal of all other sound that concentrates our focus on the music and lets us know that it’s telling us something fairly important.

Eisler concedes that there are legitimate times when music ought to be unobtrusive but is against its use in instances where ambient sound would suffice and when banal music is substituted simply to keep from drawing our attention to it. Legrand’s music is neither banal nor does the scene necessarily call for ambient sound. The music contains narrative information and is thusly moved to the foreground. However, it also avoids Eisler’s warning of musical interruption. Though it does draw attention to itself, destroying some realism in the process, it has a very good reason for doing so.

Une Femme also avoids Eisler’s trap of standardized interpretation. He complains that all too often the dynamic range is severely limited to ensure a constant, non-confrontational listening experience. He writes, “The main purpose here is the production of a comfortable and polished euphony, which neither startles by its power (fortissimo) nor requires attentive listening because of its weakness (pianissimo).” Godard avoids this with a wildly unpredictable soundtrack. Sometimes the music is extremely loud, covering all other sound up. Sometimes it is very quiet under dialogue. Sometimes it’s at a moderate volume with an even blend of ambient sound. Godard constantly plays with the expectation of aural volume. Instead of the usual dialogue, Foley effects, music, and
ambient sound (in that order), it’s unpredictable which will dominate at any given moment. When Angela first enters the Zodiac Club where she dances, she walks past a man unzipping the dress of one of the dancers (0:06:29). The dialogue, music, and ambient sound are muted as the Foley artist’s zipper noise is heard solo. Later, Alfred is accosted by a man on the street (0:12:39) while Angela’s theme continues from a previous scene (0:12:09). This is an extremely unusual treatment of music. Not only is Godard letting the musical cue play to completion; he’s allowing it to bleed over into an entirely different scene, covering up five seconds of dialogue in the process. There is no musical significance to this sound bleed. Nothing drastically changes as if to suggest that the same sound cue was somehow connecting the two scenes. It was simply longer than Godard’s take and was left to play to completion.

In both examples, it is apparent that Copland would object to this use of music stating that it has overstepped its bounds—it has not blended seamlessly into the whole. This may be true, but it doesn’t diminish the cinematic experience. It actually enhances it. In the context of this film, and Godardian cinema in general, part of the effect comes from exposing the artifice and language of cinema itself.

**Conclusion**

Though Eisler presents no alternatives or specific suggestions for the improved use of music in film, Godard appears to have answered his call with *Une femme*. Many of Eisler’s concerns are addressed, albeit probably not in the manner he had imagined.

Where does this leave the Copland/Eisler debate of unobtrusive film music? Godard has somewhat diminished the importance of the narrative. He has often said the simplest stories make the best movies because, once the audience is relieved of focusing
intently on the narrative, they are free to study the language of cinema. Eisler would be happy that the music is, at times, placed above all else and is treated thoughtfully, if unusually, throughout. However, this is a highly non-traditional film and has not always been appreciated at a very deep level by the average filmgoer. Eisler’s ideas worked in this case, but what if they were applied to a more traditional film placing the usual importance on the narrative?

In that situation, Copland offers a much better approach to film music. He is content to do what is best for the movie—to sacrifice his compositional ego to what is best for the story. This concept is much more closely aligned with the majority of Hollywood’s output and is already accepted by the average public audience. Everything hinges on one’s definition of film. Who is correct? It must first be asked, what is film?