



Edward Colless & Matt Warren **Op Music**

In the visual arts, Postmodernism has been a brief retro style extrapolating the effete ironic temper of Popism. At the end of the 1990s we have a different take on the Postmodern survival of Pop. The camp nihilism of Pop was antagonistically opposed to another artistic phenomenon of the 1960s, one which signalled a different outcome and end to Modernism: a trend which became dismissively labelled 'Op'. The snappy contraction of 'optical art', glibly coined by a *Time* reporter in 1964, 'Op' referred to a contemporary fashion — recognisable in the work of UK artists like Bridget Riley or Peter Sedgley and the Parisian *Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel* (notably François Morellet) — for highly graphic, abstract painting and sculptural constructions which featured often violently disorienting retinal effects. This fashion emerged at the end of the 1950s, within a cool 'post-painterly' reaction against the gestural expressivity of the US action painters and the *informel* spontaneity of European *tachistes*. The Op fashion had little of that dry, self-deprecating irony or whimsy demonstrated by the cool tendencies of Pop. Nor did it reveal the subtle refinement of sensibility and attenuation of feeling pursued by the mandarin late modernism of the colour-form or colour-field painters.

Op artists cooled down painterly or sculptural gestures into mechanically repetitive, intricate geometrical patterns.¹ But they also hotted up those patterns by using a repertoire of distortion techniques identified in perceptual psychology, which generate aggressive fluctuations of real surface and virtual depth. By resort to highly unstable figure/ground ambiguities, *moiré* patterns, periodic structures and complex after-images, the Op artists were able to create hallucinatory shimmer and flicker effects which theatricalised the viewers' experience to the degree of nausea inducing assault.

By the time it was loosely corralled in the 1965 MOMA exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, Op Art was already being criticised as a perverse mode of decorative art, or as a mere mannerism of other modern styles such as Italian Futurism or Russian Constructivism. Looking back on it in 1967, the US critic Lucy Lippard described Op as a doomed movement due to its 'predictability' and 'spurious contemporaneity'.² Op was just a certain trendy styling of optical tricks played upon a viewer, she noted, and there are only so many such tricks to perform. Surprisingly, Lippard's observation betrays a complaint in defence of a formalism that she would have otherwise disputed. She implied by this remark that Op was a mere novelty or fad, lacking the authority and magnitude of a formalist aesthetic to sustain its investigations, and incapable of articulating feeling — incapable, that is to say, of being an art rather than a gimmick.

If Op was considered a dubious art, this was because it raided scientific optical research (but in a manner quite unlike earlier artistic styles, such as Post Impressionism), as well as appealing to popular fashion approval. Op was not a vanguard movement so much as it was a stylish 'look'. And the Op 'look' was utilised in advertising motifs, in TV and cinema graphics. It was incorporated into fabric prints, clothing and industrial design. It is not only unavoidable but also necessary that Op 'imagery' would be turned into wallpaper. Moreover, Lippard's complaint indicates that — despite its resort to bold geometrical forms — Op was fundamentally antagonistic to formalism. Its particular mode of theatricality (not dissimilar to the rampant decorative schemes of *l'art nouveau* or chic styling of Art Deco) converted optical illusion into lifestyle decor, and looking back from 1998 we can see that — as a generic, enveloping, sensationalist gimmick — Op rather than Pop is the origin of the way we experience and consume art today.

We would argue that there is a similar musical style which could be called 'Op Music' — a mode of musical decor, a type of gimmickry, which is identifiable in the cool but hypnoid 60s and 70s cocktail lounge jazz and fuzz-funk which is undergoing retro revival today. Much of this musical Op style developed through background, filler and cue material used in cinema, TV and radio of the time. But Op is particularly distinguishable in the crossover between two dominant types of cinema soundtrack produced over the past thirty years.

On the one hand there are scores that are recognised as significant creative components of the films for which they have been commissioned. When these scores are released as a tie-in product on vinyl or CD, their composers' names will carry similar status as the films' titles. We recognise John Williams, Danny Elfman, Howard Shore, Jerry Goldsmith, Gabriel Yared, Georges Delerue, Nino Rota, Zbigniew Preisner and Ennio Morricone through their film scores, but also independently of particular commissions. Yet, despite the sophisticated artistry of these scores they are essentially programmatic pieces of music; either

correlating specific musical motifs or themes to the dramatic significance of a plot point, or articulating the mood of certain scene types.

Thus we might identify Williams's characteristic and memorable fanfares with opening title sequences for *Star Wars* or *Superman 1*, but also we recognise the epic narrative of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* through the intricate emotional texture of homesickness, romance, trial and melancholia in the Mahler-like dilation of waltzes and Neapolitan popular songs in Morricone's score for that film. The generic tendency always present in such scores is usually diminished by the prominence of signature musical thematic devices, linking the individual movie (often epitomised in a character's theme) with the individual composer. And these need not be big, warm orchestral flourishes but can also be cool jazz lines (the justly famous *Pink Panther* theme of Henry Mancini), stripped back funk groove (such as Morricone's unforgettable theme for *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*), or vividly cooing scat (accenting the lyrical synth theme of Francis Lai's fabulous score for David Hamilton's *Bilitis*).

At the other pole is 'the compilation', in which music tracks are selected and edited like a DJ's program, reflecting narrative incident and signalling mood but not expressing it. The compilation performs as a cultural sign much in the way that a sound FX track contextualises narrative incident according to both real and imagined periods or locations (such as traffic noise or howling wind). Thus, unlike a composed score, the compilation soundtrack is perceived as co-incident to the movie's narrative, indicating a cultural context for the mood or expression of that narrative. At its most generic and reduced this might suggest, for instance, an anthology of surf music complementing a surf travelogue.³ But even the simplest compilation soundtrack is never a mere index of cultural setting. Eclectic but solidly hip compilations such as *Trainspotting* indicate that this type of soundtrack is a web of associations strung across a film's rhetorical address to a cultural — or more likely subcultural — 'Imaginary'. Inevitably, there is a degree of irony in this address since the content is necessarily appropriated and hence 'quoted' by the film as a commentary, much like a series of epigraphs to particular scenes. Ironic and perhaps parodic, the compilation is a Postmodern version of the Modernist composed score.

The generic tendencies of both the composition and the compilation are countered by the signature effect of either the composer's personal style or the film's particular subcultural references. But there is a third type of soundtrack which has been underestimated due to its uncompromising generic mode. This type of track can include highly programmatic sound bank compositions, such as Roger Roger's work for French cinema and TV through the later 1950s and 1960s, Carlos Cordara's for Italian radio in the 60s and 70s,⁴ or Les Baxter's scores for the directors Roger Corman and Mario Bava.⁵ While some of this music is spoofed as 'easy listening' (although by no means can this be a general tag for it), we offer the description of it as 'concept score', after the concurrent usage of the term 'concept album'. 'Concept album' was a packaging tag attached to the inflation of the artistic status of rock and pop, unifying the tracks on a long play disc through a spurious narrative or often sentimentalised moral statement. (Among some of the more endearingly preposterous examples of these were the Moody Blues's albums *Days of Future Past* and *In Search of the Lost Chord*.) Like its rock or pop counterpart, the concept score is recognisable as a unified packaging concept, similar to an advertising pitch.

Ambience and muzak are notable modes of the concept score (Brian Eno has developed a particularly abstract version of this); but the finest concept music is what we would call Op Music. Highly graphic, imagistic and vivid but so mannered in its derivativeness that it is phantasmic, Op Music can be simultaneously ultra stylish as well as psychotic. Where Op Art was fundamentally theatrical but hallucinatory, Op Music is fundamentally cinematic and hypnoid. Thrillers, science fiction and horror — with their equal emphasis on individual style and generic patterns — are the prime sites for Op Music to flourish, especially in the European cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.

There are stylistic differences across the Atlantic within Op Music. American Op, like its psychedelia, is steeped in blues and rock, whereas European Op is often derived from jazz and funk. The difference in the musical heritage of Euro and US Op can be likened to the difference between two of the world's best known pioneers of psychedelic music: the USA's Grateful Dead and the UK's Pink Floyd. The 1967 'summer of love' performances of the Dead exhibit a standard



Left to right:

1. *Mo'Plen 3000 — Space Killer Tracks From the Past*, compilation: various artists 1997, Irma Records, La Douce [compact disc].
2. *Stroboscopica — Sonorizzazion PsychoBeat*, compilation: various artists 1997, Plastic [compact disc].
3. *Tenebre*, [motion picture] 1982, (record cover), dir. Dario Argento, mus. Claudio Simonetti, Fabio Pignatelli and Massimo Morante.

chord structure based in blues, and with solos (sometimes very long) that would veer off into what Frank Zappa had coined as the 'freak out' section, but would mainly stay within the chromatic, harmonic and rhythmic boundaries set up by the original blues structure.⁶

In the Floyd's comparable 'freak out' however, the soundscape would often be atonal, polyrhythmic and much more improvisatory. The Floyd was closer to the modes of free jazz; to the melodic lines of say Ornette Coleman than to full-bodied R&B, and also were dabbling in *musique concrète*. Where a free jazz impro section will be shaped by the extended solo melodic or rhythmic development, the Floyd's 'freak out' jamming section is characterised by individual instrumental peaks, momentarily breaking though from a fluctuating sound tide. The combinations of these elite and popular elements may have been handled naively by the Floyd, but this is precisely what also gave their music a freshness and vitality.

Op music from France, Italy, Germany and the UK is likewise far more hypnagogic — hypnoid and trance inducing — than the American style.⁷ Euro musicians and composers can arrange a trippy jazz, mod, acid-funk or even bossa nova theme for non-traditional jazz, latin or funk instrumentation, but use traditional rock and blues instruments as well as exotic ones, including the Theremin and early Moog synthesisers. This results in such unusual crossovers as the Italian band I Componenti's 1970 mix of a suave groove (that today might be called acid jazz) with a very American garage/surf guitar and 'wah wah' organ playing twelve bar blues. Or Aratari's 1972 take on Henry Mancini, overlapping the *Peter Gunn* theme as a bass line on an out-of-tune rhythm guitar with *The Baby Elephant Walk* melody (from Mancini's score to *Hatari*), played on overdriven fuzz trumpet. Listening to the range of fuzz-funk and psycho-beat on current re-releases, compiled on *Stroboscopica* or *Mo'Plen 3000* for instance, one could say that this Op Music may well be a stronger (if unconscious) influence on today's trip hop than is the more familiar cool or psychedelia. At the very least it is a fascinating precursor.

The cocktail groove of the band I Gres, the neurotic backwinding funk of Marc 4 and the sleek, syncopated pop from composer Piero Piccioni, provided some of the most distinctive Op sounds of the 60s and early 70s.⁸ In particular, Piccioni's score for the ultra modish, dystopian jet set comedy *La Decima Vittima* (*The Tenth Victim*, directed by Elio Petri, 1965) was a brilliantly offset set of variations on a waltz performed with a Hammond organ and delirious scat bebop vocals ghosting the instrumental melodic line.⁹ Unquestionably, however, the most vivid Op sounds have been associated with the Italian band Goblin, especially their film scores from 1975 to 1980.

Goblin's music traverses free-form jazz, funk, rock and metal issuing in a bizarre montage which is invariably dark and menacing regardless of how buoyant some of their melodies appear. Their musical textures are built with hypnotically recurrent music-box jingles, trance-like vocal drones, metronomic if percussive heart-beats, syncopated rhythms and multi-layered arpeggios on guitar and keyboard. Goblin's music for Dario Argento's horror films is reliably unnerving, haunting and relentless in its psychotic aggression.

Despite its luxurious and stylish emphasis on the supernatural, Italian horror cinema maintains a strong affiliation with the quasi-naturalistic slasher mode of thriller known as *giallo* for its portrayal of extreme personality traits indicating criminal psychosis.¹⁰ Most *gialli* plots seem implausible and their characterisation is awkwardly fabricated to fit into a lush but abstract savagery that converts the entire 'look' or styling of the film into an erotic delirium, which one director has neatly tagged 'blood opera'.¹¹ Argento's horror masterpiece, the 1978 *Suspiria* — set in a contemporary German dance academy populated by wistful ballerinas and (in fanciful backrooms and hidden corridors) a coven of inexplicably murderous, hideous witches — begins with a directorial *tour de force* as a young terrorised female student is, without reason or explanation, pursued by an evidently unnatural assailant who stabs her to death in orgiastic ecstasy.

Goblin's diabolical rhythms, bizarre drones and piercing operatic vocals mirror the brutal attack and the hyperreal storm lashing the macabre, overwrought *art nouveau* building. Argento's sound mix for the murder propels the music above the dialogue and spot FX tracks so that its consistent clamour drenches the scene in the same way that the film's saturated Technicolour floods the set with a lurid and sickly bloom. It is a *daemonic* score, possessing the scene as if the music were Argento's own delirium. It seems both to be brought to the film from outside, like the storm at the windows, but also to be part of the very decor of the scene — so that the characters are hearing and responding to its hysteria.

Op need not be as grotesquely idiosyncratic as this. It can be as whimsical as Piccioni's music. As blandly generic as Carlos Cordara's. Op may well sound like anything from synthetic fuzz through to muzak. In the same way that formalist critics identified yet misapprehended Op Art as mere gimmickry, Op Music will only be recognised by a judgment despatching the musical 'formalism' that defends the Modernism of rock, jazz and pop. Op is stylised cliché and trend consciousness in one sound; a decor, a design for living.

Selected Op Discography

Carlos Cordara 1997, *The Best of Cordara Orchestra*, Irma Records, La Douce [compact disc].
Francis Lai (no date — 1976?), *Bilitis*, Possum [compact disc].
Guido e Maurizio De Angelis 1977, *Mannaja (A Man Called Blade)*, RCA [vinyl].
Mo'Plen 3000 — Space Killer Tracks From the Past, compilation: various artists 1997, Irma Records, La Douce [compact disc].
Henry Mancini 1992, *Pink Panther and Other Hits* (includes selections from *Hatari* and *Charade*), RCA Victor [compact disc].
Goblin, aka The Goblins 1976, *Profondo Rosso (Deep Red)*, Cinevox [vinyl].
Stroboscopica — Sonorizzazion PsychoBeat, compilation: various artists 1997, Plastic [compact disc].
Goblin, aka The Goblins 1978, *Suspiria*, Cinevox [vinyl].
Bruno Nicolai 1972, *Une Vierge Chez Les Morts Vivants (Virgin Among The Living Dead)*, Serami [vinyl].
There is no known soundtrack available for Piero Piccioni, *The 10th Victim*.

Selected Op Filmography:

Astrozombies, [motion picture] 1968, dir. Ted V Mikels, mus. Nicko Karaski.
A Man Called Blade, [motion picture] 1977, dir. Sergio Martino, mus. Guido and Maurizio De Angelis.
Barbarella, [motion picture] 1967, dir. Roger Vadim, mus. Bob Crewe Generation.
Dawn of the Dead, [motion picture] 1978, dir. George A Romero, mus. Goblin with Dario Argento.
Deep Red, [motion picture] 1975, dir. Dario Argento, mus. Goblin.
Island of Perverstion, [motion picture] 1972, dir. Nic Mastrovakis, mus. Nick Lavronas.
Lisa and the Devil, [motion picture] 1971, dir. Mario Bava, mus. Carlo Savina. NB. Re-edited as *House of Exorcism* with dir. credit Mickey Lion.
Slave of the Cannibal God, [motion picture] 1978, dir. Sergio Martino, mus. Guido and Maurizio De Angelis.
Suspiria, [motion picture] 1978, dir. Dario Argento, mus. Goblin.
Tenebre, [motion picture] 1982, dir. Dario Argento, mus. Claudio Simonetti, Fabio Pignatelli and Massimo Morante.
The 10th Victim, [motion picture] 1965, dir. Elio Petri, mus. Piero Piccioni.
Virgin Among the Living Dead, [motion picture] 1971, dir. Jess Franco, mus. Bruno Nicolai.

¹ While derived from 1930s geometric abstraction, Op evidently owes something to the quirky pseudo-scientific tinkering of Duchamp. Duchamp manufactured five hundred sets of the 1935 *Rotorelief* — a 3D illusion generated by revolving 2D disks — in order to emphasise its 'research' value rather than its aesthetic value. He considered his *Rotorelief* a 'gadget' like a stereoscope, that is to say a novelty, exhibiting it at the annual invention show in Paris, the *Concours Lépine*, among vegetable choppers and garbage compactors.

² Lucy Lippard 1971, 'Perverse perspectives', *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, Dutton, pp. 167—168. 'It soon became obvious', Lippard declares, 'that no matter how "new" or fashionable they might become, the limitations of pseudo-scientism held no lasting interest for most serious artists, who were more likely to be concerned with form, colour, the poetic or formal expansion of painting rather than with perceptual effects alone.'

³ For example, the Beach Boys' surf hits were compiled for the movie *The Girls On the Beach*, 1964, in which they appeared. The Beatles vehicles, *A Hard Days Night* and *Help*, were films built upon compilation soundtracks but unlike, say, *Spiceworld*, they would not be easily reduced to genre.

⁴ The Cordara Orchestra often recorded under the pseudonym of Orchestra McCarl and at times in collaboration with Mirageman (Giovanni Fenati).

⁵ Baxter scored *House of Usher*, 1960, and *The Pit and the Pendulum*, 1961, for Corman. His scores often replaced the original Italian scores for Bava's films in their US release prints: notably in Bava's famous *Black Sunday*, 1960, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, 1962, and *Baron Blood*, 1970.

⁶ The 'freak out' is the trance-like jamming middle section of a song, after the introductory repetition of the lyrics in verse and chorus and before a closing chorus, peaking the development of tempo and attack, of volume and effects.

⁷ Ron Grainer's British TV themes indicate the range of Op through the 60s from a harsh, fatiguing backbeat (draped by an electronic siren as melody) in *Dr Who* (series commenced 1963) to the jazz rumble of the titles music for the extraordinary Patrick McGoochan vehicle *The Prisoner*, 1967/68.

⁸ Piccioni's film scores include those for *gialli* (see footnote 10) such as: *Devour the Male After Killing Him* (dir. J A Nieves Conde, 1971); *No Way Out* (dir. Peiro Sciume, 1971); *Seven Corpses for Scotland Yard* (dir. Jose Luis Madrid, 1971); *Open Grave Open Coffin* (dir. Alfonso Balcazar Grandia, 1972); and the notorious (banned in Australia) *New York Ripper* (dir. Lucio Fulci, 1982).

⁹ A French/Italian co-production, *The Tenth Victim* is based on Robert Shekley's SF novel *The Seventh Victim* about a future society in which government sanctioned duels to the death, with prize money awarded to the survivors, has replaced war. Petri's stunningly Op vision of such a future is rendered through the sorts of fantastic moderne decor and clothing characteristic of Italian fashion at the time, but intensified in a manner like Antonioni's treatment of mod London in *Blow Up* or Godard's wintry Paris in *Alphaville*. The interior sets allude to 60s design by Zanotta, Gaetano Pesce and Joe Colombo; and frames from the movie could be easily mistaken for the *Wallpaper* photo spread on last year's *Salon del Mobile* in Milan. Scandalously underrated, Petri's film is described by John Brosnan in *Future Tense* (1978, St Martin's Press, New York, p. 161) as 'a pretentious showcase', characteristic of the critical response which recognised but could not appreciate the film's exquisitely hip mannerism.

¹⁰ *Giallo* (translates as 'yellow') is the name given to the Italian genre of thriller, often considered to have been initiated by Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, 1962. The genre owes something to the 1950s German *Krimis*, a cycle of films inspired by the pulp thrillers of prolific novelist Edgar Wallace, whose books (along with other sensationalist writers) appeared in yellow-jacketed paperback Italian editions.

¹¹ John McNaughton (director of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*), quoted in John Martin, 'Good Giallo Guide', *Dark Side* no. 61 (special issue on *giallo*).