

The “Idyllic Sublime”: Point/Counterpoint  
A Dialog between Michael Beckerman and William H. Rosar  
© *The Journal of Film Music*

Introduction by Michael Beckerman

There is something like a pastoral vocabulary in music that stretches back to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. First appearing in madrigals, and associated with the idea of standing still in a pleasant, uncomplicated place, this mode of composition survives to our own time. While it is not advisable to try to define it too closely, the most prominent features are harmonic stasis and consonant intervals. We find, whether in operas, songs, or instrumental music, passages with drones, and often parallel thirds and sixths. These have been noted by many scholars and musicians before me, and will surely continue to be noticed. Originally associated with either certain idyllic states of nature, the sound world also was used in two related ways. First, it became associated with the people who inhabit those worlds—they could be many things, but we can begin by calling them “peasants,” since it reflects the relatively monolithic, uncritical idea of such people in the minds of the urbanites who created this pastoral world (which surely bears no real resemblance to the rural world as lived and felt by those who lived there). It also becomes associated with the idea of Christmas. Loosely speaking, if the pastoral of place refers to an imaginary geographical realm where time passes without the dissonance necessary to forge concepts of past and future, Christmas is the chronological moment of timelessness in the yearly cycle; a moment where things stand still in a pleasant place.

That these pastorals are products of anxiety, I am fairly sure. Who else but those terrified about the passage of time need to stop it, and who but those who are feeling out of control, yearns to create zones where such control appears possible?

I have been a lifelong devotee of Westerns. In 1958, the first year I have clear memories of watching television, the top four shows were Westerns, as were twelve out of the top 20 programs. Even at a young age, I was particularly attracted to the music, particularly Jerome Moross’ music for *Wagon Train*, and without knowing it, became attached to that characteristic combination of the idyllic and the violent that characterizes the genre.

More recently I had begun to notice that snippets of idyllic musical vocabulary often accompanied images where one might have expected something of the sublime. Vast mountain vistas, with rocky crags have soundtracks that recall innocuous peasant scenes from 17<sup>th</sup> century operas. The jolly theme to *Have Gun Will Travel*, “Paladin,” goes along with the harrowing image of a loaded gun pointed at the viewer. I dubbed this phenomenon the “idyllic sublime” and in a presentation at the national American Musicological Society meeting in 2002, offered examples of it from *Shane* and other films such as *Red River*, *Nevada Smith*, *The Tall Men*, *The Magnificent Seven*, and *The Hallelujah Trail*.

Response from William Rosar

Prefacing a section of cowboy songs in the second volume of *Our Singing Country*, John and Alan Lomax quoted the words of Andy Adams (1859-1935), author of

*Log of a Cowboy* (1903), who had participated in cattle drives as a youth: “There is such a thing as cowboy music. It is a hybrid between the weirdness of an Indian cry and the croon of a darky mammy. It expresses the open, the prairie, the immutable desert.”<sup>1</sup> Adams said this in 1907 just a few years after *The Great Train Robbery* was made, what has come to be regarded as the first movie Western. I share with Michael Beckerman many fond memories of TV Westerns and the music in them (particularly David Buttolph’s spirited ballad for *Maverick*), though ultimately for a long time I found the genres of fantasy, horror, science fiction much more captivating (and musically interesting), my favorite TV shows being *The Twilight Zone* and *Lost in Space* (I was never a *Star Trek* fan). Part of my role in the following discussion will be to play the devil’s advocate, and I am a little skeptical of Michael’s implied claim that the traditional “pastoral vocabulary” has been, or must be, circumscribed to scenes of pastures (and their environs) in order to seem “natural” or somehow appropriate to country life, as perhaps a kind of implicit allusion to folk music and the primordial musical icons of shepherd’s pipe or hunting horn. For example, what of a prairie meadow at the base of Mt. Whitney in the snow-capped California Sierra Nevada? How would/should that be scored in a film? Does the composer reflect the awe and majesty of the mountains or the tranquility of the pasture or both? In this regard an almost archetypal piece that long ago came to epitomize the pastoral in popular consciousness is the “Ranz des Vaches” in Rossini’s *William Tell* Overture. It was used as accompaniment in countless silent films and later in cartoons. The “Ranz des Vaches” (or “Kuhreihen”) was a simple melody played by Swiss Alpine herdsmen on a horn to drive their cattle from pasture to pasture. Needless to say, these meadows were in manifestly *sublime* settings that were also *idyllic*. One can imagine how the Rossini selection was readily transferred to scenes in Westerns of cattle grazing on the Western plains with the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop.

The problem, as I see it, is that the Western pastoral style that Michael has characterized has become almost inextricably associated with Westerns and their typical locales, and it is not associated with locales in other film genres (except when they are alluding to the American Frontier West), let alone locales depicted in opera or program music. Also, Nature has varying “moods,” a fact that has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration to poets and artists from time immemorial. Perhaps it is the case that these “moods” are only “in the eye of the beholder,” something “subjective,” as has been argued by aestheticians and psychologists who have studied the perception of art, and endeavored to explain Nature’s “moodiness” in terms of concepts such as the “pathetic fallacy” and anthropomorphism. Nonetheless, Nature can be seen in different “lights,” for one objective reason, due to changes in seasons. The bucolic pastureland with shade provided by trees near a brook may present a very different countenance and mood in the depth of winter, when there is no grass, no leaves on the trees, and the brook is frozen over with a thick blanket of snow covering the ground. Such a bleak winter landscape might accurately be described as *sublime*, in the sense of being *stark* and perhaps somewhat *forbidding*. The “idyllic sublime,” as I understand Michael’s formulation, expresses a kind of paradox, and one that really only becomes apparent upon intellectual reflection (in this case, musicological reflection). The paradox is the result of pastoral *music*, which almost invariably uses the pentatonic melodic style characteristic of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Andy Adams, quoted in John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, eds., *Our Singing Nation: A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 236.

Cowboy song tradition, being paired with the *visual* sublime (the geographic features he mentions above, viz. “vast mountain vistas, with rocky crags,” etc.). I’ve noticed in film scores that often the *orchestral* setting *does* seem to somehow chime with the sublime (rhyme not intended), whereas the Cowboy tunes themselves don’t, at least not obviously—*except* that one might expect to hear them in such locales, were they sung by cowboys riding on horseback. That makes it all the more interesting from a musicodramatic perspective. I believe that this is primarily a *historical* question, which can be answered through comparative study and analysis of film scenes and antecedents found in opera, songs, and program music.

\* \* \* \*

BECKERMAN: There’s something compelling about what I’m calling the idyllic sublime, and it’s part of a larger pull of the Western. Because there is something idyllic about many of the key films, but somewhat like Disney films, they manage to blend in, and perhaps sublimate moments of terror. For a while, in a movie like *Shane*, even the villains are fairly tame, until the Jack Palance character shows up, Jack Wilson.

Considering, though, the wildness of the West, its aridity, and the real dangers everywhere lurking, the effect of many of the key Westerns is anything but terrifying.

Of course this will get us into a discussion of just how music works in film. We’ll pass through our complete agreement that nothing has been worse for so-called “film criticism” than the terms diegetic and non-diegetic since it is the “non-” that accounts for by far the largest number of moments of film music. But still, it would be easy enough to say that somehow the music is the “repository” of the idyllic, or that it becomes the burden of music to carry that sensibility. That seems reductive to me. What’s more interesting is perhaps to conceive of something more like biofeedback: the score may get us to process images in a certain way, which in turn influences the way we process the score, since we can say the same thing in reverse.

Okay, to shift to another level of inquiry, what does this have to do with anything? We can come up with many answers: anxiety over the loss of frontier, response to war, reaction against technology. All these things could be true, or none of them. At any rate there is no way we can verify any of them. I’m less interested in what the Western “means” than the ways in which a search for, even a need, for images of purity find themselves into the Western.

ROSAR: Looking just at semantics for a moment, there is a somewhat negative sense of the word *idyllic* that may be relevant to your allusion to Disney. That which is, presumably, what is sometimes called the “Disneyesque,” and which is almost but not quite synonymous with “sugar-coating” screen drama, ostensibly so as to not upset or shock kids, as perhaps exemplified by the verse of the Sherman brothers’ song in *Mary Poppins*, “Just a little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down.” Webster’s gives this text citation for *idyllic*: “romantic memories of a lost cause threw an *idyllic* haze over earlier times” (V.L.Parrington). This suggests that to idyllize, which OED says is to “To make into an idyll; to render idyllic,” involves at least poetic license, perhaps at worst, outright deception—creating a deceptive appearance or impression that is not true to reality, a misrepresentation, like the pejorative sense of the verb “to *romanticize*” (here

from Webster's), "to make romantic: add romance to," with the example given, "old forms of drudgery are *romanticized*, old forms of slavery forgotten" (H.J.Muller) and "rebuke the press for alleged *romanticizing* of gangsterism" (F.L.Mott). The intransitive verb is defined as "1 : to hold romantic ideas : indulge in romantic fancies," as for example, one "had *romanticized* a great deal about Indians" (*Southern Observer*), and then "2 : to present or portray details, incidents, or people in a romantic light or manner," for example, she "has been [ . . . ] successful in resisting the impulse to dramatize, though she has yielded occasionally to the impulse to *romanticize*" (Howard Lindsay) or one "refuses to *romanticize* , glamorize, or otherwise adopt the strange combination of true confession and movie magazine technique" (Abraham Veinus)

Romanticization would thus seem the most relevant explanation, because one of the main achievements of the Hollywood "dream factory," as cultural anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker called the Hollywood movie business, was to romanticize, glamorize, idealize, sanitize, enchant, and most importantly, to *beautify*—rendering what is homely, or even ugly, as something beautiful. So I think it is also important to go from particulars to generalities (or generalizations), in this case, to see whether typical Western landscapes (prairie, mountains, desert, etc.) are musically depicted in some way differently from other potentially forbidding landscapes in other genres. In other words, is the treatment of such landscapes in other film genres also idylized or romanticized? Such a study should be undertaken.

Your reference to biofeedback is probably very close to the mark: Music can affect the *visual* appearance of things in movies, or, as I would put it in a metaphorical sense, their *physiognomy*, by influencing what psychologists call *physiognomic perception*, which has to do with how we perceive *expression* or the *expressive attributes* of people and even inanimate things. For example, Tiomkin wrote in 1951 of "utilizing music to 'soften' a face, or to give it qualities it does not have inherently," and that "the composer, by providing pleasant melodic music, can direct attention from what the makeup artist could not hide. And in doing so the composer is surprisingly successful."<sup>2</sup> Research on perception and cognition finds that it is perhaps not so much a matter of modulating attention (or distraction) in this instance, as Tiomkin believed, but that music can actually alter visual perception itself.

So it is that the expansive prairie and bleak desert mountains accompanied with "idyllic" pastoral music may literally no longer appear that way to the audience. Rather like the "heroic landscape" of Romantic art <http://www.humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=g&p=a&a=i&ID=1049> the pastoral music indeed *modifies* our actual perception of such landscapes. The Western landscape with pastoral music effectively creates a form of transfigured *visionary art*, evocative of purity as you suggest [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visionary\\_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visionary_art). This is the magic of film scoring. The relationship between music and image is a reciprocal one, to be sure, because the images also affect how we perceive the music. My guess is that pastoral music effects somewhat the same transformation on Western landscapes as the romanticizing technique of Western art (painting) in general: in cinema one is dealing with cinematography, which may not be able to photograph prairie wilderness in a very flattering "romantic" way, unlike the painter's brush in the paintings of Bierstadt, Church, and Remington.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tiomkin cit.

The next time you are out West, consider listening to Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony while driving through Death Valley, and see/hear the effect of that juxtaposition.

B: Many classic Western shots in cinema include such things as craggy mountain vistas, endless stretching plains, buttes and mesas, and tiny figures against a wide horizon—just as we see under the screen credits in *Shane*, as the title character is first seen riding his horse against such a background. Various traditions, particularly those associated with so-called "romanticism" might have accompanied these images with dramatic music, dissonant textures, to create a troubling, even ominous atmosphere. Yet in such films as *Shane*, *The Big Country*, *For a Few Dollars More* and the anime *Princess Mononoke*, these images are connected with traditional pastoral styles featuring drones, prolonged consonances, wide-spaced intervals, and often pentatonic figures. The question is what, if anything, does this tell us?

R: I reply with a question: What rule (or convention) established that pastoral music must only be used with certain kinds of landscapes or geological features?

B: The problem with language, with theory generally, is that once one gets "on a roll," in other words, the more one becomes sure of oneself and one's argument, the more disastrous the results. So grand theories about "America's need for a primeval Eden at its core," or, in light of *Brokeback Mountain*, "The Cowboy Pastoral as Sublimated Desire," are bound to be wanting.

R: This is old news, at least from the standpoint of film theory. Already over ten years ago film theorists David Bordwell and Noel Carroll vigorously argued that one-size-fits-all theory or theories were of little explanatory value, arguing instead that delimited small-scale theories were much more illuminating, if for no other reason because "grand theories," to the extent that they consist of unqualified generalities and generalizations, lack specificity and obvious relevance.

B: With a close reading of the opening scene from *Shane*, I'm more and more interested in the idea that the pastoral is a product of anxiety. Put another way, only very anxious types are so keen to banish tension from the world . . . .

R: Think of urbanites like Beethoven going to the country. How is the first movement of the *Pastoral* Symphony marked? "Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande" (Awakening of Happy Feelings upon Arriving in the Countryside). Obviously he is coming to the country from a different kind of place (perhaps both literally and figuratively), the city environment of Vienna. Would a Bohemian farmer feel the same happy feelings living and working in the countryside?

B: The greatest human fear is the fear of death. Death can only arrive through the passage of time—true timelessness is impossible. Therefore all attempts to stop time are attempts to keep death away, or somehow forestall it. The pastoral dialect is an attempt to stop time, or to create a world where the passage of time is imperceptible or irrelevant.

Therefore the pastoral language is a product of fear, specifically fear of time, fear of death.

R: Heady philosophical stuff to come out of reflections on a genre that exemplifies film as mass entertainment! What precisely is the “pastoral dialect” and through what means does it attempt to stop time?

B: Well, the pastoral dialect has to be taken with something of a grain of salt, but let’s imagine we find an opera libretto from 1660, and we notice a scene entitled, “The countryside, peasant’s dance.” We may not have the score, but we probably know pretty much what the music will sound like: there will be a drone, and over it a simple melody, perhaps with a range as small as a fifth. There will be parallel thirds and sixths, and probably wind music. The intent, we might argue, is to create a static space that we do not want to leave.

R: Consider a very different sort of Western from *Shane*, the film *Backlash*, starring Richard Widmark as Civil War veteran who seeks to avenge the death of his prospector father, who was killed in an Indian massacre (it was based on a Frank Gruber novel). Herman Stein’s main title music is utterly stark and bleak as the screen credits are superimposed over Widmark on horseback riding down into a desert valley from the mountains, thus a very different beginning than *Shane* and a lot of other Westerns with similar openings. It is hard to even think the word “pastoral” in this context. There are only traces of a cowboy tune at one or two points in the scoring, both as Widmark rides into a Western town—thus just the opposite venue where one expects to hear the familiar Cowboy music of the prairie setting. What’s curious in Westerns is that the cowboy tunes are often played over scenes of Western towns in more or less the same way they are over scenes on the prairie, such as the use of “The Trail to Mexico” in *Stagecoach*, and the stagecoach is seen coming into town, played about the same way when it is first seen rolling along out on the prairie under the screen credits.

B: There is never any such thing as “The” Western, because like all things we wish to (forgive the following locution) “genre-ize” we mean different things when we speak of it on different occasions. Before there was “the Western” there were “things that took place in the West,” or even “the west,” lower case. Later things, in our own millennium even, are simply tag lines to any theorized genre, not true parts of it. What we might describe as “the Western” is something that congeals slowly, and since it constantly shifts, can never be defined satisfactorily. Claims that “we know what we mean,” or attempts to delimit the Western will thus only distort if further. Therefore, we should take the chance of picking films or moments somewhat at random and trying to see what sense we can make of them, rather than making global statements about all films during certain decades or with certain subject matters. Even though, of course, these same dangers described above lurk in the attempt to discuss any phenomenon.

R: I concur with your proposal 100%. Certainly genres are conceptualized somewhat after the fact. *Genrification* is a term sometimes used, borrowed by film studies from literary theory. Of course a *genre* is a mental construct, but is by no means arbitrary

because of that. The works in a genre have a “family resemblance” (as Ludwig Wittgenstein would say) in which no one work exemplifies all the features that define the genre. It goes without saying that it is of the nature of the mind to classify and categorize, otherwise we would never be able to make sense of the world.

B: In *Shane* the first thing we hear is the Paramount logo fanfare, something which, actually, might be considered to “match” the visual images better than what follows. The vastness of the image, and the sublime are opposed by the pastoral language of the opening, particularly the “planned monotony” of the theme, particularly the “endless” oscillation between 5-6, lending a static, hovering quality. Potential images of disruption, everything from high peaks to gun toting kids, are softened by the music, which finally virtually collapses into harmonic-inflected domesticity. When the human voice appears, it is indistinct, and completely dominated by pastoral tone. The opening of the film acts like a vast frame, a “once-upon-a-time.” All the adventures, the deaths, the conflicts, are rendered unreal.

R: This “story book” quality, as I would call it, may well be imparted by the music more than anything else in the film. But my feeling is that it has more to do with a poetic sense, or poetic license, and creating something beautiful and moving, than analgesia to anesthetize the spectator’s senses to a depiction of harsh frontier reality, because it is not clear that the film makers intended the film to be solely a realistic, historical portrayal of life in the Old West, but rather exemplifying the *romance* of it. How else to do that? Of course I may be offering only a question-begging explanation, though, because film history recounts that director George Stevens went to some pains, for example, to make the gunning down of Torrey by Wilson brutally realistic, with him being almost literally cut down by Wilson’s very loud “canon.”<sup>3</sup> Must we assume that the music is supposed to match or even mirror in some way the setting? Another interpretation of the 5-6 oscillation is that it suggests movement that doesn’t seem to get anywhere, because oscillation by nature is monotonous movement, as suggested by the faux folk song “Endless Prairie” in the overture music medley of *How the West Was Won*. Rather than a sense of unreality it is arguable that the music paired with the visuals described just heightens a sense of the rustic setting—“the great outdoors”—perhaps at the same time exemplifying the glorification of folksiness already celebrated by the Poetic Realists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I don’t think Victor Young’s *Shane* theme, or the way it is set in the orchestra, is itself intended as tone painting, at least in the sense of “painting” a specific kind of locale. A few years later in *The Tall Men* he employs another such theme to which the 5-6 oscillation is an accompanimental figure rather than being part of the melodic line as in *Shane*. The *Tall Men* theme is heard in all sorts of scenery, from the snowy high mountains over which the screen credits are superimposed, to a cattle drive across a river. It just seems to be saying “this is the West” in a grand manner, and does not necessarily conflict with the specific scenery in which it is heard.

B: Of course, who am I to say that it’s unreal? Maybe the only real thing is the violence, the spilling bloodlust of the audience who recognizes that Jack Wilson (Jack Palance) is more real than Shane (Alan Ladd), which is why he has to die.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cite Stevens documentary on SHANE DVD?

Maybe with our Western idyllic we can get in to some broader issues. Do we have any idea of how anything works? I mean there are composers and film makers, there are other kinds of things going on in the arts. There is, broadly speaking, a political reality which might exert some gravitational force on the medium. And then there are “accidents” or evolutions in an evolutionary sense: things no one might have actually planned or counted on, but which seem to turn out all right.

Do you think that in some sense the openings and closings of the Westerns, with their positive “protected space” sonic world, were meant to insulate the audience from the real violence that lurks in the middle, and putatively, lurked in the “Wild” that gave the West its modifier? Clearly, at some point, the whole thing becomes a genre, and probably no one thinks about it too much; the pattern has been set, and all they have to do is find writers, directors and composers who can follow the style. But what about those initial moments; when this idyllic style was born. Was it wartime? Anxiety about boundaries and borders, or did some cunning composer simply set the world on its ear with counterintuitive but effective music?

R: Broader issues via the idyllic sublime: Certainly Westerns lead to them, because most Hollywood films of the well-named “Golden Age” had happy endings, and Westerns were no exception. Lots of characters walk into sunsets at the end of Hollywood films in other genres (e.g., *Three Soldiers*—only there they are the ghosts of the characters in the story—or the film version of the play *Harvey*, about the hallucinatory man-size rabbit who befriends Jimmy Stewart in a bar, or the surviving Earthlings in *When Worlds Collide* who walk into an otherworldly sunset on another planet). It really grows out of fairy tales: “And they lived happily ever after.” So we are in the realm of fairy tales and mythology, not (wholly) realistic history-telling

What I don’t understand is why film theorists originally turned to a literary model of film rather than a theatrical one—which seems much more relevant, given that the roots of cinema are found in the 19th century stage melodrama: We’re talking about dramatic art, theater, perhaps *dramatic musical art* at that. Yet the theorists *never* mention that fact! They are so hung up on explicating “narrative” at the expense of all that makes cinema so unique. It reminds me of something Wagner wrote in his *Opera and Drama*, where he complains about “state aestheticians”:

These people, however, see in Drama nothing but a *branch of literature*, a species of poesy such as the romance or didactic poem; only with this difference, that, instead of being merely read, it is to be learnt by rote by several persons, declaimed, accompanied by gestures, and lit up by the footlights. To be sure, to the stage-performance of a literary-drama its musical embellishment would bear almost the same relation as though it were executed in presence of an easel-ed painting, and therefore the so-called Melodrama has been branded as a genre of most pernicious medley. But this drama, the only one our literarians have in mind, is just as little a true Drama as a *clavichord* is an orchestra, to say nothing of a troupe of singers. The literary drama owes its origin to the same egoistic spirit of our general art-development as does the clavichord . . . .

As for what we know, think we know, or really don’t know, skepticism ran rampant in the art and humanities following the rise of contemporary literary criticism in the 1960s

(the “New Criticism,” or as it has come to known nowadays, “Critical Theory”). Trouble is that for most people it was a reality-shattering experience, rather like digging a deep ditch and then jumping into it, because most lacked the philosophical sophistication to realize that skepticism is ultimately a dead end. As for film music, there are many people who know lots about it—but most of them aren’t academics unfortunately.

The roots of the classic film Western are to be found in the silent era long before World War 2—even before World War 1. A while back I made the interesting discovery that Wittgenstein was a movie buff already in the 1920s and loved most of all Westerns! He loved their simple morality. So perhaps moral philosophy is more relevant here than political philosophy? We’re back, once again, to the foundations of Western (a different Western) philosophical thought: the Greeks, and their ideas about the relationship of *êthos* to music (*êthos* is translated as “habitus” in Latin, from which comes both habit and habitat . . . .)

B: Okay, but before responding to specifics about the idyllic, I have to respond to the notion that “skepticism is a dead end.” Now I realize you’ve chosen a metaphor, the Dead End, referring not to treasured anatomical parts (I hope!) but rather to streets, to passages. So you’ve given a metaphor, but you’re really saying is that skepticism is a bad, unproductive thing. I’d like to respond on two fronts, one questioning whether skepticism is, indeed, a dead end, and another questioning just what are the “productive” approaches one might take if one chose not to go down the dead end.

First things first. There’s no point in saying “skepticism is a tool” since I know you know that, I assume that you’re referring more to a nihilistic sense that “one can know nothing,” and understandably concluding that if one believes that one can know nothing there’s really no reason to know *anything*. But skepticism also questions how and why we claim to know things. While one of the results of this question has led to relativism and various forms of deconstruction, it does seem that asking such a question is quite possibly a significant part of the path to better understanding. So skepticism might not be a dead end at all, but lead to—forgive another bending metaphor—a “warp zone,” where muddling around with navel gazing questions does lead to a kind of enlightenment, and towards greater honesty and discernment about what one knows and how one knows it. We may have different straw enemies. I can’t stand arrogance, and for me, the sense of how hard it is to know things, leads to a real belief in intellectual humility.

The second part of this, as promised, is to challenge just what exactly the “productive” lines of inquiry are, those unsullied by skepticism. If we weren’t skeptical we would do . . . exactly what? Compile new databases? To what end? Find new documents? Why, don’t we have enough? More overview histories where the overview masks the ignorance of details? The notion of “if we only had more \_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) we could really know something” is a wish and a prayer, not a fact.

Now, forgive me, but I’ve just read a book on Holocaust Denial where (and don’t repeat this) I came out of it with more respect for the deniers (who I despise) than the plodding, earnest, well meaning author, who bores one to tears with “evidence” that clearly needs to be *believed* before one can conclude that it’s true. But that book does highlight another problem of historical inquiry. According to the author, who presents the straw false-ideals of positivism and relativism, the real goal of historical inquiry is a kind

of “convergence of evidence.” You can’t prove this fact or that fact all the time, but you can argue that something happened on the basis of a convergence, that all the evidence assembled from independent sources, documents, eyewitnesses, testimonies, supports the same hypothesis. That’s fine for the Holocaust, a super-event involving tens of millions and calling forth the intellectual work of thousands upon thousands of scholars. But what of other kinds of historical events, further back in time, say, where are no such witnesses, no large group of eyewitnesses. Where is our convergence of evidence then, and just how much convergence do we need before we say, “It’s history!!”

R: I’m with Frank Lloyd Wright, who said that he preferred “honest arrogance” over “hypocritical humility.” Skeptics are rarely humble, but usually arrogant (that is particularly true in science). The ultimate skeptic was Descartes who, with his “method of radical doubt,” questioned the veracity of everything around him, finding that the only reality of which he could be absolutely certain was himself, his own ego, the fact that he could think. This resulted in his famous pronouncement, “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am,” also *Dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum*, or “I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am”). In other words, one can doubt everything except the reality of one’s self, that self who does the doubting. Descartes boiled this down even more to simply this: “I am, I exist,” that which he called “the first certainty.” Taken to the extreme this results in the philosophical idea of *solipsism*, such that one can only know one’s own thoughts and perceptions. Wittgenstein’s later philosophy entailed a refutation of that view, as well as much meaningless skepticism in general (interestingly some see Wittgenstein’s ideas as anticipating Derrida’s, though they are quite different on basic points).

Skepticism as a philosophical method is ultimately untenable because it entails its own negation: There is no reason not to be skeptical of skepticism. As Aristotle showed long before Descartes it is not skepticism that is the starting point of knowledge, insight, or greater consciousness, but *perplexity* (what the Greeks called *aporia*—Derrida wrote a whole book about it). Your phrase “idyllic sublime” embodies what Aristotle called a “moment of perplexity,” what seems to be a contradiction on the face of it. In my replies above I have tried to shed some light on the source of this perplexity.

B: I’m not talking about skepticism as a philosophical method, but rather a historical one. And let’s face it, one can’t ignore relativity. In other words, one might be stimulated to take a more skeptical viewpoint if one feels that those around one are vastly exaggerating what they know (my case). I so tired of people speaking with authority about things that are far more complicated than they think to worry about whether skepticism is appropriate as a philosophical tool.

The idyllic sublime begins with a question, a question about which one also needs to be skeptical. That is: why in landscapes traditionally associated with the sublime, do we get a tradition of idyllic music? Let’s refocus on that for a while and see if we can’t bring the discussion to some kind of fruition and conclusion.

R: Now your rollin’, cowboy! Skepticism as a method is indeed found in the philosophy of history, as epitomized by both historicism (new or old) and historical revisionism (perhaps most despicably by Holocaust denial). I stand by what I said, though, that the main focus here is a moment of perplexity, which you have now restated

by posing a perplexing question, not by being skeptical, namely, “Why in landscapes traditionally associated with the sublime, do we get a tradition of idyllic music?”

B: I think we still disagree about skepticism. There are so many exaggerated claims to knowledge (factual, critical, political) around these days that without a healthy kick in of skepticism one becomes nothing but a cult member . . . .

R: Of course, there were the Pyrronists, too . . . a Greek cult of skeptics who flourished in the first few centuries of the Common Era. It has been said of them that they “withheld any assent with regard to non-evident propositions and remained in a state of perpetual inquiry.” Is this what you are advocating? You’ll get no argument from me about the value of *healthy* skepticism. For the lack of a better term *pathological* skepticism that is ultimately self defeating is what goes nowhere, as Wittgenstein and other philosophers have been at pains to point out—it ultimately refutes itself (which is not a very satisfying result). But recognizing when skepticism is unwarranted or unproductive or starts to go down a blind alley is a very tricky business. In rereading your comments I still don’t see skepticism per se, only perplexity, as much as to say, “Hey, what’s going on here anyway?!” Can you articulate what specifically you are “skeptical” about in the context of the “idyllic sublime”? (Maybe I’m just being obtuse?) That would be helpful.

It seems to me what you describe relative to the hypothetical 1660 opera libretto would only apply to the common rustic accompaniment pattern we hear used in the setting of the “big themes” in the manner of cowboy songs in Westerns, which typically have a soulful character, often bespeaking loneliness and solitude (as in *Shane*). I’m not sure that *reducing* the combined effect of the theme and accompaniment to associated characteristics of the accompaniment alone is valid, any more than it would be in any melodic accompaniment. Also I don’t know what you mean by “static space” (it’s one of ‘em fancy French abstractions, I figger). Tranquil? Peaceful? Bucolic? If there was a cattle stampede and you heard music like that would you think it was a “static space”?

Watch the English film *The Overlanders* some time. It is basically a Western set in Australia at the start of World War 2, a British film made by Ealing Studios in 1946 with music by John Ireland (his only film score). What always struck me is the almost hymn-like music Ireland wrote for a pastoral scene of cattle grazing (excerpts from the score were recorded by Boult on Lyrta back in the 1970s). Interesting, what?

I wish that rather than just talking in abstractions you’d refer to concrete film examples more because one of the main trends in contemporary film studies, as I already mentioned, has been abandoning the one-size-fits-all “grand” film theory approach, in which film theory got bogged down prior to the 1990s, in favor of more modest micro-theories of specific films and periods that seems to yield more explanatory value. For example, can we say for certain that the accompaniment pattern you described as applying to opera tradition even has the same “meaning” in Hollywood Westerns, the eclectic melting pot where musical traditions are often ignored and/or transformed and thus lost?

One of the problems I have with the current fashion for “cultural contextualization” is that it does not explain the timelessness of great art, let alone great

movies—work that speaks across the ages about the human condition. Often the circumstances in which art is created have only trivial and transient relevance to its enduring value. This bears on the whole question of art *qua* history, for example, as debated by one erstwhile Warburg Institute scholar, the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg.

B: Oй timelessness. Not to be an Einsteinian here, but we're talking *relative* timelessness. I firmly believe that today's timeless classics may be tomorrows hoots. I almost giggled out of my chair at the "overture" to *The Big Sleep* last night. As you know, I'm a middle-of-the-roader. I'm not fond of grandiose, jargon ridden approaches, but again, not because they're wrong, but because they misrepresent what the writer really knows, and claims a kind of Olympian overview that's simply false. Some time little steps for tiny feet, wrestled with endlessly is the way to go.

R: What I referred to is what people *ordinarily* call timeless, not something regarded from an Archimedean point outside time and space. There is no reason to doubt the common fact that people find works (say, stories) from even thousands of years ago timeless, or more precisely, possessing a *timeless quality*. Myths are a good example of stories that have a timeless quality, so again we are back to characteristics of mythology. The sense of timelessness seems to stem from the knowledge that something written long ago in some sense could have been written yesterday because it still valid and speaks to us today. The converse would be works that are *dated*, or as a film scholar crony of mine says, films that "have not aged well."

B: While doing my one-man Leos Janacek show I started to think a lot about what theatrical space is like, and what happens in live theater. Loosely and somewhat inarticulately speaking, the competing energies, of "the play," the audience, the space and the actors, individually and collectively, end up creating a certain kind of energy force field that can be manipulated (ridden, played off against, etc.) by the actors. When things started cooking I actually felt that (maybe I was drunk!). Anyway, I guess I started thinking also about film space, and stepping way, way back from "Westerns" and their music to the broader questions of what Westerns allowed film makers to do, and what kind of quintessential film space could be set up via a Western, pocked and articulated by, on the one hand, the "good vs. evil" dialectic, and on the other, by a musically inflected landscape that is supposed to be neutral, but which we already hear is on the side of "good."

R: Brecht, for example, was very aware of these things and railed against the "witchcraft of theatrical producers" who drug and hypnotize audiences into passive indifference (or so he maintained, mistakenly I believe). But that's just theater and always has been, since the days of Plautus and theories of Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The simplicity of Westerns is probably quite comparable to that of the old morality plays (and many operas for that matter—think of, for example, *Cavalleria Rusticana*). How the depiction of the landscape and Nature figures in Westerns is probably comparable to the depiction of them in Wagner's *Ring* in some ways—in the end, Erda always prevails.

It strikes me that this whole inquiry of yours is fundamentally a musicological question—even an exemplary one, as opposed to the sorts of questions typically posed

by cinema studies people—to the extent that your interpretations entail forging a historical link between practice (or tradition) in European art music and Hollywood film music practice. (Of course when I say “musicological” I am really thinking mainly of the sorts of studies in musical tradition exemplified by German comparative musicology or “systematic musicology” as epitomized by Walter Wiora, Erich von Hornbostel, and others before and after World War 2.)

My own working hypothesis for explicating the practice behind the “idyllic sublime” is that it stems from the “Singing Cowboy” films of the 1930s and ‘40s, starring singers such as Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Tex Ritter. The smaller “poverty row” Hollywood studios such as Republic, Grand National, and Monogram, churned out these Westerns weekly and American audiences (if not Europeans as well) seemed to have an insatiable appetite for them, given box office receipts. One composer, Frank Sanucci, spent his whole career in films (1936-1952) scoring only B Westerns! Sampling some of the Westerns he scored, I have observed that where one might expect to hear Western pastoral music, there is none—namely, non-action scenes on the prairie. What scoring there is in them is not genre specific and usually accompanies action (chases, agitated, suspense, etc.) What there is in place of the Western pastoral are scenes rather like music videos, in which the singing cowboy star rides along on his horse out on the prairie, sometimes strumming a guitar, singing a cowboy song (not traditional, but newly composed). These songs usually utilize melodic formulas from the Anglo-Irish cowboy song tradition (so that in a sense they are faux folk music) and the lyrics often refer to the setting. One typical example is Grand National’s *Rollin’ Plains* (1938), starring Tex Ritter. At one point he sings the title song (“Rollin’ Plains” by Leonard Whitcup, Walter Samuels, and Teddy Powell), riding along with two cohorts. One line in the song goes “Rollin’ plains, where I’ll meet friendly faces, roam the wide open spaces, on rollin’ plains.” I propose that the Western pastoral in films really began as an *instrumental version* of this practice, *sans* the singing cowboy, beefed up (no pun intended) with a symphonic treatment, such as we hear in *Stagecoach* (1939), for example, notably with the instrumental use of “The Trail to Mexico,” and then later in Victor Young’s scores for films such as *Shane* and *The Tall Men*. Arguably partly because of the singing cowboy tradition, this music seems appropriate, and at the same time by way of its orchestral texture, also mirrors the rugged grandeur and spectacular vistas of the American frontier prairie. As for anxiety reduction, it has been claimed that the first cowboy songs were sung to cattle at night to keep the herd calm and prevent them from stampeding.

\*\*\*\*\*