1965 was not a good year for Bernard Herrmann. In his personal life, after fifteen years, his marriage to Lucy Anderson had ended in divorce. In his professional life, his career as a film composer was stagnating. Despite a decade of collaboration with director Alfred Hitchcock during the peak of his commercial success, including Psycho (1960), Vertigo (1958) and North By Northwest (1959), new composing assignments were running dry. Lionel Newman, the new head of music at Fox, told Herrmann that their producers didn’t want him – they were “running with the new kids.” (Smith 1991, 275) Herrmann and his style of composing were no longer popular in Hollywood, and Herrmann knew that Hitchcock was under pressure from his studio bosses to find another composer (Smith 1991, 268). They were to have only one further collaboration: the aborted score to Torn Curtain (1966), a definitive and bitter end to their creative and personal relationship. Hitchcock fired Herrmann during the first day of recording and they never worked together again.

While Herrmann seems to have looked towards Torn Curtain with what in retrospect seems a somewhat naïve optimism (“I feel certain it will be one of Hitch’s greatest films. I just know it will be so”, wrote Herrmann (Smith 1991, 270)), 1965 saw him enter into one of the darkest depressions of his life. Creatively, the result was the string quartet Echoes, one of Herrmann’s last concert-hall compositions. A note on the title of the work as printed on the full score is revealing: “The term ‘Echoes’ is meant to imply a series of nostalgic emotional remembrances” (Herrmann 1966).

Echoes is strongly reminiscent of Herrmann’s work with Hitchcock, and is probably intentionally so. As Smith notes, “While many of its memories remain private, others can be guessed by allusions to past works ... the plucked signature of its opening is Psycho’s violent prelude, the crying violin harmonics of its coda, Vertigo’s lost Madeleine” (Smith 1991, 264-265). Was Herrmann attempting to eulogise his career? At this stage, Herrmann’s deepest wound stemmed from his divorce – the acrimonious conclusion to his Hitchcock collaboration was yet to come. Nonetheless, these “nostalgic remembrances”, while almost certainly referring to Herrmann’s personal life, equally apply to his body of work as a composer. In many ways, it was the echo that defined Herrmann’s work as Hitchcock’s composer – from the echo-like structure of his individual scores to the musical parallels and juxtapositions across his entire oeuvre for Hitchcock. In legacy, as well as in close analysis, Herrmann’s music for Hitchcock could not be better described than “a series of emotional remembrances.”

Nonetheless, repetition has often been cited in order to disparage and criticise the art of film music: perhaps most notably by Theodor Adorno, who in 1947 condemned film scores as “autonomous music [subject to] standardization within the industry” (Adorno and Eisler 1947, 3). According to Adorno, “no serious composer writes for the motion pictures for any other than money reasons,” (1947, 54) and “by the use of standard configurations, [film music] interprets the meaning of the action for the less intelligent members of the audience” (1947, 60). However, the scores of Herrmann challenge this argument: it is precisely because of repetition that his work for Hitchcock is meaningful and effective. In order to argue this, I will examine Herrmann’s use of repetition within three different planes: repetition within specific cues or motifs; repetition of these specific cues or motifs within an entire score; and repetition within his entire Hitchcock oeuvre. In these three instances, Herrmann’s scores counter the simplistic criticism of repetition (along with others of plagiarism which I shall discuss later) within film music and illustrate how the technique may be utilised to further meaning within, and beyond the film. It also draws attention to the auteur-like power that can be afforded to
a film’s composer as well as (as is more usual) to the director, and therefore implicitly challenges the traditional status of Hitchcock as sole auteur of his films.

The auteur

Before I begin on Herrmann’s style and the analysis of his modes of repetition, a note on the Herrmann-Hitchcock relationship. Throughout his career, Hitchcock was acutely aware of the effect of music in his films, and would often create extensive annotations to a film’s script to send, as instructions, to his composer. According to Sullivan, “Hitchcock employed more musical styles and techniques than any director in history ... one cannot fully understand Hitchcock’s movies without facing his music” (Sullivan 2006, xiii). Previous to Herrmann, Hitchcock had had numerous successes with film music, and his list of composers reads like the highlights of 20th Century film composition, including Franz Waxman, Miklos Rosza, Alfred Newman, Dimitri Tiomkin, Ron Goodwin, Maurice Jarre and John Williams. Hitchcock did not, however, always get what he wanted from his composers. This was most clearly illustrated in Herrmann’s scoring – against Hitchcock’s instructions – of the infamous shower scene in Psycho. “Improper suggestion, my boy, improper suggestion,” was Hitchcock’s clarification to Herrmann upon being reminded that he initially request there be no music in the now iconic sequence (Smith 1991, 240). These divergences did not always work out so amicably, however. Asked many years after the Torn Curtain split whether he would work with Herrmann again, Hitchcock is said to have replied: “Yes, if he’ll do as he’s told.” (Smith 1991, 274) This was far from an isolated incident with Hitchcock’s composers. Towards the end of their period of collaboration, Hitchcock sent a terse cable to Herrmann:

So often have I been asked, for example by [Dimitri] Tiomkin, to come and listen to a score and when I express my disapproval his hands were thrown up and with the cry of “But you can’t change anything now, it has all been orchestrated.” It is this kind of frustration that I am rather tired of. (Smith 1991, 269)

Yet despite Hitchcock’s later complaints, the autonomy of his composers was often on his own instigation. “As far as I’m concerned he does as he likes,” Hitchcock said in a joint interview with Herrmann in 1964 (Telescope, 1964).[1] Clearly, despite Hitchcock’s suggestions and guidelines, Herrmann routinely made his own decisions, as Jack Sullivan illustrates (Sullivan 2006).[2] Indeed, Hitchcock appreciated the skills of his composer and often allowed Herrmann long stretches of film without dialogue to compose for. Regarding the recreation sequence of Vertigo (1958) (“Scene d’Amour”[3]), Hitchcock told his composer, “We’ll just have you and the camera” (Sullivan 2006, 167). Indeed, the climax of The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956) could be viewed as Hitchcock’s testament to the power of music in film, as it is the diegetic music itself – Arthur Benjamin’s Storm Clouds cantata, written for Hitchcock’s original The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934) and in this case arranged by Herrmann – that anticipates and to some extent generates the narrative climax (a gunshot) for the audience. The on-stage conductor, of course, is Herrmann, in a Hitchcock-style cameo, musically creating another murder for Hitchcock. Even though this sequence is found merely in their second collaboration, the cameo – an indulgence afforded to no other Hitchcock composer – is indicative of Herrmann’s strong role in their projects.

Uncharacteristically, Hitchcock went as far as to acknowledge that “33% of the effect of Psycho was due to the music.” (Smith 1991, 241). Hitchcock was usually reticent about crediting his collaborators with his successes, but according to Joseph Stephano, the screenwriter for Psycho, “Hitchcock gave [Herrmann] more credit than anyone else he ever spoke of.” (Smith 1991, 241)

Herrmann’s style
By their first collaboration, Herrmann was already a noted composer, and had written a number of celebrated scores such as Citizen Kane (1941), The Devil and Daniel Webster (1941, for which he won his only Oscar), and The Day The Earth Stood Still (1951). On a basic level, Herrmann’s approach to musical scoring differed greatly from those of his contemporaries. The first few decades of film scoring had seen composers like Erich Korngold and Max Steiner become the leaders within the film music industry, bringing with them a marked Viennese influence (with lavish and elaborate scores like Korngold’s 1938 The Adventures of Robin Hood and Steiner’s 1933 King Kong) (Dickinson 2003, 1-13). The Wagnerian tradition of the leitmotif quickly become the popular mode of composition in Hollywood, whereby a melody is assigned to specific characters, places or ideas, and is played when that which it represented is on screen.[4] In contrast, and although Herrmann used the theory of musical association underpinning the leitmotif system in a number of his scores (including those for Hitchcock, but perhaps most effectively for Citizen Kane), he disliked leitmotif itself. Herrmann:

…I don’t like the leitmotif system. The short phrase is easier to follow for an audience, who listen with only half an ear. Don’t forget that the best they do is half an ear. You know, the reason I don’t like this tune business is that a tune has to have eight or sixteen bars, which limits you as a composer. Once you start, you’ve got to finish – eight or sixteen bars. Otherwise, the audience doesn’t know what the hell it’s all about. It’s putting handcuffs on yourself (Brown 1994, 291-292).

Herrmann’s Hitchcock scores are almost wholly vacant of traditional melody or “tunes”, and are instead populated by vast stretches of short patterns and impressionistic, ambient musical sketches. His approach was more of mood and tone: “In Hitchcock,” noted Herrmann, “one has to create a landscape for each film, whether it be the rainy night of Psycho or the turbulence of a picture such as Vertigo” (Herrmann 2004, Track 11). Indeed, ‘landscape’ seems the most appropriate term to describe Herrmann’s Hitchcock scores. Though there was at least one attempt to extract a pop hit from a Herrmann score (Marnie (1964), with dire consequences),[5] each film scored by Herrmann has more of an overall identity, or ‘sound’ than distinct melodies. Critics like Royal S. Brown and Graham Bruce have argued that this particular sound, unique to Herrmann’s Hitchcock work, is fuelled by a ‘Hitchcock chord’, a half-diminished seventh that dominates much of his music during this era (Bruce 1985, 117-121; Brown 1994, 148-174). Yet most immediate of these ‘sounds’ for Hitchcock is Herrmann’s use of orchestration: in Vertigo the harp speaks strongest of all the orchestra, while Psycho’s only accompaniment is the frantic and bare string section. Herrmann’s aborted score to Torn Curtain was to be his most adventurously orchestrated Hitchcock yet, calling for sixteen French horns and twelve flutes (Sullivan 2006, 281). “The sound of twelve flutes,” said Herrmann, “will be terrifying” (Sullivan 2006, 282).

Herrmann’s abandonment of melody was key to his success composing for Hitchcock. According to Brown, “melody is the most rational element of music” (Brown 1994, 154). Despite Hitchcock’s occasional complaints, then, we can see the lack of melody in Herrmann’s Hitchcock scores as supporting the irrationality often shown in Hitchcock’s films: the compulsion of Marnie Edgar, the phobias of Scottie Ferguson, and the split personality of Norman Bates. These are all musically supported via Herrmann’s landscape approach. Melody, as rationality, has no place in Hitchcock.

Repetition One: within specific cues of motifs

The notable musical ideas that are present in Herrmann’s Hitchcock scores often have a heavy focus on internal repetition. Frequently, sections of Herrmann’s music will consist of a short idea which is repeated in a number of different ways; used on the one hand to partially disguise this repetition, but on the other to aid the suspense and mood of obsession and cyclic falls, chases or journeys often found in Hitchcock. The most notable of these repetitious strategies are chromaticism[6] and instrumentation[7]. Perhaps the best example of these used in conjunction can be found in North By Northwest. Brown argues that the film contains:
not one example of anything that could be designated as a theme on a cue sheet ... Instead, it is made up of numerous, brief motifs sewn together in sometimes audaciously chromatic harmonic progressions and presented in brilliant orchestral colors, with totally unhummable interval leaps being the order of the day. (Brown 1994, 159)

The ‘Journey’ cue, which is most often heard when protagonist Roger O. Thornhill is travelling, combines a chromatic, cyclic repetition with variations of instrumentation. ‘Journey’ is essentially a one bar pattern of sixteen semiquavers that could conceivably be repeated endlessly via chromatic descent, with no necessary resolution other than a continuation of the loop. This cue reappears in multiple forms throughout North By Northwest, and aside from the opening fandango, is probably the most memorable piece of music found in the film. The motif, as short and malleable as it is, suits the mood of the film perfectly: cyclic chromaticism here creates a driving feeling of perpetual movement, which for North By Northwest, translates as a sense of travelling endlessly without destination – a clear parallel with the film’s plot. The addition of varied instrumentation adds to this mood. In “The Auction”[8], the pattern is played interchangeably between the string section, and the clarinet section, before shifting to alternate between the flutes, strings and clarinets, seemingly changing instrument section every note. ‘Journey’ is played in a number of different ways throughout North By Northwest, and its various uses demonstrate Herrmann’s skills of subtle variation. The theme, while remaining melodically and harmonically intact, is played as foreboding (“The Airport”), as suspenseful and dynamic (“The Ledge”), and as frenzied and exciting (“The Police”).

Chromaticism is combined with ostinato[9] in many similar sequences in Herrmann’s Hitchcock scores. This ostinato/chromaticism figure first appears in The Man Who Knew Too Much, during the sequence where Jo and Ben McKenna (Doris Day and James Stewart) attempt to find their son at the Ambrose Chapel. A harp plays a steady ostinato on one note, while strings and clarinets alternate chromatic harmonies in thirds. This idea returns in Vertigo’s “Carlotta’s Portrait”, with an altered rhythm being played by a harp. This time, the rhythm of the ostinato is relates to the plot of the film, as it is a habanera, reflecting Carlotta’s Spanish origin and creating a musical presence for her. These sequences have much in common: they are both searching sequences, and the probing nature of both cues reflects this. Again, as in North By Northwest’s ‘Journey’, we may see the chromaticism as a strategy employed to encourage the feeling of travel without destination, though in this case, tweaked to suit the feeling of a search.

However, what is most interesting, and for our purposes important, is that chromaticism not only allows Herrmann to repeat short phrases endlessly, but it also augments the suspense and overall mood of a scene. It is a device of Herrmann’s ‘landscapes’, and we can see it as the first of Herrmann’s notable ‘echoes’.

Repetition Two: within an entire score

Herrmann’s use of repetitive, short phrases can also be seen to increase the feeling of psychological fixation within an entire score, often mirroring that of Hitchcock’s characters. This is the second level of repetition – that within an overall score. Herrmann’s repetitive use of short phrases can be seen to create a feeling of a myopic, tunnel viewpoint: a feeling of a single idea recurring again and again. Herrmann’s scores for Vertigo and Psycho best illustrate this mode of repetition. In Vertigo, the score is divided into roughly two sections. “Madeline’s Theme” which plays over a number of extended sequences, such as “Scotty Trails Madeleine” and “Beach”, dominates the first half of the film. However, after Madeline’s ‘death’ the landscape changes abruptly to focus almost exclusively on what Brown titles “The Love Waltz”, while “Madeline’s Theme” returns only occasionally (Brown 1994, 167). This “Love Waltz” perfectly illustrates Herrmann’s use of repetition to indicate mental fixation.
— it is, of course, a very short (only one bar long) phrase that, via chromaticism, can be repeated endlessly. The “Waltz” reaches its climax in the “Scene d’Amour” and leads us into an overblown variation of “Madeline’s Theme” in 6/8 timing. The music here has been described as “the gushiest Hitchcock music since Spellbound, and a potent rejoinder to the claim that Herrmann avoided Romantic hyperbole” (Sullivan 2006, 126). Howard Goodall, however, claims that this overstated nature was intentional: “Because we’re in a fantasy of Scotty’s making, the strings are unashamedly colourful and symphonic.” (Goodall 2004) Indeed, Herrmann’s use of vibrato in the string section is highly unusual. In contrast to his contemporaries, Herrmann usually required the strings to be played with little or no vibrato, as in the entirety of Psycho. Goodall suggests this disregard for vibrato was a first since the time of Mozart, (Goodall 2004) — though of course, as Midge rightfully asserts at Scotty’s rehabilitation clinic, “I don’t think Mozart’s going to help at all.” The “Scene d’Amour” is the musical climax of the film, and the counterfeit emotion felt by Herrmann’s strings, in support with the myopic repetition of the score, parallels the unreal passion felt by Scotty. The landscape of Vertigo is clearly populated with the echoes of nostalgic reminiscences; and the melancholic and fixated character of the film’s score is almost wholly created by Herrmann’s repetitions.

Perhaps most famously, Herrmann’s score for Psycho relies on an overall feeling of repetition to create suspense and drive the meaning of the film. In particular, the musical structure of the film is extraordinary: not only is the film monochromatic in terms of its orchestration (the unaccompanied string section was chosen by Herrmann – “to compliment the back-and-white photography with a black-and-white score” (Smith 1991, 237)), but the entire score is largely based around a single musical thread which finds its basis almost exclusively in Psycho’s opening credits. Most notably, the ‘driving’ music (“Prelude”, “Flight”, “The Rainstorm”) has its basis in only four notes, which leads Goodall to claim that Psycho used minimalist techniques ten years before composer Michael Nyman coined the term (Goodall 2004). Graham Bruce elaborates:

The majority of the musical cues in Psycho, as well as providing apt contributions to the specific scene, also set up, via a fabric of developments and variants of a number of motifs, structural relations within the film text as a whole (Bruce 1985, 184).

Perhaps Psycho then provides the best illustration of Herrmann’s repetitious musical ‘landscapes’ for Hitchcock. Though the “Prelude” of the film introduces (though often in oblique technical ways (Brown 1994, 162)) a large amount of the entire score, it also serves a more important role: to drive the narrative of the film from the first frame. Herrmann:

After the main title, nothing much happens in the picture, apparently, for 20 minutes or so. Appearances, of course, are deceiving, for in fact the drama starts immediately with the titles ... I am firmly convinced, and so is Hitchcock, that after the main titles you know that something terrible must happen. The main title sequence tells you so, and that is its function: to set the drama. You don’t need cymbal crashes or records that don’t sell (Cameron 1980, 132).

This is perhaps the most important contribution made by Psycho’s score. That the film’s musical language is clearly placed from the very beginning is key: even though Marion is not murdered until one third of the way through the film, there is nevertheless an unease present that cannot be simply attributed to the visuals alone. Instead, we must attribute this feeling to Herrmann, the organic and in many ways limited structure of his score, and the overall cohesiveness of repetitious echoes to create his Psycho ‘landscape’.

Repetition Three: within Herrmann’s Hitchcock oeuvre

The third, and perhaps most unusual level of repetition utilised by Herrmann is intertextual. We have already seen this on a basic level in the similarity between the ostinato in The Man Who Knew Too
Much and Vertigo. However, we can also see this ostinato figure more broadly reflected throughout Herrmann’s Hitchcock work. This rhythm, initially representing the parent’s search for their child in The Man Who Knew Too Much, undergoes a minor metamorphosis for Vertigo and becomes a Spanish Habenaña rhythm (“Carlotta’s Portrait”), as we have noted. At its most aggressive, the Vertigo ostinato is joined by castanets (“Nightmare and Dawn”) to reinforce the imposing and decidedly Spanish figure of Carlotta (and perhaps her insanity) in Scotty’s search for Madeline (Kalinak n.d., 20). Yet further still, this figure also appears in Psycho, slightly changed again, as Norman watches Marion as she undresses (“The Peephole” – this time played on pizzicato strings) (Bruce 1985, 134). Even more interestingly, this figure reappears for the last time in a Hitchcock film four years later in Herrmann’s score for Marnie. This time, it appears in order to narrate the dialogue-less sequence where Marnie plots the Rutland’s theft as she types (“The Safe”) (Bruce 1985, 134).

There are several possible links we can draw from these instances of Herrmann’s ostinato. Most apparent are the themes of searching, and of looking or watching. In The Man Who Knew Too Much, Ben and Jo McKenna search for their child; in Vertigo, Scotty searches and watches Madeline; in Psycho Norman watches Marion; and in Marnie we observe the process required to steal. These sequences are also largely silent outside of the non-diegetic music; indeed, the Vertigo sequence is one of the longest stretches of film without dialogue in all of Hitchcock’s work. These are sequences of what Hitchcock called “pure cinema” – that is, storytelling in purely visual terms (Truffaut 1984, 214-222). It is possible to suggest that Herrmann associated the subdued nature of his ostinato with the emphasis away from sound in these sequences. However, other commonalities between the instances suggest there was a distinct motive behind Herrmann’s implementations.[11]

Aside from the themes of searching and looking, we may also see the ostinato as an indication of insanity. Just as the McKennas are treated as mad by their friends and police in their desperation to retrieve Hank (“It was a crazy thing to do,” says Jo to Ben about traveling to the Ambrose Chappell), we can see a direct link to insanity in all other instances. The direct pairing of the ostinato with Carlotta in Vertigo is the clearest indication: not only did Carlotta commit suicide, but we are led to believe that Madeleine is suffering from a mental illness that makes her periodically believe she is Carlotta. The psychotic aspects of Psycho are obvious, yet musically it is the ostinato that lies at its heart. It is also Norman’s desire for Marion that sets the murder in motion, a desire made clear by the peephole sequence. As Toles argues, “Anything that his mother judges depraved must be dropped from the perceptual frame” (Toles 1999, 641). This is a neat intricacy of Herrmann’s Psycho landscape: for all the violent music in the film, it is one of the most subdued musical cues – the simple and quiet ostinato – that triggers Norman’s madness and renders murder unavoidable. Lastly, we can again clearly see madness at the heart of Marnie’s ostinato. Indeed, as Marnie’s thieving is the result of her neurotic compulsions, the plotting of her theft at Rutlands is perhaps one of the most overt symptoms of her illness in the film.

The ostinato is one element in a larger musical landscape for Hitchcock that defines Herrmann’s work with the director. The echoes found here are not just audible to the viewer via the context of the film: they are also within the metanarrative, viewer preconceptions and awareness of the film as a Hitchcock film. This is however a minor instance of self-appropriation: though we can see overt links between Herrmann’s various uses of the ostinato for Hitchcock, they are only general associations; thematic echoes that do not prompt an intellectual comparison so much as an emotional one. Nonetheless, Herrmann’s other instances of self-appropriation prove, as I shall show, to be much bolder. Perhaps the most audacious and meaningful example comes from Vertigo and North By Northwest.
Similarities between Vertigo and North By Northwest are rarely noted. Both films probably represent the apotheosis of major strains of Hitchcock’s work: on the one hand, the humorous adventure of North By Northwest and on the other, the somber psychological exploration of Vertigo. Yet, as Brown notes, “one of the most striking appearances of ‘Madeline’s Theme’... does not occur in Vertigo but in North By Northwest” (Brown 1994, 166). It is interesting to note tonal and intervallic similarities between “Madeline’s Theme” and the love theme from North By Northwest, which already indicate some form of musical echo. However, Vertigo and North By Northwest are successive in the Herrmann/Hitchcock corpus (1958 and 1959 respectively), so it may be tempting to disregard the similarities as a symptom of an overworked composer returning to familiar material. Yet it is not until North By Northwest’s confrontation between Thornhill and Eve in her hotel room (“Reunion”) that Herrmann’s strategy becomes clear: he abandons the differences and features “Madeline’s Theme” in full. It is little wonder that Herrmann opted to sonically remember Vertigo to audiences at this point, as thematically this scene shares much in common with Hitchcock’s previous film. Both Eve (in North By Northwest) and Judy (in Vertigo) are forced to conceal their surprise on the unexpected arrival, at their hotel-room door, of the men they had plotted against. By musically referencing the events of Vertigo at this point of North By Northwest, Herrmann adds a deeper layer to understanding and interpreting the sequence. To compare the sequences is to compare both film’s characters and our perception of them: might we now view Eve and Madeleine as equally deceptive, and Thornhill as trapped as Scottie? This intertextual parallel only surfaces through Herrmann’s self-appropriation. It is a musical echo, and unlike that of the ostinato, it is designed to draw an intellectual, rather than an emotional comparison.

While the instance of “Madeline’s Theme” in North By Northwest is the most commonly noted, echoes of “Madeline’s Theme” are not limited to Vertigo and North By Northwest. Indeed, just as Herrmann prefigured his Hitchcock ostinato in The Trouble With Harry, a suggestion of “Madeline’s Theme” can be heard prior to Vertigo in The Wrong Man (1956). In The Wrong Man’s sanatorium sequences, where Manny Balestrero (Henry Fonda) despairs over the deteriorating mental state of his wife, Rose (Vera Miles), Herrmann uses a similar harmonic cadence and short melody to “Madeline’s Theme”, although this time in a minor key.[12] Musically, this suggests experimentation by Herrmann, or an early variation on a theme for this particular element of his Hitchcock landscape, which he would perfect later with Vertigo. Though the similarity between the two musical ideas is remarkable, the minor key of the motif in The Wrong Man is perhaps not as effective as the false happiness conveyed by the major setting of “Madeline’s Theme”. Unsurprisingly, however, it is in these sequences that The Wrong Man is most Vertigo-like, with mirroring themes of mental illness and a tragically broken connection between lovers. The psychological debilitation of the sanatorium theme is no less potent than that of “Madeline’s Theme”, however, and both films finish with these themes playing, imparting their full power over the now enervated minds of Scotty and of Rose.[13]

A full echo of “Madeline’s Theme” was to resurface one final time in Herrmann’s cancelled score for Torn Curtain. While ultimately Herrmann’s score was rejected by Hitchcock and unrecorded by Herrmann save for a few cues, we can hear from subsequent recordings that “Madeline’s Theme” was to reappear in “The Hill”. Designed to underscore Michael Armstrong’s (Paul Newman) silent moment of confession and love to Sarah Sherman (Julie Andrews) before both characters attempt to escape East Germany, we again hear a complete rendition of the Vertigo theme. The connection, had it been allowed to remain, is just as clear. Though neither character is suffering from mental illness as in Vertigo or The Wrong Man, throughout Torn Curtain Michael has been forced to plot against Sarah, and is now confessing his true motives – just as in North By Northwest and Vertigo.

Through his echoes of “Madeline’s Theme” in Vertigo, The Wrong Man, North By Northwest and Torn Curtain, Herrmann draws attention to some significant intertextual parallels that might otherwise remain unnoted. Yet this third mode of repetition could also be seen to draw our attention to the variations-on-a-theme style of filmmaking Hitchcock and Herrmann were engaged with at this point.
in their careers. It paints both Hitchcock and Herrmann as similarly fixated, clearly unable to get away from these ideas – on the one hand, psychological breakdown and a disruption between lovers; on the other, the musical threads that echo “Madeline’s Theme” – that permeate their work.

One other major instance of self-appropriation in Herrmann’s Hitchcock work remains,[14] though it resurfaces in a non-Hitchcock film.[15] The three-note “Madhouse” motif from Psycho – first used when Marion suggests that Mrs. Bates be retired to an institution, and continually used within the Psycho score to represent madness – reappears as the last notes of Herrmann’s final film: Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976). This, Bruce suggests, connects Norman and Travis Bickle: “a nicely ironic link between two killers – the one confined to an institution, the other elevated as a hero” (Bruce 1985, 200). Yet this motif also stems from Herrmann’s first major work as a composer: the fourth movement (“Interlude”) from his Symphonietta for Strings and Timpani from 1935. Much of Psycho’s score finds its initial threads in this piece, from the incessant driving theme heard in the film’s opening credits (“Prelude”) to the whirling dissonance of the discovery of Norman Bates (“Discovery”). The “Madhouse” motif is in the “Interlude” in its entirety, however – it is even in the same key, following the progression of F-Eb-D in the low strings. Interestingly, it remains in the same key for Taxi Driver as it is played as the final credit rolls, this time on Bass Clarinet and Bassoon. From some of the first most important notes he wrote, to the final notes he ever recorded (Herrmann died in his sleep after finishing the final recording session on Taxi Driver), this particular echo seems to have followed Bernard Herrmann throughout his entire career.

Finale

It would perhaps be easier to write these echoes off as simple self-plagiarism. Indeed, despite these clear intertextual links, Herrmann himself seems to have been fiercely resistant to claims of self-appropriation, or more strongly, self-plagiarism. A 1970 interview with Herrmann performed by The Los Angeles Free Press took a turn for the worse when the interviewer, Leslie Zador, suggested that Herrmann had re-used his own music:

LESLIE ZADOR: To give an example of what Mr. Herrmann is talking about, he wrote an opera called Wuthering Heights. Part of the music from act one, scene one, was in a film called The Ghost and Mrs. Muir.

HERRMANN: No I didn’t, that’s completely false.

ZADOR: But it sounds just like it ...

HERRMANN: THAT’S BECAUSE IT HAPPENS TO BE ME! (Smith 1991, 305)

However disputed by Herrmann, these self-references did not go unnoticed by Hitchcock. In the same cable to Herrmann as his complaints regarding Dimitri Tiomkin and unchangeable scores, Hitchcock berated Herrmann for plagiarism:

I was extremely disappointed when I heard the score of Joy in the Morning, not only did I find it conforming to the old pattern but extremely reminiscent of the Marnie music. In fact, the theme was almost the same. (Smith 1991, 268)

In this instance, Hitchcock may well have been justified in his complaints. The score to Joy in the Morning, a 1965 drama directed by Alex Segal about young marriage, is strongly reminiscent of Marnie and other Herrmann works. “Thematically,” argues Smith, “the score is rarely original.” (Smith 1991, 264) It was Herrmann’s only score for 1965, and was written during the period of Herrmann’s divorce from his second wife. Smith notes the impact of the divorce on Herrmann’s creative output:
“as his life reached crisis point, Herrmann seemed unable at times to compose new, fresh music.” (Smith 1991, 48) It is not especially unusual for film composers to re-use material; the composition process has always been pressured and often run to tight deadlines, creating instances where the quickest (or sometimes only) solution is to self-copy (Cooke 2008, 494-495). Some of the most admired scores in film history have contained such ‘borrowed’ music: Nino Rota’s The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola 1972) had its Academy Award nomination withdrawn after it was agreed that Rota had reused music from his Italian TV writing (Cooke 2008, 378); while John Williams’ Star Wars (George Lucas 1977) contains a note-for-note excerpt from the “Le Sacrifice” of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring. Claims of plagiarism are commonly leveled at film composers, and not just in Adorno’s denigration. New Yorker critic Alex Ross, in discussing James Horner’s Troy (Wolfgang Petersen 2004), made the following remarks:

There are two possible interpretative approaches to [James Horner’s] challenging opus. One is that Horner is presenting us with a kind of musical meta-narrative of deconstructive requotation … By reducing other people’s masterworks to cheap ditties, Horner shakes his fist at the suffocating weight of bourgeois culture … That’s one explanation. The other is that the man is a hack. (Ross 1998)

Despite scores like Joy in the Morning, it is difficult to come to the same conclusion in regards to Herrmann. As well as the release of Joy in the Morning, 1965 also saw the creation of Herrmann’s string quartet, Echoes, from which I take the title of this piece.[16] As already noted, Echoes is strongly reminiscent of the composer’s work with Hitchcock, and is probably intentionally so. As Smith notes, “While many of its memories remain private, others can be guessed by allusions to past works … the plucked signature of its opening is Psycho’s violent prelude, the crying violin harmonics of its coda, Vertigo’s lost Madeleine.” (Smith 1991, 264-265) These are not the lazy shorthand of a film composer under pressure. Echoes is a concert hall piece: these are significant and conscious invocations in an art-music context. Evidently, Herrmann was able to use the echoes of his entire work as a composer to make emotional and intellectual links in this one concert hall piece. There is much to indicate that he was employing the same technique with “Madeline’s Theme” and the “Madhouse” motif, and little to suggest otherwise. Perhaps it is only fair to give Hitchcock himself the final word on the issue of plagiarism, taken from an interview to promote his final film, Family Plot. Asked about the Hitchcock “vein” of filmmaking, and reminded that “people accused Picasso of repeating himself,” Hitchcock offered a fitting rejoinder: “Self-plagiarism is style.” (Gilliatt 1976)

If, as I have argued, we accept that the instances noted in this paper are conscious “echoes,” then we must conclude that Bernard Herrmann was an innovator not just in film music, but also in the film industry itself. Indeed, just as the later “film school” generation of directors (whose enfant terrible, Martin Scorsese, received Herrmann’s final, self-referential notes) was careful to visually link their films with prior landmarks in cinema, Herrmann was clearly able (via his collaboration with Hitchcock) to link his films sonically. These allusions betray a more intelligent purpose than a simple lack of creativity; these echoes throw thematic patterns in the Herrmann-Hitchcock oeuvre into stark relief, often offering a revealing commentary that the images alone do not. As Smith suggests, these quotations “demonstrate the internal consistency and distinctive personality of Herrmann’s work, a sign of artistic maturity rather than fatigue.” (Smith 1991, 48)

Yet these echoes also reveal the depth of aesthetic repetition that lay at the heart of Herrmann’s music for Hitchcock, from the echo-like structure of his individual scores to the musical parallels and juxtapositions across his entire oeuvre for Hitchcock. Herrmann’s scores counter the simplistic criticism of repetition so often bluntly levelled at film music in general and illustrate how the technique may be utilised to deepen meaning within, and beyond an individual film. We can now also clearly see the auteur-like power that can be afforded to a film’s composer as well as to the director. Though no serious argument could be made that Herrmann was the sole author of his films, we may see through the examples provided that his was an authorial power with the ability to create and
change meaning beyond the control of the director – even a director as exacting as Hitchcock. Thus, as I have argued, it is precisely because of repetition, and not in spite of it, that Herrmann’s work for Hitchcock is meaningful and effective. To return one final time to his string quartet, we can see just how apt a eulogy, if it was indeed intended as one, Echoes was. In legacy, as well as in close analysis, Herrmann’s music for Hitchcock could not be better described than as “a series of emotional remembrances.”

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Music

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Written Word


Notes:

[1] However, Hitchcock then went on to accuse composers – “not necessarily by Mr. Herrmann, but by other musicians” – of being completely inflexible.

[2] Of note is Sullivan’s account of how Herrmann directly disobeyed Hitchcock’s desire to have “increasingly comic” music while Scotty trails Madeleine in the first half of Vertigo.


[4] Steiner paid particularly slavish attention to the leitmotif system in his work on Gone With The Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939), and is an excellent example, as there is a theme for almost every character, minor or major. For more recent examples, the work of John Williams (most notably in the Star Wars series 1977-2005) and Howard Shore’s Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003) provide excellent use of the leitmotif. Interestingly, Williams, who was a friend of Herrmann’s, scored Hitchcock’s final film, Family Plot (1976).

[5] Nat King Cole recorded a version of Herrmann’s Marnie theme set to lyrics, but it was quickly forgotten. As Sullivan notes, “a frigid, hallucinating kleptomaniac was not exactly the ideal subject for a pop love song.” (Sullivan 2006, 276)

[6] Chromaticism, in this instance means the use of notes, or chords that are directly sequential within the western twelve-note scale.

[7] In this sense used synonymously with ‘orchestration’, meaning the compositional use of one or more instruments. Herrmann was known for unique instrumentation before and outside of his Hitchcock work: he used the pioneering electronic instrument, the Theremin, in his score for The Day
The Earth Stood Still; he also utilised modern technology to make previously impossible combinations, such as bass flute and kettle drums in his score for Mysterious Island (Cy Endfield, 1961).

[8] All North By Northwest tracks referenced are from Bernard Herrmann, North By Northwest: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack, by Bernard Herrmann, Turner Entertainment, 1995.

[9] An ostinato is a phrase that is continuously repeated in the same musical voice. It may be a complete melody, or at least a melodic phrase; however, most commonly, it is a monotonic rhythm, and it is this usage that is applied in this essay. Perhaps the most famous monotonic ostinato is from Ravel’s Bolero.

[10] All Psycho tracks referenced are from Joel McNeely, Psycho: Original Motion Picture Score, by Bernard Herrmann, California: Varese Sarabande, 1997.

[11] While the first appearance of this musical thread appears in The Man Who Knew Too Much, it is certainly prefigured in the first Hitchcock/Herrmann collaboration, The Trouble With Harry (1955). Though it appears for less than a minute (in a cue fittingly titled “Ostinato”, played during the final nighttime exhumation of Harry), and differs from the other implementations in that it features the harp ostinato between two pitches rather than one, the movement of the strings around the figure is unmistakable.

[12] For The Wrong Man, Herrmann uses the minor iv-i7 cadence in the clarinets while an oboe plays the Vertigo-like melody descending from the 2nd degree of the scale. For Vertigo, the cadence is the major VI-I7 in the strings with the melody descending from the 2nd degree of the scale. Harmonically, these are closely related patterns.

[13] Interestingly, Vera Miles, who was Hitchcock’s original choice for Madeline/Judy in Vertigo, plays Rose Balestrero.

[14] Numerous other examples can be found throughout Herrmann’s entire oeuvre, though his self-appropriation within his Hitchcock scores appears to be more limited. For an exhaustive list, see Wrobel 2003.

[15] We could also examine Herrmann’s score to Brian De Palma’s Obsession (1976); however, that score (or rather, the entire film) can be viewed as a homage or even pastiche of Vertigo, and therefore in-depth analysis is less likely to be as revealing.

[16] It is worth noting that Echoes is also the name of the Bernard Herrmann Society’s Journal.

Bio:

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