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How to cite this publication
Please cite the final published version:


**Publication metadata**

**Title:** The Musical Framing of THE BEACH  
**Author(s):** Iben Have  
**Journal:** Short Film Studies  
**DOI/Link:** 10.1386/sfs.7.1.63_1  
**Document version:** Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Abstract

The Beach is framed by a musical theme. But although the musical expression remains consistent, our reception of the music changes radically according to whether it is heard at the beginning or the end of the film, when it emphasizes the experience of Simon’s lost innocence.

Keywords: Film music, Musical framing, Emotional experience, Reception, Narrative, Musical theme.

The Beach is an good example of how a piece of film music is not just adding a predefined mood or feeling to a scene, but changes meaning in relation to the narrative context (Have 2008).

In The Beach music is heard at the start (00:07 – 01:45) and in the last two minutes of the film. It is the same theme but with varying layers of instrumentation. In the beginning the theme is played by piano only and then repeated together with a cello. At the end of the film a female soprano is leading, and the piano theme becomes an accompaniment to her voice together with the cello.

The tempo of the music is slow (around 64 beats per minute) and without any profound dynamic variations. The key is B-minor. In the beginning the piano’s bass and treble (left and right hand respectively) simulate a kind of human conversation, where identical melodic movements are slowly interchanged between the two voices. After 16 bars, and exactly where David is shown (Shot 3) the musical stream shortly pauses before the theme is repeated with the cello adding a legato tune above the piano ‘conversation’. Together with camera movement the music makes a smooth landing at Shot 15 showing the two women under the white parasol.

In the first two long shots, the slow intro theme in a minor key accompanies the camera movements, the curved dune landscape, the bright light and the rhythm of the waves, creating a lazy, calm, and soft mood. This corresponds with the feeling of “the hottest day of summer”, which director Dorthe Scheffmann intended to orchestrate in this scene:
I think that the whole narrative set-up that was involved in those shots was to say that it's the hottest day of summer. This is a day when the telling of secrets can happen. To try and give the audience a memory for themselves of what that hottest day in the summer involves. It's the fact that you've got two fathers on the beach, minding the children – happily doing so, each in his own little world (Scheffmann to Raskin, 1997).

In her analysis from 1997, Anne Marie Olesen argues that a female perspective is intonated in this scene. The feministic message, and gender perspective of the film is also explicitly discussed by the director herself (Raskin, 1997). And although one should be very careful not to predetermine the meaning of a certain key, minor is historically and culturally associated with the female (in Latin mollis, meaning 'soft') and major with the masculine (Latin durus, meaning 'hard'). In German (and other Western languages) minor and major are referred to as tone gender, Tongeschlecht – in English they refer to the minor and major third of the respective musical scales (Sørensen et al, 1987).

A radical change occurs in the narrative during the three minutes and 37 seconds when the music is absent. And when the musical theme returns towards the end of the film, it is experienced in a very different way.

A clear soprano vocal begins between Shots 42 and 43, and is visually mostly connected to the boy, Simon. The timbre of the singing voice also reminds of a pure and innocent boy’s soprano, but the vibratos reveal a more mature female voice. Actually Dorthe Scheffmann said in an interview that she did have a boy’s voice as her initial musical idea, which she passed on to the composer Keith Ballantine:

I listened to virtually everything that I possibly could and at the end of the day, the Bach cello concertos were what came closest to me. And the Fauré requiem with the boy’s soprano piece was the piece for the end. And these two pieces of music I gave to Keith Ballantine (Scheffmann to Raskin, 1997)

Compared to the intro, where the music is received in a more open narrative context, establishing a general mood, this second time it is coded by the preceding narrative and connected more specifically to the emotional state of the protagonists – first and foremost to the boy Simon, but also to his mother Anne in Shots 44, 48 and 53, and to
Margie, who with the introduction of the soprano realizes that her physical attack of David has a negative consequence for Simon (Shot 43). The music is a medium for expressing the emotional denseness and complexity of this scene. With the diegetic sounds pulled to the background, the dominating music creates a kind of duvet or bubble that keeps the struggling emotions internal for both the protagonists and the audience. Simon has just experienced violence between two adults he trusts and probably loves. And even though Margie is trying to distract him and cheer him up, the musically insisting emotions pull him back towards his mother’s eyes. At the same time the music makes it possible for the audience to feel the emotional pressure inside him (Have, 2008).

Focusing on the narrative contribution of the music of *The Beach*, it serves not so much to tell the story of a woman who confides to her friend that her husband beats her, but instead accentuates the story of a boy, who on a warm, calm summer day suddenly loses his childhood innocence and security by witnessing the conflict and physical violence of the adults. Because the soprano is visually connected to Simon (especially in the final, long Shot 54), it is his confused, contemplative look and emotional pressure that still resonates during the credits. Even though the general musical expression is consistent during the film – same key, same tempo, and almost the same instrumentation (with an important soprano added in the last part) – it changes in just a few minutes from providing an emotional preparation for a peaceful, hot summer day to an oppressive emotional expression of a young boy’s lost innocence. In that respect, *The Beach* demonstrates why film music must be analyzed in relation to the specific narrative and audiovisual context, if we want to understand how and what it communicates.

**References:**


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