

**Romantic Affinities?
Cavell on Opera, Film, and the Task of Expression**

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In “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” as in a smaller essay entitled “Opera in (and as) Film,” Cavell makes a challenging argument about the historical link between opera and film. For him, they represent two historically juxtaposed attempts to solve the same problem, that of a “cultural trauma having to do with a crisis of expression, a sense that language as such, reason as such, can no longer be assured of its relation to a world apart from me or to the reality of the passions within me”. And he adds: “Nothing less than such a trauma could meet the sense of language as requiring as it were a rescue by music”¹. Just as opera – to which Cavell is referring in this passage –, cinema would be a way of coming to terms with such a “traumatic crisis of expression”. And yet, film provides a different – more optimistic – response, on account of which cinema may be seen as both an inheritor and a competitor of opera.

Cavell’s take on the agonistic affinity between film and opera (with music at its core) turns out to be relevant to understand film’s arguable expressive power (its capacity, as he might put it, to grasp the human being’s experience of the world) in at least two different senses: (1) as it sheds light on the main assumption of silent film (think of DeMille’s *Carmen* or Lang’s *Die Nibelungen*), that the movement of images is as compellingly expressive as the movement of music, and (2) as it suggests the importance of the use of music (be it operatic or not) in sound cinema. The second line of thought interests me further, in that it leads to a couple of philosophical questions I aim to discuss in a critical manner.

Is the affirmation of this affinity between opera and cinema a way of postulating – as Adorno put it, changing Nietzsche’s dictum – the “birth [not of tragedy anymore, but] of film from the spirit of music”²? Are there consequences to be drawn from such an assumption in terms of time being more crucial than space to characterize the human experience? What kind of music is required to meet such an expressive demand? Is Romantic music, by virtue of its pervasive influence over the listener, to take the lead?

I shall discuss these questions against the backdrop of a critical analysis of the use of music in Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder* (2012). Two reasons justify the option: Malick’s use of a great deal of Romantic music in these films, and Cavell’s admitted admiration for his former student and friend’s oeuvre.

Keywords: Film, Opera, Music, Expression, Cavell, Malick

¹ Cavell, Stanley, “Opera in (and as) Film”, in Rothman, William (ed.), *Cavell on Film* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 306.

² Adorno, Theodor W., *Versuch über Wagner, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp, 2003), p. 102.