

MUSIC AND ECSTATIC TRUTH  
ALTERNATE APPROACHES TO SCORING A DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the SALSA Traverse team. Their incredible work ethic, kindness, and willingness to welcome a stranger into their world are what made this film and paper possible.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION: MUSIC AND ECSTATIC TRUTH.....	1
2. MUSIC AND THE MIND.....	7
Processing and Emotion.....	7
Music and Mirror Neurons.....	10
3. ALTERNATE METHODS OF DOCUMENTARY SCORING.....	13
Score-writing Early in Production.....	13
Self-Scoring.....	16
4. SCORING <i>THE TRAVERSE</i> .....	21
Writing on Location.....	22
New Approaches to Scoring and Editing <i>The Traverse</i> .....	24
Self-Scoring and Ecstatic Truth.....	27
5. CONCLUSION.....	34
FILMOGRAPHY.....	36
REFERENCES CITED.....	37

## ABSTRACT

Music has the capacity to quickly and effectively communicate abstract emotional states. In documentary film, music has a powerful impact on how audiences' perceive and empathize with its characters. Despite this, its role can be diminished in comparison to its creative significance. This is often due to the timing of its creation during the production process. In this paper I will discuss two alternate methods of film scoring and how they can yield more authentic musical interpretations of real events. Through the works of various filmmakers and my own experience scoring the short film, *The Traverse*, this paper will discuss how scoring a film early in the production phase, or self-scoring can yield a more authentic display of "ecstatic truth" in documentary.

## INTRODUCTION

## MUSIC AND ECSTATIC TRUTH

Filmmakers and audiences have an expectation for documentaries to truthfully represent something about the world. However, every documentary is “characterized by the inherently contradictory idea of representing, in whatever way, something about the real and tangible world we live in, through the fabrication and construction of stories and narratives” (Sanders 1). In other words, documentaries are paradoxical in nature, where despite the idea that such films are meant to visually recite true and tangible events, they remain creative constructions filtered through many layers of subjective decisions.

Over the course of the genre’s history, filmmakers have attempted to close this contradictory fissure through a diverse set of approaches. The cinema vérité and direct cinema movements of the 1950s and 1960s sought truthfulness through setting limitations upon themselves, using long takes, diegetic sound, and unobtrusive camerawork to foster a more objective and literal representation of true events (Rogers 1). However, while this approach’s chief tenant was that greater objectivity yields greater truth, the fact that the camera retained a particular perspective made this goal impossible. After the limitations of direct cinema were realized, the art form experienced a paradigm shift away from objective realism towards acceptance and embracement of subjectivity (Rogers 5, 10). Films that lie within the poetic, participatory, performative, and reflexive categorical modes coined by film scholar Bill Nichols have rejected the limitations set by direct cinema to freely manipulate the genre’s building blocks. Films within these modes can

bypass realism to display a subjective or emotional truth (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* 99 – 138). Films that broadly fit within these categories can include the presence of the filmmaker, non-linear editing, metaphorical images, and staged events and recreations (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* 99 – 138). When describing truth in documentary, Werner Herzog, a filmmaker who frequently works within the poetic and reflexive mode says, “There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as a poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive and can only be reached through fabrication and imagination and stylization” (301). Today, critically and commercially successful films such as Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, which credits Herzog as a producer, embraces this idea through using stylized set pieces, fabricated situations, non-linear editing, and a heavy dose of surrealism to communicate a deeper truth about its subjects, rather than simply documenting them as they exist in the real world.

While “fabrication, imagination, and stylization” (301) are often manifested within the creative manipulation of set pieces, footage, narration, and editing, one of the most effective yet overlooked methods of evoking a “poetic or ecstatic truth” (301) is through a film’s musical score. Of all the tools at a filmmaker’s disposal, music is the most abstract, yet it is one of the most effective cinematic tools for evoking a poetic truth. In the words of Bill Nichols,

Few things help us to better understand what it feels like to be in a particular time or place, in the midst of a challenge or situation, than music. In this sense, music is not a supplement, a filling in or coloring of an outline already sketched, but a part and parcel of what we come to understand it feels to be, to live and perceive, and act and dream in a particular way.....It brings them alive in a way similar to how our own bodies and sense organs receive the world around us as far more than a



conglomeration of facts and much more as a force field of intensities and lures, focal points, and empty spaces. (*Preface xi*)

The raw elements of music, which include rhythm, pulse, tempo, pitch, melody, harmony, texture, timbre, and dynamics, can all be manipulated to convey rich meaning. When combined with footage, music has the capacity to communicate intangible subjective states and transport audiences into the emotional world of a film's subject.

This power comes with consequences for how audiences perceive people, places, and ideas. Because documentaries are a visual medium, much of the discussion surrounding creative authorship and authenticity is focused on image. Most documentaries contain non-diegetic music that is added in post-production. Audiences generally accept and understand the notion that film scores are physically and temporally detached from events captured on camera. Because of this, discussions surrounding the evolution of representation and poetic truth in documentary often overlook the presence of music (Rogers 1). Despite this, music has the authority to completely change an audience's interpretation of a person or place just as a scripted recreation can. And like a scripted recreation, documentary composers are tasked with the challenge of creating pieces that are in synchrony with true experience in order to uphold an acceptable degree of poetic truth.

When discussing her process of scoring for documentaries Miriam Cutler, known for her work on *RBG* and *The Hunting Ground* said "I always feel this incredible responsibility to be very heartfelt and pure in my approach, because this is somebody's real story. I try to use the craft of music to express what the beats of the film are, to find a truth with that and to always respect the fact that these characters are living people"

(Leeman). Composer Mark Adler who scored *Food Inc.*, had a similar thought saying, “In a dramatic film you have suspension of disbelief working for you... And that's not the case with a documentary. And very often the one ‘artifice’ that is at least detectable by the audience is the music. And that makes scoring documentaries a much, much tougher job. I think people's threshold of what they'll accept is much, much higher” (Leeman). These composers understand the degree of responsibility that comes with documentary scoring since they are writing pieces of music that affect how audiences perceive real events, and real people instead of actors.

The process of scoring a documentary film varies between projects, directors, and composers. Sometimes scores are written prior to, or during production. A more common practice is to create a score after principal photography during the post-production stage. At this point, the composer will see either raw footage, an assembly rough cut, or fine-cut, and work alongside the director to create suitable music. While it is not the case for all documentary films, it is uncommon for composers to be physically present during stages of principal photography. Rather than drawing inspiration from physically witnessing events captured on film, they will draw inspiration from footage, and work with the director to guide their creative output. Many times, this is done astoundingly well such as in Phillip Glass’s acclaimed score for Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line*, which chronicles the hazy and equivocal events that lead to a wrongful murder conviction. Bill Nichols writes

The tendency of Glass’s music to possess a tonality that is both hypnotic and repetitive gives effective embodiment to the sense that the police and prosecution had circled around and around the events, repeating their own mantra of assumptions and convictions, only to let the truth slip through

their fingers like the elusive spirit that hovers near but not quite in Glass's music. (*Preface x*)

In Morris and Glass's case, the director was able to guide the composer to create an effective score that used music to convey the intangible and emotional truth of the events in the film.

While acclaimed filmmakers such as Errol Morris have learned how to communicate and guide composers to create well-suited scores in post-production, this approach remains physically detached from a film's source material, i.e. the principal photography stage. But what happens when filmmakers bring composers onto a project at an earlier stage in the production process? What happens when a composer is able to experience each moment in a film not through a monitor, but through experiencing events as they unfold in real time? What happens when the director is also a film's composer? Will they be able to create music that more authentically reflects the "ecstatic" truth of a character or environment?

In this paper, I will discuss how directors and composers have implemented this process and how scoring early in the production process or self-composing can help a film reach a more truthful musical representation of real events. I will also discuss my own experience filming, editing, and scoring the short documentary *The Traverse*, which follows the journey of Antarctic traversers as they drive tractors 600 miles across the Antarctic Ice Sheet to deliver science equipment to a remote field site. While the film does not push or test the boundaries of the documentary genre, scoring the project made the filmmaking process distinct from many documentaries. While it varies between films, it is common for scores to be written during the rough or fine-cut stages of post-

production. However, for *The Traverse*, each sequence was first scored and then edited to follow the rhythm and emotional tone that was established by the music. This fundamentally changed the way the film was created, and thus had a great effect upon the structure, pacing, and tone of the final film.

Through this process, I gained a further appreciation and respect for the power and significance of music in documentary. When created with care and honesty, music has the capacity to place viewers within the inner world of a subject and illuminate the visceral and emotional truth of real events. There is no one-size fits all approach to scoring a documentary. Scoring processes vary from film to film and are contingent upon filmmakers' and composers' preferred methods—whether that be scoring early in production or late in post-production. In the case of *The Traverse*, I argue that having the opportunity to film, edit, and score the film helped me dive more deeply into the experience of its subjects to convey the intangible movements, swells, and spaces that underlie the experience of Antarctic traversing.

## CHAPTER TWO

## MUSIC AND THE MIND

Processing and Emotion

Most filmgoers can attest that musical scores affect the way we empathize with a person or experience a setting. A common expression in music criticism is that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture” (Portman) since music’s abstract nature makes it challenging to convey the direct experience of listening. While one can qualitatively describe music’s effects through metaphors and anecdotes, research in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience provide quantitative insights for how it yields such a strong response in the brain. This research further supports music’s integral role in sculpting an authentic emotional landscape for a documentary film.

Sound and sight are processed in different regions and at different speeds within the brain. The average reaction time for responding to auditory stimuli is between 140 and 160 milliseconds whereas the average reaction time for visual stimuli is significantly slower, between 180 and 200 milliseconds (qtd. in Koinsky). This difference exists because the systems involved in vision are more complex than the systems involved in hearing. Visual information travels a much further distance through the brain, from the eyes to the occipital lobe at the back of the skull, whereas auditory information travels a much shorter distance, from the ear to the temporal lobe on the side of the skull (Schiller 1351 - 86; Pandya 486 - 94). This means that at its most fundamental level, your brain is picking up and reacting to a film’s music and sound before it reacts to the image. Film

theorist and experimental musician Michel Chion explained this discrepancy through differentiating the function of each of these senses. Vision could be processed slower because it “must explore in space as well as follow along in time” whereas our ear “isolates a detail of our auditory field, and it follows this point or line in time”. He concludes by saying “Overall, in first contact with an audiovisual message, the eye is more spatially adept, and the ear more temporally adept” (Chion 11). This quality has ramifications within visual storytelling as music and sound can be very effective for covertly stitching together fluid temporal sequences of actions and events. While our eyes are trying to make sense of where we are, music can be used to add a greater sense of temporal continuity to cuts and visual shifts.

While sound is processed faster than sight, how do they compare in more complex processes such as emotion? One study used positron emission tomography (PET) to compare levels of activity in the left hemisphere of the brain in response to emotionally salient visual and audio stimuli. The researchers found that images and audio produced the same amount of activity across the same cortical structures (Royet et al. 1997: 52 - 59). In other words, despite the fact that emotional images and sound were being translated through different inputs at different times, they yielded the same emotional response within the brain.

In film, music and image are not presented in isolation. Another study had one group of participants view scary and sad images without any accompanied music and another group view the same images paired with emotionally congruent music. Results were measured through using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to compare

levels of activity across the brain and through a questionnaire where participants were asked to rate the intensity of their subjective emotional experience. The participants in the group that viewed images paired with music reported a significantly higher level of emotional intensity compared to the group that viewed images alone. When the music and image group's brain activity was monitored using fMRI, the researchers confirmed this effect through seeing significantly higher activity in structures of the brain associated with emotion such as the hippocampus, parahippocampus, amygdala, striatum, insula medial ventral frontal cortex, cerebellum, and the fusiform gyrus. The condition where images were shown alone yielded very different fMRI results as there was greater activity in the cognitive portion of the prefrontal cortex but significantly less activity within the areas associated with emotion. In the words of the researchers "Based on these findings, we suggest that emotional pictures evoke a more cognitive mode of emotion perception, whereas congruent presentations of emotional visual and musical stimuli rather automatically evoke strong emotional feelings and experiences" (Baumgartner, Lutz, and Janke 151).

To summarize, sound is processed faster than vision within the brain, it yields equal emotional responses as image, and provides a much stronger emotional reaction when paired with an image. This suggests that music in filmmaking has a significant effect upon the emotional experience of the viewer and should be approached with great care and consideration. Because music can significantly alter the emotional weight of an image or imply meanings that weren't there to begin with, musical scores have significant weight in a craft that represents the lives of real people.

### Music and Mirror Neurons

Music exists in every culture ever known (McDermott 287). The underlying reasons for how something so abstract can produce such complex emotional states has prompted a myriad of theories across a broad range of fields (McDermott 287). Of all these theories, one of the most compelling has to do with networks in our brain known as mirror neurons. People interact in synchrony, where we unintentionally imitate the facial expressions, postures, movements, and emotions of those around us. This could be a result of the mirror neuron network, which responds to other humans' movements by internally imitating the movements and expressions they make (Overy and Molnar-Szakacs 490). Movement is ripe with emotional signals and mirror neurons are thought to be a chief mechanism for the experience of empathy. In one study, participants were shown pictures of emotional facial expressions and their facial muscles responded by making micro-movements that mimicked the expression in the photo, even when the photos were shown so quickly that they could not be consciously perceived. Likewise, participants reported that the pictures elicited an emotional response congruent to displayed expression (Dimberg et al. 85). In sum, mirror neurons cause us to automatically experience the lives of others as we unconsciously model their movements and emotions within ourselves.

Music and Cognitive Psychology researchers Katie Overy and Istvan Molnar-Szakacs proposed a neural model which suggests that music is processed similarly to how we process and mirror movement in relation to emotion. Components of music such as pitch, upward and downward movement, rhythm, and tone abstractly mimic types of



movement and speech associated with emotional states. Brain imaging studies have shown that the motor areas of our brains are activated while listening to music, even while we are not moving (Chen et al. 2844) and Overy and Molnar-Szakacs provide a model that suggests our mirror neurons respond to music in a similar way to how they respond to facial expressions, speech, and body movements. In their words

Within a neural network involving the temporal cortex, the frontal parietal mirror neuron system, and the limbic system, auditory features of the musical signal are processed primarily in the superior temporal gyrus and are combined with structural features of the expressive *motion* information within the mirror neuron system. . . The recruitment of these neural systems in both the agent and the listener allows for a *shared affective motion experience* (SAME). Thus the expressive dynamics of heard sound gestures can be interpreted in terms of the expressive dynamics of personal vocal and physical gestures (Overy and Molnar-Szakacs 492).

To exemplify this theory, a song with a high pitch, faster pace, and staccato playing style is congruent to the movements and speech patterns of a happy person. Our mirror neuron system interprets the music as if it were responding to a happy person right in front of us, and the mirror neurons associated with happy movements, expressions, and emotions are activated.

This model suggests that Bill Nichols' sentiment that "few things help us to better understand what it feels like to be in a particular time or place, in the midst of a challenge or situation, than music" is not hyperbole (*Preface xi*). If music has the capacity to place us in someone else's shoes through literally recreating their emotional state within our mirror neurons, then its use in documentary film is of high consequence. If a documentary's goal is to place viewers within the emotional experience of real people in real events, then it is the responsibility of the filmmaker and composer to portray that

experience with maximum emotional authenticity. It is unrealistic to expect all directors to score their own projects since most directors are committed to the craft filmmaking, not music. However, it is logical to assume that directors that create music, have a musical background, or bring a composer along during earlier stages of production are at an advantage for communicating poetic truth.

## CHAPTER THREE

## ALTERNATE METHODS OF DOCUMENTARY SCORING

Score-writing Early in Production

The majority of prominent director/composers work within fiction film. Although there are significant differences in the process of scoring a fiction film versus a documentary, the works of these filmmakers serve as a paradigm for how this approach can be brought to documentary. Sergio Leone was an Italian filmmaker and the originator of the Spaghetti Western genre with films such as *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, and *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Although he did not score his films, he placed great value on music's capacity to enhance characterization through prominent leitmotifs. Leone's reverence for music caused him to approach scoring differently than most filmmakers as he integrated music into new areas of the production process.

Rather than create a score during post-production, Leone had composer Ennio Morricone write and record the score for *Once Upon a Time in the West* prior to principal photography. Leone played the score on set so that actors could better grasp the pacing, underlying emotion, and characterization of a scene. Through this, Leone tapped into music's expressive qualities to improve his direction and translate abstract concepts more succinctly. In reviewing the film David Kehr said that "Leone played music the music on the set, asking his actors to mold their performances to it; the relationship of music and character is unusually tight, almost operatic" (Kehr 266). Through creating a score early in production, Leone was able to utilize the now heralded leitmotifs developed by

Morricone to drive the creative process of production and ultimately draw out more grounded and compelling performances from his actors. However, this process was only viable because *One Upon a Time in the West* did not record synced sound on set. Instead, they overdubbed dialogue and sound effects in post-production. This process of playing music on set is also used in modern day music videos where the visuals are inexorably linked to their soundtrack. This exact process would be impossible to apply to most documentaries or even narrative films, which rely on having synced sound and dialogue during filming. While this method is ill-suited for most documentaries, Leone's approach provides an example for how writing a score early can foster new avenues for creativity and story development.

When applied to documentary, it seems that incorporating score writing earlier during production could be just as beneficial. Leone created a score early so that music could bring about greater poetic truth in the process of fabricating events. However, creating a score early in documentary could bring about greater poetic truth in the reinterpretation of real events. Although they are different, these two cases are two sides of the same coin. The underlying sentiment is of music's capacity to evoke ineffable truths about a person or place. In Leone's case, music allowed him to create the emotional backbone for a fictional world before shooting even began. This leads to the question that if music is powerful enough to create a fictional world, then shouldn't it be taken seriously when its purpose is to reflect the world as it exists around us? In cases where documentary composers are able to join the production process at an earlier stage, would their scores more effectively communicate the intricacies of real-life experience?

There is a general lack of scholarship on this topic but the International Documentary Association hosted a discussion with documentary film composers where several members touched on this issue. Jeff Beal who composed the score for *Blackfish*, *Boston* and many more said

I love the idea of feeling much more like a fellow filmmaker. I feel sometimes the presence of music will help inform editing or storytelling choices in a way that a filmmaker's very appreciative of. Without that early chance to have a composer onboard, that interaction wouldn't happen in that way because things have already been decided, or the picture's been locked (Leeman).

Another composer Peter Davison who scored several series for PBS, and feature docs on Bravo, History Channel, and A&E had a similar opinion saying

I also like to come in as early as possible, maybe while the editing is happening, and start playing ideas for the director and producer...I do enjoy feeling like I'm part of the creative process of the film itself. You can feel much more that way if you're brought in early (Leeman).

Although many films do involve composers early in the production process, these composers appear to have worked mostly in later stages of production. They expressed a desire to be involved early in order to form greater emotional connections with the source material and in turn, create more compelling material. Akin to how Leone used music to inform his actors, this process could inform documentary directors in the storytelling and editing process. I am not arguing that documentary filmmakers should play a score during filming like Leone—because that would be entirely impractical. The distinction is that involving music early in production could open up new creative pathways by providing an emotional framework from which to draw inspiration. The details of how this process can be applied to directing, filming, and editing will be discussed later in chapter four.

The rest of the composers in the discussion agreed with these ideas and expressed a similar desire to be considered more as crucial storytellers in the greater filmmaking process. The host of the panel, Lisa Leeman who is not a composer, but a filmmaker responded by saying “I think it might be news to some filmmakers that composers would like to be involved earlier on, that composers might even start experimenting with themes” (Leeman). Lisa’s response indicates that some documentary filmmakers might not understand the degree to which composers want to be involved earlier in the filmmaking process. From this discussion, it seems clear that some of the most prolific composers in documentary see great value in scoring early in production to improve their understanding of key emotions and generate a more compelling score.

### Self-Scoring

In some cases, filmmakers with musical backgrounds choose to score their own films. The reasons for this can be simply to reduce production costs. In *Halloween*, John Carpenter’s budget restrictions caused him to compose and record the score entirely on synthesizers as opposed to live instruments. The results are “one of the most recognizable and influential scores to date” (Vaughan). Other director/composers such as Charlie Chaplin and Clint Eastwood choose to score their own films not for budgetary concerns—but to execute a clear vision for their films. Chaplin created films when sound in cinema was still in its infancy and conventions for the process had not been established. As a life-long musician, Chaplin saw no reason not to score his own films and as a meticulous and thoughtful creator, he saw it as an opportunity to further his

vision for a project. Charlotte Higgins writes “The invention of the recorded soundtrack gave him absolute control—a concept that was of prime importance to Chaplin in his film-making. Sound allowed him to create an ultimate artwork, complete in every way” (Higgins). This process was given official approval when he won the Academy Award for best score in 1973 for the film *Limelight* (Higgins). Since Chaplin’s scores often served as satirical counterpoints to the contents of a comedy scene, they are not serving as a foundation for poetic truth (Higgins). That being said, having creative control over the score allowed Chaplin’s films to reach their full potential and are now remembered as some of the greatest in early cinema.

Clint Eastwood is a contemporary director and actor who has self-composed his films’ scores since 2003 (Vaughan). As the lead actor in Sergio Leone’s, *The Good the Bad and Ugly*, it is possible that Leone’s reverence of music and Morricone’s unforgettable scores had an impact on Eastwood’s approach. Unlike Carpenter, Eastwood’s films are higher budget so he could hire a composer of his choice. His decision to score his own projects beginning with *Mystic River* was “like the next step in an increasingly personal filmmaking career – and a logical one, considering his well-known love of music” (Weir).

It seems Eastwood began scoring his films because music, being a highly personal and emotional art form, allows him to invest more of himself into the storytelling process. While several films he directed and composed have been nominated for Best Picture Academy Awards, his scores have had a lukewarm response from critics with “too simple, too scarce” being the main criticism (Weir). However, one film music critic,

James Buhler, commented on how even though Eastwood's scores might feel sparse, they do a great job of serving the characters and story. When referring to *Flags of our Fathers* Buhler was paraphrased in saying that the score "seems to struggle to express the story's emotions, mirroring the characters' inarticulateness" (Weir). Buhler goes on to say, "Because a professional composer's training equips him or her with a fairly wide range of expressive registers and musical forms, it would have been harder for a professional to capture and convey the same sense of struggle and awkwardness in such a simple piece" (Weir). Eastwood's score in *Flags of Our Fathers* might not be flashy or musically complex, but through having a deep personal knowledge of the source material and a less dense musical repertoire, Eastwood was able to create a simple, yet evocative score that communicated the inner turmoil of the story's characters.

From the works of these director/composers, it seems that self-composing films has the capacity to create scores that are more in sync with key themes and sentiments of a story. The directors previously discussed all work within narrative style films, so what happens when this process is applied to documentary? While there are likely more filmmaker/composers working in documentary today, only one was found during the research for this paper. Henry Kaiser is a prolific experimental guitarist, scientific diver, and filmmaker who co-produced, under-water filmed, and co-scored Werner Herzog's film *Encounters at the End of the World*. Kaiser spent many seasons in Antarctica working as an under-ice scientific diver prior to filming *Encounters at the End of the World* and as a friend and collaborator of Herzog's, he was the inspiration for the film (Palopoli). When tasked with scoring segments of the film along with David Lindley,



Kaiser had a rich bed of personal experience from which to draw ideas and sounds. In an interview with *Premier Guitar* magazine, Kaiser says

A musical calling since 2001 has been to record and perform music about my experiences underwater down South. It is perhaps the most satisfying experience of my musical career. For me, research diving, filmmaking, playing guitar, and making albums—they are all different sides of the same personal experience. (Drozdowski)

Kaiser was responsible for performing the pieces of acoustic guitar playing throughout the film and he co-wrote the choir and violin pieces with David Lindley. Antarctica is a continent with no musical history or culture. Because of this, Kaiser and Lindley drew from their large bed of cross-cultural musical knowledge to create a score that is as much inspired by American blues as it is by Bulgarian folk music. While segments of ethereal choirs and violins evoke the otherworldly vastness of the Antarctic continent, the quiet pieces of acoustic guitar played during sequences at McMurdo Station serve as a storytelling counterpoint through evoking feelings of sentimentality and comfort. Without explicitly saying it, the dualistic nature of this score communicates that for the people who return year after year, a place as foreign and desolate as Antarctica can also serve as a home, community, and sanctuary. As proponents of communicating an ecstatic truth, Herzog, Kaiser, and Lindley's score succeeds in evoking the emotional underpinnings of the Antarctic experience; that you can feel closed in, awe-inspired, isolated, and accepted within a community all at once. It is impossible to know, but if Herzog chose a different person to score his film, it is likely the final result would be completely different. As Kaiser said, diving, filmmaking, and music are all pieces of the same personal experience, and through being involved early, and truly

experiencing the events of the film, Kaiser crafted a score for *Encounters at the End of the World* that transports audiences into the internal experiences of the individuals on screen and behind the camera. It is completely coincidental that Henry Kaiser also filmed and scored a project about Antarctica and it is not surprising that the contrasting sensations evoked within the score of *Encounters at the End of the World* were congruent to my own experience scoring *The Traverse*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

SCORING *THE TRAVERSE*

Over December 2017 I had the rare opportunity to join an Antarctic science traverse to create a short documentary. The film follows a team of five as they use specialized tractors to tow nearly 1,000,000 lbs. of equipment to a remote field site where a large-scale subglacial lake drilling research project would occur the next year. Prior to leaving, I experienced a mixture of feelings ranging from gratitude and excitement to a paralyzing fear of failure and the unknown. People who were familiar with traversers told me things like "You are in for a wild time, traversers are crazy, get ready to be covered in engine grease." From all that I'd been told, I formed an image of these people known as "traversers", as these grizzly and intimidating figures. What I found on the ice was completely different from my preconceptions. Rather than meeting a group of diesel-fueled wild men, I found myself surrounded by a group of kind, thoughtful, hardworking, and genuinely hilarious people whose passion for their work, friendships, and the Antarctic experience was infectious.

It became apparent that the contractors who support scientific research keep coming back to Antarctica year after year, not for some extreme adventure, but for the lasting relationships that form through sharing a remote experience with no distractions beyond the job at hand. It also became apparent that I had a real responsibility to share the experience of Antarctic research's unsung heroes with as much care and faithfulness as I could muster. In my experience, the process of scoring the film played a significant

role in helping me communicate the underlying bed of sensations, swells, and emotional rhythms that accompanied my experience with this team of Antarctic traversers. It is important to distinguish that this score was not meant to convey the direct experience of the traversers, but rather to convey my own feelings along the journey. My goal for the film was to help audiences feel like they were there alongside the traversers. Because of this, I used music draw audiences into my personal experience as I transitioned from being an outsider to being part of the team. While the film does not directly follow my personal journey, it uses music to abstractly portray the sensations I experienced along the way to help viewers feel as if they were really there.

### Writing on Location

Today, musicians have access to an infinite world of sounds through digital audio workstations and software instruments. As a recreational digital music producer, I had access to my laptop's library of sounds and instruments during my time in Antarctica. During the traverse, there were periods of empty time as I sat in the modules while the rest of the team drove. Prior to production, I had not committed to the goal of self-scoring due to a lack of experience and confidence, but during these empty hours, I began sketching musical ideas and laying them over existing footage. The landscape and direct experience of traversing began to inspire new sounds and chord progressions and the goal of self-scoring the project slowly became more plausible.

The vast landscape of flat white coupled with the experience of spending time in a small group elicited contrasting sensations of sublimity and homely peacefulness. While

sketching ideas on my laptop, I was drawn to a software instrument called Exhale that uses digital vocal samples and a variety of effects to create lush vocal pads. Pads are typically chords that feature slow attack and a long, sustained release. They are often used as atmospheres much like a string section in an orchestra. The instrument pad created an ethereal, alien, yet still human sound which matched the experience of traversing through the landscape. Likewise, I was drawn to major 7<sup>th</sup> chords as they contain an ambiguous, nostalgic, and happy/sad quality with notes in both the major scale and relative minor. The sounds that were inspired during my direct experience of the film's events were a true embodiment of my emotional state during the filmmaking process and thus served as the backbone of the score and project as a whole.

An unforeseen effect of scoring during production was the degree to which it influenced the process of filming. As I filmed various moments and sequences, the music was freshly in my mind and like the actors in Sergio Leone's films, provided a blueprint for the creative process. One of the biggest challenges of cinematography is seeking footage that can be coherently and evocatively edited together. Incorporating music within the process of filming provided a creative pulse that drove the formation of mental images, cuts, transitions, and sequences. With music as the underlying connector, I was able to more clearly visualize new ideas for sequences, and how images would cut together during the actual process of filming. A common thought I have while filming for documentaries is "how is this all going to make sense?" and this was the chief challenge on my mind during the initial phase of filming. While this thought process is necessary for creating a coherent story, using this process alone can lead to an overly surgical

approach that overlooks opportunities for evocative expression. Creating music during production helped me to look beyond the goal of logical coherence and into the emotional ebb and flow of shots and sequences. Rather than simply thinking about how images would cut together in a logical progression, music helped me to think more about how to combine images and sound to form an emotional arc. As mentioned before, music's ability to conjure a mental picture of an emotional arc was the foundation for forming clearer mental pictures of shots and sequences and even helped me form a better understanding for how the film could come together during the edit.

#### New Approaches to Scoring and Editing *The Traverse*

The editing process for this film was unconventional and did not necessarily follow the suggested process I learned through my coursework. Documentary edits normally contain two initial phases before reaching the fine cut: an assembly, and a rough cut. These stages are done in a way where the contents of a timeline are considerably longer than the fine cut. The goal of this process is to draft shots in a logical order so that they can eventually be trimmed down to a more refined fine cut. If music is included in any of these stages, it is commonly in the form of a temp track that will not appear in the final film. Later on, it is common for the composer to write music based on the director's input, the rhythm of a sequence, or sometimes the temp track itself.

The process for editing *The Traverse* was reversed where music was created prior to and during the edit. During the edit, I would place one or two shots in a timeline to establish the beginning of a sequence, and then write a piece of music that established

how I wanted that sequence to feel. Once I had a temporary instrumental that matched the tone I was seeking, I would bypass the assembly and rough-cut stage and work on a sequence until I felt it was absolutely complete. An advantage of this process was the opportunity to edit the images and music in synchrony. For example, if the sequence felt too slow, I would increase the tempo of the song and adjust the images accordingly, or if the sequence felt too flat, I would add another sound to the music. When the composers in the scoring confab expressed their desire to become involved earlier in production (Sanders), I imagine this is the kind of creative process they were seeking. Music and image in documentary film do not exist in isolation, and a successful score should ebb and flow in natural synchrony with the image. So why should the process of editing and scoring be separated rather than united? There are limitations in the real world of documentary filmmaking, including budget restrictions and time. However, the more common process of scoring is merely an accepted paradigm of production where music's temporal placement can make appear as a cherry on top rather than a foundational ingredient. When filmmakers view composers to be as crucial to story development as editors per se, it is likely that new avenues for creative dialogue, and expression can be opened.

Another advantage of editing sequences alongside the creation of music, was that it fostered a more intuitive versus cerebral process of editing. Again, like Sergio Leone's actors, music served as a foundational guide for the creative process. Before beginning the construction of a sequence, I had already established its tone and pacing, causing editing choices to flow more quickly and fluidly. In a sense, creating music replaced the

step of creating an assembly. An issue I see with creating assemblies and rough cuts without a pre-composed score goes back to the notion of logical coherence versus emotional coherence. When an editor creates a rough assembly, or a very rough cut, the goal is often to find pieces of interviews and b-roll that can be placed in a logical sequence. While many editors and directors have the capability to cut these sequences down into incredibly evocative moments, they could be missing out on moments of pure intuition. This point is largely anecdotal because in my personal experience of editing, creating assemblies and rough cuts can feel uninspired. The process of editing this particular film felt more fluid compared to past projects that followed the more common process. It is possible that many editors are still able to have a sense of fluidity and inspiration in making assemblies and rough cuts. This was just not the case in my personal experience of editing this film.

An issue I face once an assembly is created, is that I am more likely to base fine cuts on a pre-arranged series of shots that was created with the overarching question of “does this make sense?” versus “does this make me feel?” When creating, the score first, I was essentially assembling the emotional tone and pacing of a sequence rather than assembling the logical flow of shots. This was very helpful for finding shots and transitions that evoked specific feelings at specific moments in time within the real-time world of the film as opposed to the lengthened structure of an assembly or rough cut. In other words, rather than relying on a predetermined structure that was created outside the actual audio-visual, temporal, and emotional world of the film, going straight to a fine cut with music helped show me the precise time and place certain shots needed to be to feel a



certain way. An interesting bi-product of this process was that it counter-intuitively sped up the editing phase. Although there was lots of time put in to the music and sequences, bypassing the assembly and rough-cut stages shed considerable time away from the editing process. This gives me the hope that this process could potentially be brought to other productions as it could make up for the extra costs of bringing on a composer early. Since this was my first attempt at this process, it was not perfect. However, when compared to past films I worked on that followed the standard process, this alternate editing process felt far more intuitive, creative, and effective for the purposes of this film.

### Self-Scoring and Ecstatic Truth

The process of self-scoring *The Traverse* both changed and helped the process of editing the film. I argue that it also helped establish an emotional landscape that was congruent to the abstract ecstatic truth of traversing. Like Henry Kaiser in *Encounters at the End of the World*, I was lucky to physically experience each moment presented in the film and had well of experience and emotion to draw from. While the film is about the five team members, the emotional arc of the score follows my own experience of feeling, at first, intimidated and overwhelmed by the people and environment and then eventually finding fellowship and serenity. Through placing the audience within my shoes, I aimed to evoke the experience of slowly getting to know these individuals and coming to appreciate the subtle moments of peacefulness and camaraderie that underlie the experience.

Before describing some key moments of the score, I first want to clarify more about how it was created. As mentioned before, the score was made entirely on my laptop using software instruments. Another key tool besides software instruments was the use of purchased royalty free samples and loops. While about fifty percent of the songs were created from scratch, others were built off of loops and samples from sample packs designed for music producers. In the process of scoring, I would look through my library of previously downloaded samples to find one that matched the tone I was trying to establish, usually drums. Then I would chop these loops into a new sequence, and layer on new sounds such as bass and pads. Like many contemporary compositions, although the score was created by me, it was not entirely built from scratch.

The film opens with a sequence of text and drone footage accompanied by a soft vocal pad and a slow attack sub bass. This piece of the score was actually the first piece written during my time on the traverse and its ethereal quality introduces the audience to the vast, pristine, and alien setting of the film. The film abruptly shifts into a rapid succession of harsh mechanical sounds and close-ups as the team fixes and preps equipment. The music that follows is contrasted against the floating opening score with gritty boom-bap drums, distorted bass, and a minor key distorted string pattern. Team members are introduced in a video portrait with their names and jobs written in text. The rapid editing coupled with the aggressive and gritty music reflects my own experience of feeling intimidated and overwhelmed by the equipment, landscape, and people in the moments after landing. As the music plays throughout the introduction of the film's

subjects, it gives the impression that these traversers are hardcore and intimidating figures.

The next piece of music was not a piece of the score, but diegetic music that played within the cabs of the traverse tractors. This sequence serves two purposes, to show the passage of time and to introduce the personalities of the drivers. Before filming this sequence, I asked the group to play what they normally listen to on their tractor speakers. Kevin, who was generally more quiet and pensive listened to an audiobook, Fabian who was gregarious and sardonic listened to a reggaeton dance hit, and James who was the class clown of the group sang loudly to Outkast's "Ms. Jackson". While these pieces were not written for the film, the cultural connotations and emotional qualities of these pieces can tell the audience a great deal of information about who these people are. Also, through listening to books and songs like most of us do while driving, the experience of traversing becomes more relatable and the subjects become more approachable. Although this section of the film was not a piece of the score, it demonstrates music's capacity to communicate a large amount of emotional and cultural meaning in a very short period of time.

When it comes to copyright, the diegetic music and audio in this sequence qualify as fair use. The audiobook and songs within the scene were transformed from their original state to deliver new meaning in a new context. The songs and audiobook were not played with the same purpose and context from which they were originally created. Rather, the short sections were incidentally used to foster a new understanding of the individuals portrayed in the film. The bits of audio also did not contribute to any

monetary gain, since this film was released for free and accrued zero profits. Likewise, the use of this audio does not impede on music or audiobook sales, infringe upon any potential market, or deprive the owner of potential income (Stim).

The next piece of music is set over a sequence where Steve, the Traverse Supervisor discusses the remoteness and isolation of traversing as the team settles in for the night. The piece contains another airy vocal pad and an undulating electric piano with smooth and rhythmic volume automation. During this section, Steve describes the experience of traversing and the hypnotic and sleepy quality of this piece is meant to reflect the transition from chaotic preparation to the quiet and slow rhythm of life on the Antarctic road. This piece also drew from my own experience as filming became less frenetic and I began settling into the new surroundings and getting to know the team.

The next section of the film introduces one of the most significant hazards of traversing, which are large crevasses hidden below the snow surface. In scoring this section, one might feel compelled to increase tension and drama with a dark and foreboding piece of music. The reality is that these traversers have the technology and expertise to safely avoid crevasses along their route. When speaking to team members, they expressed their dislike for much of the media surrounding Antarctica since it often overdramatizes hazards in a way that is inconsistent with their own experiences. In scoring this section of the film, I did not want to over-sensationalize inherent risks and instead aimed to establish a sense of poise in the face of danger. Instead of relying upon foreboding swells, the piece suggests a slight sense of danger through its crunchy drums and minor key. Despite this, its consistent beat and bassline, warm arpeggiated

xylophones, and airy keys evoke a sensation of confidence and proficiency. If this piece were placed in a narrative film it would be placed in the section where the characters discover clues or sort through problems, versus a section where they face mortal danger. Again, the purpose of scoring this section with this approach was to remain true to the real experience rather than inserting meaning that was never truly there.

The film then transitions towards the key moment of its story, where the traverse crosses the crevassed shear zone and reaches the study site. This piece of music is the most personal because it exemplifies the greatest sensations of peace and wonder I experienced. Likewise, the camera perspective during this section shifts away from the traversers and into my own perspective gazing out the windows of the modules. This section of the film contains no dialogue and the music and images are meant to draw audiences into the direct experience of what is happening on screen. Much of the music prior to this sequence contained a mixture of major and minor chords, however, this section was played solely within major chords, distinguishing itself as the most overtly positive moment of the film. The piece begins as the camera peers out the module windows and a glistening synth arpeggio laid over a subtle synth string pad evoke a floating sensation. The camera cuts to a drone shot of the traverse as a slow-attack sub bass provides weight and an airy vocal pad adds extra dimension. The slow tempo and lack of drums also fosters a slight feeling of bittersweet nostalgia. Like the previous piece, I could have increased the drama of crossing the shear zone through a more foreboding piece of music; however, this moment in the film was my opportunity to share

the most beautiful qualities of this experience. Once again, I had a well of memories to pull from and tried to musically communicate my direct experience as well as I could.

The next piece contains another gritty hip-hop beat with, a distorted synth bass, and piano laid overtop. The consistent beat and sturdy piano loop are meant to simply communicate the process of working and finishing the task at hand. The final piece of score in the film, with exception to the credits returns to a somber, nostalgic tone, with a partially reversed hazy synth key sound and an airy vocal pad. This music follows a sequence where the team discusses the strong personal relationships they form while on ice along with the fact that Antarctica has become a home and community. Steve goes on to describe that it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from; in Antarctica, it's the content of your character that counts. The warm tones, lack of drums, and the major to minor chord pattern was designed to give the piece a sentimental quality that suits the narration and gives the impression that the journey is coming to an end. The final piece of music composed for the film was for the credits and contains a major key seventies rock inspired piano line, coupled by an upbeat drumbeat and electric guitar. Similar to my experience leaving Antarctica, this piece was meant to leave audiences with the celebratory sensation of finishing a meaningful experience.

Although I lack experience in film scoring, and have very limited knowledge in music theory, having the opportunity to self-score ultimately allowed the film to more accurately communicate the true experience of traversing. Even if the score is fairly simple in musical terms, it draws directly from the experience of true events to express a personal recreation of emotional states. The goal of this film was to make audiences feel

as if they were there alongside the team. Through music's capacity to literally transmit personal experience, I hope viewers had the chance to at least feel some of the sensations of intimidation, serenity, awe, and companionship that I experienced during my time on the traverse.

## CONCLUSION

The overarching goals of documentary films vary immensely among styles and modes, from persuasion to illumination, to personal expression, and even to pure entertainment. However, if one's goal is to elicit "a poetic, ecstatic truth" through "fabrication and imagination and stylization" (301) as described by Herzog, there are few tools more powerful than music. Music's evocative nature has the power to embellish documentary footage with layers of meaning, emotion, and rhythm. This quality can then allow a documentary to reach beyond literal representation and communicate the abstract and intangible "ecstatic truth" of its subject.

For these reasons, the significance of music's role in documentary film is disproportionate to its involvement and location within more common production processes. Composers commonly begin their contribution late in production and are tasked with the challenge of communicating a film's underlying personality and emotional arc. It seems problematic that such a crucial component of emotional representation be so far removed from the storytelling process. While many films which follow this method scoring created successful and evocative soundtracks, an alternate understanding of music's significance could yield a creative process that proportionally recognizes its influence on poetic truth.

This understanding can be most acutely fostered through witnessing the events of a film not through a computer screen, but through physical experience. While it may not be practical to include composers in the process of filming, filmmakers that chose to score their own films are already in a position where they may get to know a film's



characters and setting. In turn, they have the unique opportunity to develop their own pool of memories, thoughts, and feelings. Thus, it seems logical that they may be more likely to craft a more truthful musical interpretation of real events.

Through my first attempt at film scoring for *The Traverse*, I gained a newfound appreciation of music's power to translate the abstract emotional undercurrents of true experience. Through living each moment represented within the film, I was fortunate to make personal connections with the traverse team and the setting in which the film took place. My goal for this film was to make audiences feel like they were there alongside the traverse, and music served as the key emotional footprint from which to guide audiences into the chaotic, quiet, and awe-inspiring experience of traversing.

As Bill Nichols said, "Few things help us to better understand what it feels like to be in a particular time or place, in the midst of a challenge or situation, than music" (*Preface xi*). If a documentary's goal is to transport audiences into a true-life experience, there are few tools as powerful as music. Music affects how we absorb, emphasize and interpret the re-imagination and re-construction of true events and I hope that self-scoring *The Traverse* brought audiences closer to the strange world of traversing and painted a more honest portrait of Antarctic research's unsung heroes.

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