

Sound Mass Music in the Light of Cognitive Transmedial Narratology

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrativity of sound mass music, focusing on works by Edgard Varèse, Witold Lutosławski, and Krzysztof Penderecki. It adopts a transmedial, cognitive approach, arguing that narrative categories such as agent, space, and storyworld are not medium-specific but are high-level cognitive schemas stored in long-term memory. The analyst constructs mental representations of these categories through the process of narrativization, organizing textual signs from music to interpret and expand existing cognitive schemas.

Sound mass music, characterized by unpredictable processes and the absence of linear progression, poses unique challenges for narrativity. The paper explores how multiple temporal dimensions, as articulated by Jonathan D. Kramer's concept of multiply directed time, can be interpreted in post-tonal music. Rather than following a straightforward chronological order, these works create narrative through disruptions, interruptions, and reordering of time, activating universal narrative patterns. The research emphasizes the cognitive processes involved in recognizing and synthesizing these multiple temporalities. Discontinuities in the music require listeners to mentally merge non-chronological events into a causal, coherent sequence. This act of mental configuration mirrors the plot's construction, drawing on Ricoeur's method of narrative construction. The paper also explores the potential of specific plot types, such as agonistic, ludic, and ritualistic, in interpreting the narrative of these works. By applying an interdisciplinary approach, this study lays the groundwork for future research that incorporates insights from other fields, offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the narrativity in sound mass music and expanding its hermeneutic potential.

Keywords: sound mass, temporality, linearity, cognitive transmedial narratology

Introduction

This study originated from an interest in examining how music, which organizes its temporal

flow through sound masses—discrete blocks of sound that resist decomposition into individual components—conveys meaning. It challenges the view that sound mass music is static and non-teleological by emphasizing its temporal dimension, aiming to understand its meaning through the lens of linearity and purposiveness. In this context, the study primarily explores the narrative potential of this music. The initial idea for this research emerged from analysing the music of Witold Lutosławski, who described his works as narratives, developed through the concept of action (*akcja*) as a specific musical plot (Reyland, 2005). In post-tonal contexts, Bergson's notion of mental synthesis is crucial for understanding processes, as key events in a work are often presented in a non-chronological manner. Jonathan D. Kramer describes contemporary music as characterized by the fact that its most visible and significant connections do not occur between adjacent events in time (Kramer, 1973, 142; Kramer, 1988). This interplay between the objective sequence of events (the "time of the work") and our mental synthesis, which supports non-objective sequences, gives rise to new forms of temporality. This relates to Bergson's "energetic effort of analysis" and Boulez's "active analysis," both of which highlight the role of mental synthesis in interpretation. Thus, the interaction between surface and deep temporality allows for interpretations of both the time of discourse and the narrative time in these works.

This work highlights the significance of cognitive transmedial narratology as both a theory and a method. It emphasizes its theoretical-conceptual and methodological foundations to underscore the transmedial reconceptualization of narrative and narrativity as transmedial phenomena. The study proposes a new methodology for analysing sound mass music as narratives and offers a classification of approaches to working with sound masses. This classification is based on structural and semantic plot typologies, identifying plot as a fundamental narrative category.

The musical medium functions as a communication model, facilitating the conveyance and interpretation of meaning between the creator and the receiver, effectively conveying the intended message from one to the other. As a semiotic form of expression, music belongs to the semiotic category of media, whose sensory configurations we first perceive (“mediation”, presemiotic phenomena) and then cognize in terms of recognizing the activation of the sign’s function during semiotic activity (cognitive import) (Elleström, 2019, 23). This illustrates the phenomenon of “representation” (semiotic phenomena), and for a particular media product to communicate meaning, it must provoke interpretation. (Elleström, 2019, 5, 13, 22; 2020, 2; 2014, 16–17). Comprehending the presented “cognitive import” within a given medium, as well as shaping the process of semiosis, is intrinsically connected to and influenced by the interpreter’s prior experiences, namely, their knowledge, expectations, memories, and values. In this context, the (pre)knowledge, experiences, memories, beliefs, or “stored mental entities”, as collectively described by Elleström (2019, 24–25), may originate from the interpreter’s prior encounters with the same medium, other media, or generally from their experiences in the world. In this manner, the author engages with the aspect that Paul Ricoeur identified as the first stage of mimesis in his exploration of the narrative (Ricoeur, 1983).

Transmediality of the narrative

Transmediality encompasses phenomena that are not limited to any single medium; rather, these phenomena generate meaning independently (Rajewsky, 2005, 46; Wolf, 2002, 18). The prefix “trans” in “transmediality” should not be interpreted merely as the transfer of phenomena from one medium to another, but as a transgression of boundaries that enables these phenomena to exist independently of any specific medium. As independent entities, they can be found across multiple media, realized in circumstances and ways unique to each medium, creating meaning within a given medium rather than in relation to others. Following in the footsteps of Claude Bremond, who in the mid-twentieth century introduced a transmedial perspective, the study of narratives was expanded (Bremond, 1964). Bremond emphasized that a story, or any form of narrative message, is independent of the medium through which it is conveyed. This perspective has led to the

exploration of other phenomena as transmedial. As a result, narratology has developed into a discipline that transcends the boundaries of individual media. Thus, all the components of a story—characters, events, temporal-spatial perspective—can also be interpreted as transmedial phenomena. The perspective articulated by Marie-Laure Ryan, in which a semiotic object can realize its narrative potential in two ways—either by “being a narrative” or by “possessing narrativity”—allows narrativity to be recognized both as a phenomenon and a quality in media products that are traditionally not considered narratives (Ryan, 2005, 6–7). If any media product can evoke a narrative schema or a macro-framework of narrativity in the observer’s mind and stimulate narrativization—reading as a narrative—then it can be said to “possess narrativity”. Narrativity, as a characteristic of a narrative text, is hierarchically placed at the level of the story, within the framework of narrative meaning, rather than at the level of discourse, i.e., semiotic encoding.

If the transmedial identity of a narrative is read from the signified—underlying structures of an immutable nature—then the narrative can also be viewed as a cognitive pattern created independently of the signifiers. This mental framework of the narrative entails constructing a mental model of a “storyworld” inhabited by characters who actively shape the course of events and are simultaneously influenced by those changes (Herman, 2009, 106–107). The interpreter uses signs in the text to construct mental representations of worlds or models of situations and events. They then identify the constitutive elements of these worlds, which can also be considered transmedial phenomena. By relying on media-specific signs pertaining to the narrative’s textual dimension, the interpreter identifies characters, events, their chronology, and the temporal and spatial dimensions in which these characters exist and in which events and changes occur. This process represents the narrative’s cognitive dimension.

The cognitive approach to constructing the concept of a character involves recognizing that the storyworld is perceived as a real world and that characters within it are also considered real entities. These characters, whether human or anthropomorphic entities with human-like qualities such as desires, will, and intention, are understood to have their distinct presence within the narrative. The cognitive aspect of understanding a character as a “text- or media-based figure in a storyworld”, or as a participant “in storyworlds created by various

media” (Jannidis, 2009, 14), is also examined through the process of “characterization”, which involves attributing certain traits to the character. The process of characterization reflects the active role of the reader in constructing a character and understanding its significance within the narrative by using their own stored cognitive frameworks and applying them during interpretation. Readers interpret a particular character in a specific way, viewing it as a coherent conceptual unit. Therefore, the cognitive approach views characters as textually based mental models of possible individuals, constructed in the recipient’s mind.

The role and typology of sound masses

The cognitive construction of the character has been guided by examining the role that the sound mass, as a unique sonic domain defined by pitch, register, and instrumentation, plays in structuring the musical flow of selected compositions. The sound mass is identified as a “referring expression” (Margolin, 2007, 76), an entity that demonstrates uniqueness within the musical flow, maintaining coherence of properties and identity, or temporal continuity throughout the entire piece (considered as a narrative), despite any changes it may undergo. As an active agent within the musical storyworld, the sound mass guides the development of various processes, influencing the emergence of events and changes in state, while simultaneously being shaped by these transformations. By analysing the formation of sound masses in nine selected works by three composers (Edgard Varèse: *Hyperprism* /1922–23/, *Octandre* /1923/, *Intégrales* /1924/, Witold Lutosławski: *Symphony No. 2* /1965–1967/, *Livre pour orchestre* /1968/, *Double Concerto* /1980/ and Krzysztof Penderecki: *Dimensions of Time and Silence* /1960-61/, *De Natura Sonoris no. 1* /1966/, *De Natura Sonoris no. 2* /1970/), including the number of instruments and lines that constitute them, their interactions, and the goal-directed processes they govern, it is possible to propose a paradigm-based sound mass typology on three levels, using two criteria: perceptual and cognitive. The first level, or the textual layer, consists of a single instrumental line that develops horizontally and, in further development, can become part of a sound mass as a block. The second one is the level of the sound mass as a “textural block”, composed of two or more “textural layers” or planes. The third one is the level of the sound mass as a textural “superblock”, consisting of two or more “textural

blocks” (cf. Chomiński, 1977, 201, 206; Masłowiec, 2008, 79; Ilišević, 2023, 23–53). Multiple planes, regardless of whether they belong to the same group of instruments, can unite in movement towards a common goal, alongside processes they govern independently. By recognizing the shared processes they engage in, these planes are then identified as parts of a sound mass as a block. Similarly, multiple sound masses as blocks can collaborate in a common process, forming a sound mass as a superblock. Understanding the processes by which sound masses navigate at various hierarchical levels is essential to comprehending the proposed typology. Consequently, sound masses, through their activities and the processes they govern toward diverse objectives across various levels, along with the relationships they establish with one another, significantly shape the temporal perspective of the compositions under analysis.

The typology of sound masses can be related to Aleksandar Pejčić’s (2019) actantial model and to his semantic and structural typology of plots. Pejčić enhances the discussion of character by introducing a dynamic model of interstructure. This interstructure is positioned between the deep structure of the actantial model—inhabited by general agents of action (subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, and receiver)—and the surface structure, which is occupied by specific characters and actions. The interstructure of Pejčić’s model serves to translate the deep structure into the surface structure through interstructural figures of a transformational nature. These figures include the subject, object, corrector, instigator, director, trigger, and static figure. They facilitate the transition from the abstract domain of actants to the concrete surface structure, where they become involved in actions and character activities. In the proposed model, sound masses occupy the interstructural figures and function as characters based on their activity and direction of action. The dominant sound mass, which governs the majority of processes within the work and serves as the main agent in the musical narrative, assumes the role of the figure of the subject. This dominant sound mass corresponds to the actant subject in the deep structure. The prevailing sound mass is characterized by its intent to shape the progression of the entire musical activity. The activities of other sound masses are organized around it, with their roles delineated in relation to it; they either support its objectives or impede its progress. This primary sound mass pursues local goals associated with specific musical elements. The quantity and nature

of these goals, along with the methods employed to achieve them, enable the interpretation of these action structures as linear, parallel, nested, intersecting, fan-shaped, and so forth. These goals are achieved through the pursuit of resolving the global problem knot, which unveils the narrative's semantic level and encompasses themes such as change, growth, development, and antagonistic relationships.

Results

The analysis revealed that the most common structural type of plot among the selected compositions is the linear type. This type features the activity of a single subject figure focused on a single problem, without twists or escalating obstacles. Dynamism is achieved through the repetition of specific actions and counteractions. Five out of the nine compositions displayed these characteristics. Conversely, the dominant semantic type identified was the ritual plot, with seven out of nine compositions displaying this symbolism. All three of Varèse's compositions exemplify a linear structure and are characterized by a ritual semantics, portraying the symbolism of change. This aligns with Varèse's compositional poetics, which he metaphorically describes as a process of crystallization (MacDonald, 2003, 148). The overall form of the work, including its recognized plot, originates from a single generic cell or primary plane as the main character, the subject figure presenting this idea. This idea is then "projected" into vertical and other dimensions, undergoing various transformations. This process reveals ritual semantics as the dominant semantic core. Penderecki's works are characterized by a relatively small number of sound masses, which he treats primarily as perceptual categories. These sound masses are often homogeneous and exhibit a high degree of independence, unlike those in Varèse's works. In Penderecki's compositions, sound masses typically complete their processes independently and undergo few transformations. This approach creates an environment conducive to the semantics of competition and conflict. Among the analysed works, only Penderecki's compositions feature the agonistic semantic plot types. In these works, conflict, struggle, and competition are depicted through a soundscape with two distinct timbres that do not blend. Listeners remain continuously aware of two separate blocks of sound that develop independently. The conflict begins with the collision

of these sound masses, where one penetrates the other, leading to the transmutation of one of them. The most complex actions occurring across two plots are found only in the works of Lutosławski. These compositions, written for the largest ensembles and significantly more extensive than the others, are unique in featuring two intersecting plots. The complexity arises from the activity of numerous sound masses that occupy nearly all the figures of the interstructure. This complexity can be linked to the concept of "akcja" as a purely musical plot, which the composer sought to achieve in his works.

Conclusion

By moving beyond a purely formalistic approach, the proposed poetics of the plot provides a methodological foundation for a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the selected compositions. The cognitive-transmedial narratological approach to analysing sound mass music proves effective, as it provides insights into how this music conveys meaning through both semantic and structural plot types. Sound mass music is realized through unique, work-specific temporal profiles as well as through transmedial universal narrative patterns. This allows it to activate a narrative framework in listeners' minds, revealing deeper linearities and configurations within the plots of the analysed works. The approach demonstrates that different plot structures and semantics, as cognitive semantic patterns, are fundamentally universal and independent of the verbal medium. Understanding their transmedial nature enhances our ability to listen to and comprehend music based on sound masses.

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