Top 10 Film Music Clichés, Part 1

From the Dies Irae to Braaam, the most famous and infamous tricks of the trade.

By Erik Heine

A new technique is used in a film, and deemed to be successful. The concept is then used again, and yields another positive result. Variations on the technique start to emerge, and are even applied to new situations. Finally, the idea becomes so ubiquitous that it begins to be parodied, as it has come full circle as a cliché. Whether it's a visual element (think of "bullet time" in the *Matrix* films), a "twist" ending (as in the works of M. Night Shyamalan, among many others), or even a musical gesture, ideas that were once fresh and exciting can easily become hackneyed and even trite.

This article explores 10 prominent musical concepts that were once invigorating—at least arguably—and have since become cliché in film. First, some quick parameters: These stock ideas must live beyond a single composer, so, for instance, James Horner's "danger motif" does not appear on this list. Also, there will be no discussion of the irritating (over)use of certain source music, such as the primary melody from the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or the opening of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" to accompany visuals of ridiculous celebrations, largely in teen-focused films—these have nothing to do with original underscore, except that they take its place. Also, this feature cannot cover every possible instance of some of these ubiquitous clichés, so take the breakdowns as starting points, not final destinations. (Many, but not all of the selected examples will be analyzed in detail.)

Let's begin with the oldest cliché in the book…

The Dies Irae

(Selected Examples)

Citizen Kane (1941) "Breakfast Montage"—Bernard Herrmann
It's a Wonderful Life (1946) "The Prayer"—Dmitri Tiomkin
The Seventh Seal (1957)—Erik Nordgren
Jason and the Argonauts (1963) "Hydra's Teeth"—Bernard Herrmann
The Car (1977) "Main Title"—Leonard Rosenman
Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977) "Burning Homestead"—John Williams
Conan the Barbarian (1982) "Orphans of Doom"—Basil Poledouris
Poltergeist (1982) "Escape from Suburbia"—Jerry Goldsmith
The Lion King (1994) "The Rightful King"—Hans Zimmer
Crimson Tide (1995) "1sq"—Hans Zimmer (See Feb. 2019 *FSMO*)
Demolition Man (1995) "Dies Irae"—Elliot Goldenthal
The Quick and the Dead (1995) "Kid vs. Herod"—Alan Silvestri
The Matrix Revolutions (2002) "Why, Mr. Anderson?"—Don Davis
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005) "Battle of the Heroes"—John

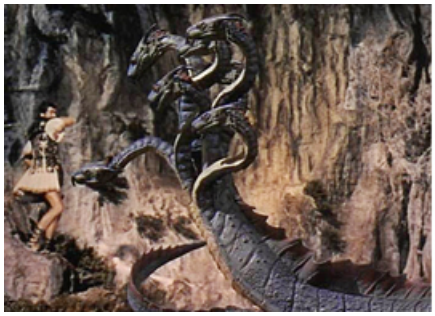
Williams
10 Cloverfield Lane (2016) "10 Cloverfield Lane"—Bear McCreary

The ***Dies Irae*** is a sequence, a syllabic melody set to the same Latin text, and is part of the Requiem Mass. The text, "Dies irae, dies illa, Solvet saeculum in favilla, Teste David cum Sibylla," translates to, "The day of wrath, that day when the world will dissolve in ashes, David will witness, along with the Sibyl." The sequence was composed in the 13th century, and has remained the same for nearly 800 years. Composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Giuseppe Verdi have set the text to different music in their respective Requiem Masses, and these versions have also appeared in film. One example of Mozart's treatment features in the opening White House Attack scene in *X-Men 2: X-Men United*. Verdi's treatment famously appears in the full trailer for *Mad Max: Fury Road*, but is also used, less noticeably, in the film itself. After Furiosa blinds the Bullet Farmer, he begins wildly spraying ammunition, accompanied by strains of the Verdi. Film composers often use the Dies Irae to highlight war, violence and impending doom and destruction. For those unfamiliar, the traveling musical troupe in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* sings the Dies Irae, essentially in its original version, presented here with the text of the second "verse." The Dies Irae may be the most familiar cliché in all of film music, and although it rarely feels gimmicky, it is usually obvious.

One of the earliest uses of the Dies Irae is found in Bernard Herrmann's score for *Citizen Kane*. The melody is heard throughout the film, but in one particular scene, the "Breakfast Montage," it is given particular prominence, as Kane gradually ages over the course of the montage, and the music becomes darker as his marriage disintegrates.

Five years later, Dmitri Tiomkin used the Dies Irae near the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*. George pleads with Clarence the Angel on the bridge that "he wants to live again." George is then recognized by Bert, the police officer, and George realizes that all has been put right in his world; he avoids the Day of Wrath through his prayer and acceptance of his life.

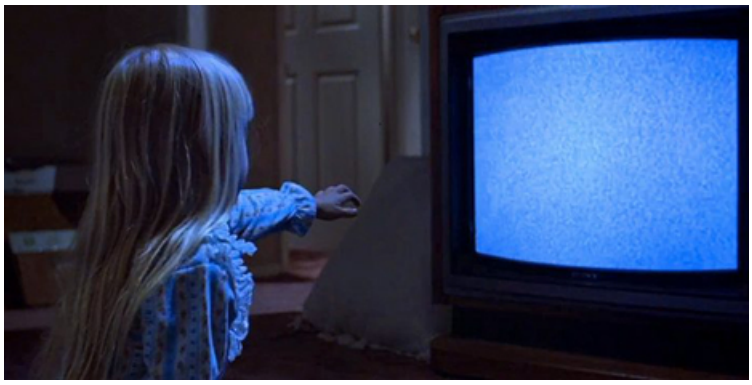
In his score for *Jason and the Argonauts*, Herrmann revisits the tune and gives it to the skeleton warriors derived from the teeth of the Hydra, the multi-headed serpent, placing it in the trombones and tubas, presented as long notes, with interjections by the woodwinds between every note in the melody.



Leonard Rosenman makes significant use of the Dies Irae in his score for *The Car*, about a possessed vehicle that attempts to kill the inhabitants of a small town. The film is a poorer version of *Christine* and other "death vehicle" films of the '70s and '80s. The "Day of Wrath" is represented through the car murdering people one by one, and even becoming frustrated when its attempts are thwarted.

Luke fears for Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru after seeing the Jawa massacre and heads for home. Once there, he finds a burning homestead, along with the skeletons of his aunt and uncle, and looks away in horror and with rage. The Dies Irae is referenced in the brass, followed immediately by a statement of the Darth Vader motive. While this example is an incomplete statement of the Dies Irae, its prominence at this juncture shows both the vengeance and impatience that the

Empire has for anyone in their way, as well as setting Luke on a course to study with Obi-Wan and become a Jedi.



Jerry Goldsmith's treatment of the Dies Irae in *Poltergeist* is similar to Herrmann's in *Jason and the Argonauts*, in that the notes of the Dies Irae are short and filled in with additional material. In *Poltergeist*, the dead are taking out their anger on the Freeling family, as their house was built on a cemetery, and the spirits are not pleased with being disturbed.

The Quick and the Dead is a gunslinging western about a dueling competition run by a corrupt town sheriff. When "The Kid" faces off against Sheriff Herod, the former loses and dies. Silvestri uses the Dies Irae at this moment, as The Kid believed Herod to be his father.

In *The Matrix Revolutions*, Neo sacrifices himself so that the computer world can regain control of the system and rid itself of Agent Smith. In doing so, Neo forges a peace treaty with the Machines. Rather than wrathful, this use of the Dies Irae is closer to the Requiem Mass, an intonement and celebration of the dead.

The planet Mustafar is an allegory for Hell, as it is covered in molten rock, and Anakin has chosen the path of the Dark Side of the Force, having killed Younglings and, he believes, Padmé. His climactic battle with Obi-Wan is his day of reckoning; Anakin believes his powers to be greater than those of Obi-Wan's, but his arrogance proves to be his undoing. Obi-Wan spares Anakin, making his former pupil's rage and lust for power greater than before.

10 Cloverfield Lane is a "mystery box" film—is the main character telling the truth about what is happening outside of the shelter or not? McCreary's score plays on this idea, as what the audience thinks it knows about the characters, and about the outside world, is constantly shifting. Wrath is ultimately unleashed, but on whom?

***Psycho* Strings**

(Selected Examples)

Psycho (1960) "The Murder"—Bernard Herrmann
Jaws (1975) "Shark Attack"—John Williams
Carrie (1976) "The Card Catalog/Telekensis" & "The Dream/The Nightmare"—Pino Donaggio
High Anxiety (1978) 10m4—John Morris
Alien (1979) "Parker's Death" & "Here Kitty"—Jerry Goldsmith
Predator (1986) "Girl's Escape" & "Billy and Predator"—Alan Silvestri

The "stabbing" violins used for the scenes of murder in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* have taken on a cultural leitmotif, both for violent killing and for indicating that someone is crazy (or "psycho"). A cliché reaches its greatest cultural capital when it has been parodied in a film that is not strictly a parody, and this is the case in *National Lampoon's Vacation*, where Clark Griswold walks in on his wife showering, pulls back the curtain, and makes stabbing motions with his toothbrush while making the violin sound with his mouth. All of this is an attempt to see his

wife without her top, a far cry from the original use. People also use the gesture to represent others that are crazy (particularly exes), or simply murder, which is why parents laugh at 1:14:00 or so into *Finding Nemo* as Darla, the niece of the dentist, enters the building to the shrieking violins: She is a fish killer.

The Murder Scene in *Psycho* would not have had music, had Herrmann not fought for it, and yet it has become one of the most recognized film music cues in history.

The score for *Jaws* is terrifying because the accents are not in a pattern, nor are they on strong beats (thanks, Igor Stravinsky and *Rite of Spring*). When the shark attacks, the "murder" strings attack with it, making the unsuspecting victim that much more surprised.

In *Carrie*, the title character's telekinetic powers are often accompanied by shrieking violins, an aural representation of her special, and perhaps, unnatural abilities. They also serve as a prelude to murder, as Carrie kills everyone at the prom who mocked her. When her friend, Sue, the only survivor of the massacre, sleeps, she dreams of Carrie's house, but then Carrie's undead arm grabs her leg from beneath the rubble—and while the music isn't exactly shrieking violins, the concept is similar. Carrie is actually dead, so this is something akin to an echo of the aural telekinetic music.

Mel Brooks' *High Anxiety* is a parody of several of Hitchcock's films, and the two primary motives from *Psycho* both appear. First, music similar to that heard in *Psycho*'s "Main Titles" is referenced in cue 7m4. Later, the "Murder" music is used in 10m4. Curiously, the actual "Shower Scene" spoof contains no music for the "murder," with the bellhop instead shrieking, "Here's your paper," and making other high-pitched noises representing the strings from *Psycho*.

Like in *Jaws*, the monster in *Alien* is not human, yet the shrieking strings still preview the deaths of the passengers on the *Nostromo*, particularly Parker and Brett. The xenomorph shows no mercy, and once it reveals itself to the humans, it offers no escape.

In *Predator*, the aftermath of the Predator's actions, as well as the final battle between it and Billy, are accompanied by the ***Psycho* strings**, but slightly muted.

Through all of the examples of *Psycho* Strings, it becomes clearer that they are about murder, but more about unnatural or non-human entities committing these acts. Although Norman Bates and Carrie are, of course, human, they are not "normal" by any definition.

Moaning Woman

(Selected Examples)

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992) "The Beginning"—Wojciech Kilar
Gladiator (2000) "The Wheat"—Hans Zimmer
Black Hawk Down (2001) "Gortoz a Ran - J'Attends"—Hans Zimmer
Minority Report (2002) "Everybody Runs!" & "Visions of Anne Lively"—John

Williams
25th Hour (2002) “Ground Zero”—Terence Blanchard
Team America: World Police (2004)—Harry Gregson-Williams
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005) “Padmé’s Ruminations”—John Williams
Munich (2005) “Remember Munich”—John Williams
The Mist (2007) “Spiders”; also uses Dead Can Dance’s “The Host of Seraphim”—Mark Isham
Tropic Thunder (2008) “You’re My Brother” & “Real Tears”—Theodore Shapiro
Gravity (2013) “Gravity”—Steven Price

“Moaning Woman” became a cliché in the early 2000s, initially through the scores of Hans Zimmer. Tim Grieving, who still occasionally contributes to *FSMO*, wrote a wonderful article about the use of “Moaning Woman” in the July 2009 issue (Volume 14, Number 7), providing origins and early examples, so I won’t bother to reinvent the wheel here. The typical effect is to provide a sense of exoticism and “the other” through the use of this often wordless female voice.

One of the earliest instances of Moaning Woman comes from Polish composer Wojciech Kilar’s score for *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*. While it appears in multiple locations throughout, the first use is in the film’s prologue, a cue titled “The Beginning.” This particular instance lasts nearly two minutes, much of it unaccompanied. (Side note: The recently released 3-CD complete recording collection from La-La Land is exceptional.)

The score that made Moaning Woman famous is Hans Zimmer’s *Gladiator*. The vocals were deemed significant enough to give Lisa Gerrard, in this case the voice of the Moaning Woman, co-composer credit for some cues. The first instance of Moaning Woman in the film is heard while Maximus is having memories of his family in Spain, looking forward to returning from war to be with them. Maximus is fighting for Rome in present-day Germany, a long way from Spain, and it is this exoticism that Moaning Woman is accentuating.

Black Hawk Down tells the story of Americans fighting in Mogadishu, and their courage in getting out of enemy territory after their Black Hawk helicopters have been shot down. Once again, the voice of Moaning Woman is Lisa Gerrard, and once again, her voice accentuates the location’s non-western setting.

Sometimes it seems like every Hollywood composer wants to copy John Williams. For this cliché, John Williams is the copier. He makes significant use of Moaning Woman in the early- to mid-2000s, but not always to represent the exotic. In *Minority Report*, the use of Moaning Woman is a representation of the future, the idea of pre-crime, and the visions of the female pre-cog, Agatha, showing the audience previously unknown clues. In *Revenge of the Sith*, Williams uses Moaning Woman for a similar effect: the worries of Padmé and her sense that Anakin is headed down the wrong path. But in *Munich*, Moaning Woman is back to being a marker of non-western people, here representing a tragedy for Israel.

Every cliché reaches its parody point, and Moaning Woman is parodied by Harry Gregson-Williams in *Team America: World Police*, likely at the request of Trey

Parker. The idea achieves even more parodic heights in Theodore Shapiro's score for *Tropic Thunder*, a film about the making of a Vietnam War epic, where the actors cannot cry, ruining take after take. In "You're My Brother," the opening cue in the movie, Ben Stiller's character is gunned down by the Vietnamese, but alive enough to have a final conversation with Robert Downey, Jr.'s character. The scene is cut because Stiller cannot cry. Near the end of the film, he finally cries "Real Tears," and the Moaning Woman enhances this emotionally cathartic moment in the film about the film.

Steven Price's score for *Gravity* won the Oscar for Best Original Score in 2014, and the final 20 minutes of the film contain a large amount of Moaning Woman, which operates here with dual meanings. First, it is a representation of the exotic, in this case "space," but it also gives voice to the on-screen character played by Sandra Bullock, lending her courage to attempt to get home. In the final cue, once she safely lands on Earth, the wordless female voice becomes exceptionally loud in the mix, almost painfully so, foregrounding Bullock's strength.

One final use of the gesture is curious. In Spike Lee's *25th Hour*, Terence Blanchard uses "Moaning Man" in the cue "Ground Zero," the track title and narrative both referring to the location of the 9/11 attacks in New York. Rather than use the general female voice to emphasize the non-western origins of the terrorists, Blanchard employs a wordless male voice, which allows him to remind the audience that all of the terrorists that day were in fact male. The difference between Moaning Woman and Moaning Man is striking. While I am certain that other examples of "Moaning Man" exist, I have not come across them of late.

BRAAAM

(Selected Examples)

Inception (2010) "528491"—Hans Zimmer
World War Z (2011) "Z Shock in Philadelphia"—Marco Beltrami
Edge of Tomorrow (aka Live.Die.Repeat) (2014) "Combat Training" & "The Omega"—Christophe Beck
X-Men: Days of Future Past (2014) "Paris Pandemonium"—John Ottman
San Andreas (2015) "Hoover Dam"—Andrew Lockington
Justice League (2017) "Hero's Theme"—Danny Elfman
Skyscraper (2018) "Bridge Collapse"—Steve Jablonsky
Us (2019) "Pas de deux"—Michael Abels
Trailers—Various

"BRAAAM" is the newest gesture on this list, only a decade old, yet it has already been around for far too long. I'll place the blame squarely on (seemingly) every action trailer that's been made in the past decade. Because the sound is nearly ubiquitous in action films of the 2010s, it is easily parodied, especially in things like *The Lego Movie*.

The preeminent use comes from *Inception* (and its trailer), where it's also a hyper-accented and highly slowed note in Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien," a song used throughout the film. It occurs at significant emotional moments in the film,

particularly when Robert Fischer encounters his father in the dream world. From here, the sound starts to appear in action films, whether they involve fantasy, such as superheroes, or fantasy, like the ability to jump from building to building.

The instance in *World War Z* is quick, showing the decimation of Philadelphia, buildings ablaze, death everywhere. In *Days of Future Past*, Braaam highlights the appearance of Mystique as a mutant, and people are afraid of her.

The sound also seems to be present in most films starring Dwayne Johnson/The Rock. While I didn't check every score (*Fast and Furious* franchise, *Rampage*, etc.), it appears in *San Andreas*, a film about a devastating earthquake where Johnson saves the day, and in *Skyscraper*, a movie where Johnson's family is taken hostage in the tallest building in the world, and where he again saves the day.

Recently, the sound appeared in *Us*, and like *Inception*, the Braaam is a result of a popular song immensely slowed. Here, it is Club Nouveau's "Why You Treat Me So Bad," which was sampled in Luniz's "I Got 5 on It." Because of the unsettling nature of the film, the "Pas de deux" from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* wouldn't create the right tone. The action of the duet combined with the terrifying tone make this an exceptional example.

The *American Beauty* Orchestration

(Selected Examples)

American Beauty (1999) "Dead Already"—Thomas Newman
The Emperor's Club (2000) "Teaching Montage"—James Newton Howard
K-PAX (2001) "Grand Central"—Edward Shearmur
Heartbreakers (2001) "Heartbreakers Suite 1"—Danny Elfman
Finding Nemo (2004) "Mr. Ray, Scientist" & "Friends Not Food"—Thomas Newman
Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events (2004) "Drive Away (End Title)"—Thomas Newman
Rest Stop (Dead Ahead) (2006)—Bear McCreary
Big Eyes (2014) "Opening"—Danny Elfman

Thomas Newman composed one of the very best scores of all time with 1994's *The Shawshank Redemption*, but it wasn't until five years later that his signature sound become wholly codified. His score for *American Beauty* was so popular and influential that other directors immediately wanted to appropriate it. The aural palette began appearing everywhere, including in television commercials. Within five years of *American Beauty*, almost as many films sounded like it than didn't. There are some precursors to this setting, including Mychael Danna's *Ice Storm*, and bits of other Thomas Newman efforts, but it was *American Beauty* that truly established the sound. Newman himself would return to it in films such as *Finding Nemo* and *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*, among so many others.

The ***American Beauty* Sound** permeates the entire score for *The Emperor's Club*, a movie not as good as *Dead Poets Society*, and certainly not as sonically original. Beginning with the "Main Titles," and throughout the film, in cues such as

"Confronting Sedgewick," the *American Beauty* sound is omnipresent, masking the fact that it was composed by James Newton Howard, ever the chameleon.

Edward Shearmur's score for *K-PAX* doesn't use the *American Beauty* sound throughout the film, but in one scene that occurs in Grand Central Station, it is unmissable. Here, it represents the differences within people, highlighting Kevin Spacey's character's belief that he is an alien from a distant planet called K-PAX.

Danny Elfman has been asked to utilize Newman's signature sound rather than his own multiple times. For *Heartbreakers*, a film about a mother-daughter relationship scam duo, the approach is used to represent the idea that the women are not to be trusted. Even director Tim Burton asked Elfman to replicate the sound in his film about Margaret and Walter Keane, *Big Eyes*. Elfman was put off enough to skip Burton's next project, *Miss Peregrene's Home for Peculiar Children*.

—FSMO

Next time, in the conclusion of Top 10 Film Music Cliches, we wrap up with "The Conspirators Theme," Sexy Saxophone, *Edward Scissorhands* and more…

In the meantime, what are some of your favorite film music clichés, and/or notable examples that fit into the above five categories? Share them in the comments section below. If you have private thoughts for me, shout at me at: erikjheine@gmail.com.