

/

Painting the Past:

An Analysis of the Soundtrack in Animated Feature Film *Loving Vincent* (2017)

Inge van Nimwegen

4066510

BA Muziekwetenschap

BA Eindwerkstuk, MU3 V14004

2017-2018, blok 4

Deadline: 15-06-2018

Begeleider: dr. Ruxandra Marinescu

Universiteit Utrecht

## Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction .....	2
Chapter 1: Absent animation .....	5
Chapter 2: A proposition for analysis.....	9
Chapter 3: Painting a plot through sound .....	13
Past and present .....	14
Missing from the music .....	17
Conclusion.....	19
Bibliography .....	21

## Abstract

Animated feature films have soared in the box office in recent years. However, when it comes to their soundtracks, these have long been ignored by both the discipline of musicology as well as film studies. This thesis examines how this situation came to be and aims to correct this negligence, while it provides ideas on how to go about analysing the soundtracks of animated films that are not cartoons or Disney studio productions. It moreover presents one such analysis of the soundtrack to the recent well-received animated feature *Loving Vincent* (Dorota Kobiela & Hugh Welchman, 2017). In the process, this thesis reveals the primary issues stemming from the fact that animation is considered to be a single genre, while it is in fact as diverse in genres as live-action film.

*Keywords:* film music studies, feature films, soundtrack, animation, animated film

## Introduction

The discipline of film music studies has been a rich subfield of musicology for years.<sup>1</sup> It prides itself on looking at a broad range of films and their soundtracks: in content, storylines and genres as well as musical styles. One specific type of film soundtrack, however, is barely the topic of discussion, even though it is as diverse as those others: animated film. It has been said that animation has “as many individual styles and approaches as there are individual animators.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is often defined by its opposition to live-action films alone.<sup>3</sup>

Although it makes as little sense to speak of ‘animation music’ as a genre as it would to speak

---

<sup>1</sup> David Neumeyer, *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Langer, “The End of Animation History,” *Society for Animation Studies* (2002).  
<http://asifa.net/SAS/articles/langer1.htm>.

of all live-action soundtracks as belonging to a single genre, this is often the case in academic publications.

Although plenty of writing on animation is available, not enough has been done in relation to music or sounds accompanying animated images. Much of the writing on animation from a film studies perspective overlooks the soundtrack altogether. On the other hand, while the definition of film music *includes* music in animated features,<sup>4</sup> not many musicologists have written about animation soundtracks either. If ‘animation soundtracks’ as an umbrella term is not sufficient to refer to all animated film soundtracks as a single, uniform category, we can agree that there is need for methods to examine and describe this diverse range of soundtracks. How does the soundtrack work in animated feature films? A framework by how to address this issue still lacks. This thesis aims to set an example for how to examine soundtracks of animated films, using the few handles afforded by animation studies combined with models designed for film soundtracks similar in characteristics to the music in this case study. While research methods never explicitly address and seem to include animated features, I will argue that these provide good departure points towards a field where animated film soundtracks are included in the corpus of film music.

The objective of this thesis is to start filling this unexplored niche through examination of a number of scenes taken from the soundtrack of the recent independently released film *Loving Vincent* (Dorota Kobiela & Hugh Welchman, 2017),<sup>5</sup> which was an Oscar nominee for ‘Best Animated Feature’. This biographical drama about the death of Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh is the “first fully painted feature film”<sup>6</sup> –each of its 65,000 frames was painted on canvas using oil paint, in a style similar to the post-impressionist techniques Van Gogh

---

<sup>4</sup> Mervyn Cooke, “Film Music,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Loving Vincent*, directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman, produced by Dorota Kobiela, Hugh Welchman, and Sean M. Bobbitt (Poland: Next Film, 2017), DVD.

<sup>6</sup> Fiona Macdonald, “Loving Vincent: The film made entirely of oil paintings,” *BBC*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20171016-loving-vincent-the-film-made-entirely-of-oil-paintings>

employed. It can therefore be considered a new subgenre of animation in an era dominated by the Disney Studios, cartoon shorts and Japanese manga films.<sup>7</sup> The music for *Loving Vincent* was written for this film specifically by English musician and composer Clint Mansell. The composed score<sup>8</sup> was nominated for ‘Best Original Score in an Animated Film’ at the Hollywood Music in Media Awards 2017. This thesis will show in what ways the soundtrack as a whole contributes to the viewer’s understanding of the storyline in this animated feature.

The first chapter provides an overview of the issues regarding the lack of writing on music in animated film. It shows what research has been done on the topic, and how it lacks. The second chapter deals with the theoretical framework and the analytical tools that can be used for analysing an animated feature’s soundtrack. It is in this chapter that the proposed method for discussing animation soundtracks is explained. One case study forms the substance of the last chapter, wherein two scenes from animation film *Loving Vincent* will be discussed in detail. I will as a result be providing not only an attempt at adding to the current debate on sound in animation, but also challenge the notion of animation as a single genre and show that animated features are just as deserving of scholarly attention.

---

<sup>7</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

## Chapter 1: Absent animation

The term ‘animation’ is difficult to define because there are many different forms and techniques that comprise it. It is an audio-visual film form that can be generally defined as a wide variety of practices “in which the illusion of motion is created through the incremental movement of forms.”<sup>9</sup> Although a very diverse field with origins dating as far back in history as live-action film, defining its parameters is difficult. A division is often made on the basis of the animation technique, dividing ‘animation’ into three subcategories: 1) 2D animation, which employs drawn or painted images; 2) stop-motion, involving objects that are over time modified in form or position; 3) 3D animation, representing “digitally produced images simulating deep space.”<sup>10</sup>

The first full-length animated images were made not long after the arrival of live-action feature films.<sup>11</sup> However, the majority of animation produced in the 1920s were shorts that audiences would watch in theatre before or after the screening of a live-action film, and so, animation was given a “less credible position” than live-action.<sup>12</sup> From the 1920s onward, popular animation came to be dominated by cartoons, the animation type known from the Disney Studios and Warner Brothers.<sup>13</sup> Cartoons are characterised by a linear beginning-middle-end linear structure and/or slapstick comedy.<sup>14</sup> Ever since its first well-known work *Steamboat Willie* (1928) – coincidentally the first synchronized sound cartoon – Disney and other cartoon studios have dominated the animation world.<sup>15</sup> As a result, animation is often understood in a very limited way, wherein cartoons overshadow other styles and genres of animation – not just in popular culture, but also in musicological

---

<sup>9</sup> Maureen Furniss, *Animation: The Global History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Furniss, *Animation: Global History*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Furniss, *Animation: Global History*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 2-3; Furniss, *Animation: Global History*, 61.

scholarship.<sup>16</sup> This type of music bears little resemblance to the music in animated full-length features for adults: music's main purpose in cartoons is to enhance the comedic effect.<sup>17</sup> This is essentially why the understanding of cartoon music is of little use when examining 'serious' animations, such as *Loving Vincent*. A major contribution to bringing music in animation to light was unsurprisingly about cartoon music, written by Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor in 2002. Their book, featuring writings by critics, cartoonists and composers, aimed to correct the then-existing negligence of cartoon music in scholarly publications.<sup>18</sup> Although this negligence has been corrected to a fair extent, soundtracks to other genres of animation are to this day severely underexposed in academia.

Animation Studies as a subfield of film studies, with its own publications and journals, has been growing since the late 1980.<sup>19</sup> However, while many histories of animation have appeared since then, very few have included the animation's soundtrack in their writings. One example of a comprehensive overview of the history of animation that pays little attention to sound is Maureen Furniss's *Animation: The Global History* (2017). She affords music no more than a couple of paragraphs within the book's 443 pages.<sup>20</sup> This problem is by no means recent: expert in Media Studies Paul Wells afforded it little thought in his 1998 publication *Understanding Animation* (1998), even as he tried to explain the defining characteristics of this "critically neglected but increasingly popular medium."<sup>21</sup> It is not until his 2016 essay "Britannia, The Musical" that he attempts to improve this situation, by offering a historical overview of music in British animation.<sup>22</sup> Wells makes a case that scholars should not only consider the ways in which animation shares traits and applied principles of live-action

---

<sup>16</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Cooke, "Film Music."

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor, *The Cartoon Music Book* (Chicago: A Cappella, 2002), xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Furniss, *Animation: Global History*, 12; Rebecca Coyle, ed., *Drawn to Sound: Animation Film Music and Sonicity* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Furniss, *Animation: Global History*, 75; 79; 82; 89; 99-100.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Wells, "Britannia, The Musical: Scores, Songs and Soundtracks in British Animation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 247.

(which he calls “traditional”) film scores, but that they should also consider potential differences. A difference he himself mentions is how music in animation occurs as a catalyst of the action rather than a consequence.<sup>23</sup> But Wells leaves it at mentioning the phenomenon; he does not exemplify how this is seen or examined in practice.

The essays collected in Rebecca Coyle’s *Drawn to Sound* (2010), which studies audio elements in feature-length animated films released since World War II, show a more practical approach.<sup>24</sup> Each chapter exists of a discussion of one or more case studies. However, although she signals that “animation film bridges many genres and appears in different forms,”<sup>25</sup> she appears to fall into the same trap of featuring only a small margin of this broad genre: most essays have Disney Studios and other family-oriented titles as their subject. Moreover, the majority of the films discussed notably date from before 2000.

So while music is rarely discussed in publications on animation, animation soundtracks have been relatively under-examined in publications discussing film music as well, the collection by Coyle discussed above forming a rare exception. Another strong case study has appeared in a larger volume on film music written by John Corner.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, animated film does not limit itself to a single genre – animation has for example been used as a filmic technique to make feature-length documentaries, such as Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Corner includes a detailed analysis on this “landmark in animated documentary” in his book on music and sound and documentaries, focusing his discussion on sequences where the music is essential to meaning.<sup>27</sup> He uses models known in the field of documentary music, rather than any one theory specifically aimed at animation soundtracks. Corner observes that music provides “a choreographic dimension which distances it even

---

<sup>23</sup> Wells, “Britannia,” 248.

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Coyle, ed., *Drawn to Sound: Animation Film Music and Sonicity* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Coyle, ed., *Drawn to Sound*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World: Time, Event and Meaning in Feature Documentary,” in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. Holly Rogers (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Corner, “Feature Documentary,” 132.



further from conventional documentary reality than the fact of animation would achieve on its own”<sup>28</sup> – meaning that this film wants to stress its status as animation, rather than have the viewer focus on the events portrayed.

Overall, one can conclude that there are no characteristics unique to animated films soundtracks because of their stylistic variety, and more problematic yet – not one proposed framework for examining such soundtracks.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 133.

## Chapter 2: A proposition for analysis

The recent increase in diverse animated features calls for more writing on and analysis of animated film, and specifically its soundtrack. As expressed in the previous chapter, scholars before have used whatever pre-existing method they saw fit. However, the term ‘film music’, with its definition as compiled by Mervyn Cooke of “music composed, arranged, compiled or improvised to accompany motion pictures”<sup>29</sup> does not discriminate between genres: neither genres of music, nor genres of film. It is thus so broad as to also include any type of animated film – which warrants this borrowing from existing film music analysis approaches to animated film music.

Scholars writing on live-action music and animation music have through the years made use of very similar terminology to refer to certain aspects of the score and how to describe its functions. A common way to divide live-action film music into two categories is by differentiating between diegetic and extra-diegetic music: “music contained within the action (known variously as diegetic, source, on-screen, intrinsic or realistic music),” and music “amplifying the mood of the scene and/or explicating dramatic developments and aspects of character (termed extra-diegetic or extrinsic music, or underscoring).”<sup>30</sup> Wells uses this same divide in his description of what elements constitute the animated film. It is generally agreed upon in scholarship that music is only one part of the live-action film’s soundtrack, which as a whole also comprises of speech, sound effects (and silence).<sup>31</sup> In the case of animation, according to Wells, this division can be broken down into separate elements: 1) voiceover [omnipotent narrator] (non-diegetic); 2) character monologue (diegetic); 3) character monologue (non-diegetic); 4) character dialogue (diegetic); 5) character dialogue (non-diegetic); 6) instrumental music (diegetic); 7) instrumental music (non-diegetic); 8) song [music with lyrics] (diegetic); 9) song [music with lyrics] (non-

---

<sup>29</sup> Cooke, “Film Music.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

diegetic); 10) sound effects (diegetic); 11) sound effects (non-diegetic); & 12) atmosphere tracks.<sup>32</sup> It shows how live-action and animated film soundtracks are made up of if not the same, at least largely similar components – it is thus this terminology that will be put to use in the discussion of *Loving Vincent*.

Next to these similarities in terminology, there is also considerable resemblance between *Loving Vincent*'s score and the commonly discussed functions of film music. One of the elemental functions of film music, mentioned also by Wells in his discussion of narrative strategies in animated film, is that music “fundamentally informs how an audience may interpret the film [...] whether animated or live-action.”<sup>33</sup> Sound creates the mood and atmosphere as well as the pace of a film. Comparably, Mervyn Cooke similarly says that music in film is “capable of generating continuity, narrative momentum and subliminal commentary.”<sup>34</sup> This is especially true for music for composed scores, which are most often associated with classical Hollywood scoring traditions.<sup>35</sup>

*Loving Vincent*'s score shares many characteristics with those classical Hollywood film scores of the 1930s and 1940s (and its revival in the 1980s and 1990s). These scores typically employ a symphony orchestra playing in a post-romantic musical style. Scenes are scored wall-to-wall, meaning that the music runs throughout a scene with no interruption. Furthermore, the music provides unity through leitmotivic and thematic transformation.<sup>36</sup> The music in *Loving Vincent*, although sparingly employed at very specific moments, is often utilized in within scenes in a wall-to-wall manner so that it has a specific use within the narrative. The score moreover provides several returning themes that serve a narrative function. Its instrumentation is very classical, with strings, wind instruments, piano and harp, reserving a specifically large role for violin. It has dynamic tempo and volume variations. As

---

<sup>32</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> Cooke, “Film Music.”

<sup>35</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Cooke, “Film Music.”

Claudia Gorbman writes in her influential *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (1987), it is specifically the classical Hollywood-type of soundtrack that produces meaning.<sup>37</sup> In her model for the analysis of film music she distinguishes between seven principles of music in classical film: 1) invisibility; 2) inaudibility; 3) signifier of emotion (“soundtrack music may set specific moods and emphasize particular emotions suggested in the narrative, but first and foremost, it is a signifier of emotion itself”); 4) narrative cueing (“music gives referential and narrative cues, e.g. indicating point of view, supplying formal demarcations, and establishing setting and characters ... and ‘interprets’ and ‘illustrates’ narrative events”); 5) continuity; 6) unity; 7) may violate any of the principles, when in the service of the other principles.<sup>38</sup> While the first two and the last three principles are much more generally applicable to what a soundtrack does, the third and fourth are of specific interest to the upcoming analysis.

Specifically, the communication of meaning and how this contributes to the viewers’ understanding of the film’s narrative is what is of interest to this thesis. In order to perform a close examination of these functions of *Loving Vincent*’s soundtrack, one needs to study what kind of meaning this music conveys in relation to both the images and other aspects of the film’s soundtrack. The similarities already shown between Wells’ insights into animation soundtracks and live-action soundtracks justifies the use of a well-known model designed for (live-action) film music by Anahid Kassabian. In her prominent book *Hearing Film* (2001), she proposes a framework which helps examine how music communicates meaning, and applies this to a number of contemporary Hollywood film soundtracks.<sup>39</sup> She describes that film music serves three broad purposes with regards to how a film’s narrative is explained to the viewer: 1) identification (conveying character, place, object, situation, period, time, or certain sociological factors – possibly identified musically by the use of a leitmotiv); 2) mood

---

<sup>37</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 3-4; 9.

<sup>38</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (Bloomington, IN: IU Press, 1987), quoted in Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 41-42.

(music that is similar in emotional tone to other threads of the film; will less likely call to conscious attention); and 3) commentary music (conveying a counter mood; music that is rather different to other threads of the film).<sup>40</sup> Each musical instance can serve more than one purpose simultaneously.

Exactly how music creates meaning in an animated film context can furthermore be studied when also involving Nicholas Cook's *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (2000). In this book on the relation between music and images (not just in film but in any multimedia), he offers three possible relations between the two aspects: 1) conformance (music and images offer a comparable mood or impression, so that the music is more or less consistent with what the images show); 2) complementation (music emphasizes the images, may offer other insights); 3) contest (counterpoint between music and images; both may express different moods or ideas).<sup>41</sup> While Kassabian's terms can be used to describe what the music does (in isolation), Cook's model can be used to describe in more detail how the different elements of the soundtrack relate to the moving images, proposing a more nuanced tool for describing mood than Kassabian's mood/commentary dichotomy. I am therefore using a combination of their models as a basis for the upcoming analysis of *Loving Vincent*.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 98-106.

### Chapter 3: Painting a plot through sound

On Sunday July 27 1890 Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh shot himself in the fields of Auvers, France, with a revolver, which resulted in his death two days later. The events in *Loving Vincent* take place one year after this tragic event, when Armand Roulin embarks on a journey to deliver a letter from the late Vincent. This letter was supposed to be delivered to Vincent's brother Theo, but got returned as undeliverable. Although Armand initially leaves only as a favour to his father, postman Joseph Roulin, he becomes increasingly intrigued with the story of how and why Vincent died as more and more people share their memories of the events surrounding Vincent's death.

How do all the elements of the soundtrack of this animated retelling of Vincent van Gogh's death contribute to the viewers' understanding of the storyline? A number of aspects together constitute the answer to this question. The music has an important role in creating structure within the narrative and giving narrative clues as it conveys time and place, since the presence of music, often with thematic resemblance, usually indicates a flashback scene. Besides, the music conveys different moods and counter moods<sup>42</sup> in respect to the images shown. Finally, sound effects contribute to realistic surroundings for this story to take place in. This chapter looks at the soundtrack from two specific scenes: Adeline Ravoux's recounting of Vincent's death,<sup>43</sup> and Dr. Gachet's flashback to Vincent's last days.<sup>44</sup> These specific scenes feature similar themes, as well as being spread over the course of the film as to give a good indication of how the music helps the story to develop over time.

---

<sup>42</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 56-57.

<sup>43</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:27:14-00:31:30.

<sup>44</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 01:17:14-01:22:45.

### Past and present

Whenever Armand Roulin talks to other characters in the story about Vincent van Gogh, the images and the music transport the viewer back in time during sequences I will be referring to as ‘flashbacks’. Visually, flashback sequences are indicated by the images changing from colour to black-and-white.



Figure 1: Dr. Gachet in the present<sup>45</sup>



Figure 2: Vincent and Marguerite Gachet in Dr. Gachet's flashback<sup>46</sup>

The contrast with scenes taking place in the present is also created because the flashback scenes have non-diegetic music, whereas scenes in the present are most of the time not underscored at all, with some exceptions at moments negligible to the analysis at hand.

Simply the presence of music and the colour of the images thus indicates that what the viewer sees takes place in the past. This music can therefore be called identification music – conveying narrative information and therefore aiding the structure of the narrative.<sup>47</sup> Many of these flashback scenes build on a theme that occurs in very specific situations in which the mood is angsty. The initial appearance of this theme that will recur throughout the story is very early on in the film, accompanying the very first flashback.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 01:17:48.

<sup>46</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 01:18:27.

<sup>47</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 56-57.

<sup>48</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:06:30-00:08:28.

One scene in which this theme plays an important role is Adeline Ravoux's first flashback scene,<sup>49</sup> a result of Armand asking her about what happened with Vincent. Fast repeating triplets are played in a minor key, accompanied by a rather slow and low in pitch. This staccato rhythmic pattern in strings and wind instruments makes the passage feel rushed and therefore anxious, as though the viewer is left waiting for something to happen. While Adeline Ravoux speaks the words "something was very wrong," the viewer sees Vincent approaching, his hands pressed to his stomach – and the cellos playing the staccato rhythmic pattern increase in volume to join the first melody, adding a dark, foreboding element. The music's volume increases at first, only to decrease in volume again, and so continues during the first part of the scene as it accompanies the images. The instability in the music's volume allows for a feeling of unrest. The music reaches a climax when Dr. Gachet enters the scene, slamming the door to Vincent's room in Adeline Ravoux's face, and finally calms back down as she explains that she thought that everything was "normal and calm." It is here that the music is more telling than the dialogue or the images; the music complements the images, enlightening the situation for the viewer.<sup>50</sup> The viewer, of course being aware of Vincent's ending and paying attention to the music creating suspense, knows better than to believe that Vincent's status at that time was indeed normal. Another theme begins when the next image of Vincent appears, smoking a pipe. The viewer hears strings slowly playing an overall descending four-note melody in D minor (A, -E, -D, +G), continuously repeating as the strings are joined by wind instruments as well as a choir singing inaudibly. This music forms a stark contrast with the previous melody also since the triplets have made room for a much more direct 4/4 time signature, and as such strongly influences the viewer's perception of the storyline – this music can be classified as sad or heavy, rather than rushed or anxious. As Vincent dies, the music is sustained and in fact, even when it eventually fades out into silence,

---

<sup>49</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:27:14-00:31:30.

<sup>50</sup> Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 98-106.



it ends on the fifth rather than the tonic<sup>51</sup> – there is no resolution to the fact that “Vincent is dead.” For Armand, this conversation has only set in motion a curiosity of wishing to find out what drove Vincent to commit suicide – if that was even the case.

This last theme is to return in the last flashback scene, in which Dr. Gachet informs Armand of what ‘actually happened’ to Vincent, in his view.<sup>52</sup> Here, past and present seem more intertwined than in the previous scene, indicated by the music continuing even when the characters are in dialogue in the present, painted in colour. As the flashback begins, the images and the music are in contest.<sup>53</sup> The images portray happy people enjoying their time together, sitting at a large dinner table (reinforced by Dr. Gachet saying that it “seems like everything was alright”), but the music allows for other interpretations: a piano is played softly in a low register, combined with lingering strings – a sad melody. It is only after this musical clue that the viewer sees Vincent looking unsettled while Dr. Gachet and Vincent’s brother whisper to each other.<sup>54</sup> The next flashback fragment, which shows Vincent and Dr. Gachet arguing, has no accompanying music at first, but is later joined by the same melody in D minor heard towards the end Adeline Ravoux’s previously discussed flashback, for Vincent’s deathbed. This music continues both in the flashback as well as in the present. After days of searching for an answer as to why Vincent would have killed himself, the music indicates that Armand Roulin has gotten the answer from Dr. Gachet. The melody left unfinished in that first important flashback – which is, in fact, only present during these two crucial scenes – now does end on its final tonic D and therefore finally offers resolution. Because this melody is only present during these two instances, it invites the viewer automatically to connect the two and to conclude that the questions Armand fostered at the beginning of the narrative have now been answered.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:31:30-00:31:39.

<sup>52</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 01:17:14-01:22:45.

<sup>53</sup> Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 98-106.

<sup>54</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 01:18:20.

The music's role throughout these scenes is representing the main character's involvement with and interest in the story behind Vincent van Gogh's death through, firstly, not finishing the musical pieces until this last scene, and secondly, by letting the music seep through into the present as well as continuing throughout the flashback scenes. This way, the music has as a purpose to identify time<sup>55</sup> and as such to provide structure to the narrative as well as convey narrative information (Armand's involvement in the story); as well as communicating the mood of the character narrating the flashback to Armand, since the music was not always in conformance with the images shown, but rather added more information (complementation), or even expressed different moods (contrast).<sup>56</sup>

#### Missing from the music

Wells has claimed that the animated film creates a “visual environment radically different to the live-action version of the world.”<sup>57</sup> Since the visuals have the capacity to alienate the viewer, it is left to the sound to translate this strange environment into one that is comprehensible to the real-world audience. As discussed, the music in *Loving Vincent* communicates meaning with regard to structure as well as mood. Sound effects must therefore take it upon them to render the images to the viewer in a manner that is quickly understandable, thus retaining the magic and realism of the story and its emotional impact. The viewer's “immersion”<sup>58</sup> into the film's narrative world can be sustained only when the viewer is willing to accept this new animated world as real during the time spent watching the film. In this case, the world represents a real world, albeit in the past. *Loving Vincent* is not alone in this aspect: many serious animated films emulate the structural and narrative worlds of live-action films. In animation, sounds are regularly “metaphorical rather than realistic, and

---

<sup>55</sup> Kassabian, *Hearing Film*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 98-106.

<sup>57</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and Karen J. Shepherdson, *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2004), 336.

non-essential ambient sound is frequently eliminated”<sup>59</sup> so as not to distract the viewer. In this film, sounds are consistently present and detailed. In Adeline Ravoux’s flashback scene, the sound of footsteps on the stairwell and pouring water are placed more in the sonic foreground than is usually the case in Hollywood film soundtracks.<sup>60</sup> This makes sense, especially considering the fact that the painting technique used to animate *Loving Vincent* is not all that clear in representing real-life items. Especially when the same images are also meant to represent a chaotic scene, as is the case when Adeline runs up the stairs.<sup>61</sup> All incidental sounds are presented with a kind of depth and realism – rarely exaggerated, but very present in the soundtrack, especially because of their louder-than-expected volume. Sound is actually played on a similar volume as the other components of the soundtrack (music and speech).

One could eventually conclude that the soundtrack in a visually ‘challenging’ film such as *Loving Vincent* has to ‘work harder’ than in a live-action film where images are much easier to discern and recognise. This, in order to help viewers understand what the film’s images are meant to represent, without distracting them from the narrative and taking them out of their immersed state. In this manner, we can agree with Wells when he claims that within animated film, sounds incorporated “delineate specific narrative information”<sup>62</sup> – the visuals and music on their own would not be sufficient in telling the story. My analysis thus emphasises that both music and sound play a significant role in the creation of an understanding of the film’s narrative – the music helps determine the viewer’s understanding and interpretation of the film while sound keeps the animated images as realistic as possible.

---

<sup>59</sup> Janet K. Halfyard, “‘Everybody Scream!’: Tim Burton’s Animated Gothic-Horror Musical Comedies,” in *Drawn to Sound: Animation Film Music and Sonicity*, ed. Rebecca Coyle (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010), 36.

<sup>60</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:27:14-00:31:30.

<sup>61</sup> *Loving Vincent*, 00:27:14-00:31:30.

<sup>62</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 99.

## Conclusion

While the realm of animation spans far beyond just cartoons, animated film soundtracks have been ignored in scholarly research with only few exceptions. This problem is strongly intertwined with issues of genre and misconceptions about how ‘animated feature music’ would exist separately from live-action film music. In recent years, the market is flooding with more ‘serious’ animation, in a large variety of genres, and also at award ceremonies these animations have been afforded an increasing amount of attention and praise.

One such film is *Loving Vincent* (2017), receiving nominations both for best animated film as well as best soundtrack. This thesis has provided an understanding of how the soundtrack to this animated feature attributes to the viewer’s understanding of the narrative, emphasising that both music and sound effects play a significant role in the creation of the storyline. The analysis as presented in chapter 3 has used well-known theories from film music and multimedia studies to show that the music helps the audience both understand and interpret the film, while sound keeps the animated images as realistic as possible so as to keep intact the viewers’ immersed state. Especially interesting about the music in this film is how it not only communicates mood through its musical characteristics and their relation to the painted images, but also how the presence of music simultaneously helps structure the narrative, as well as providing information that is not communicated in any other way.

Since so little analysis of animated film soundtracks has been done, more case studies deserve to be looked at in proper detail. There is an abundance of possible topics as animated film can encompass so many different genres. It is here that I stress the term ‘animation’ must be redefined – there is not a single ‘genre’ of animation, and it should as such not be spoken of as though constituting one. After all, animation is an umbrella term referring to the technique used for creating moving images on screen – it in no way indicates the genre, themes, or otherwise content of the film in question. Different animation techniques are used

for films in a broad variation of genres: from dystopian dramas (*Metropia*) to documentaries (*Waltz with Bashir*), and crime films (*A Scanner Darkly*) to autobiographical fiction (*Persepolis*).

There are many theories for looking at music for live-action film within these different genres – why not use these to also consider the music in these animated films? The analysis of music in animated film can use some of the same apparatus used to describe live-action film music, since the definition of film music *includes* music for animated film. Within its small scope, this thesis has not been able to look at animated films from different genres, nor has it managed to discuss all aspects of the soundtrack of a single film – however, it has aimed to not only locate, but also make a start at correcting mistakes regarding the scholarly neglect of a complete industry. Getting rid of the negatively affecting terminology surrounding animation, would be a first step in the right direction.

## Bibliography

- Cook, Nicholas. *Analysing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Cooke, Mervyn. "Film Music." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Corner, John. "Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World: Time, Event and Meaning in Feature Documentary." In *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, edited by Holly Rogers, 123-36. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Coyle, Rebecca, ed. *Drawn to Sound: Animation Film Music and Sonicity*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010.
- Furniss, Maureen. *Animation: The Global History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2017.
- Goldmark, Daniel, and Yuval Taylor. *The Cartoon Music Book*. Chicago, IL: A Cappella, 2002.
- Kassabian, Anahid. *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Langer, Mark. "The End of Animation History." *Society for Animation Studies* (2002).  
<http://asifa.net/SAS/articles/langer1.htm>.
- Loving Vincent*. Directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman. Produced by Dorota Kobiela, Hugh Welchman, and Sean M. Bobbitt. Poland: Next Film, 2017. DVD.
- Macdonald, Fiona. "Loving Vincent: The film made entirely of oil paintings." *BBC*, October 16, 2017.
- Neumeyer, David, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Simpson, Philip, Andrew Utterson, and Karen J. Shepherdson. *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge, 1996.

---. "Britannia, The Musical: Scores, Songs and Soundtracks in British Animation." In *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford, 247-61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.