In our daily lives, we are surrounded by many sorts of background music, by which is meant music to which we do not turn our conscious attention. It is in supermarkets when we go shopping, at restaurants when we dine out, as background music in films, on TV and also on the Internet to an increasing degree, as music we carry round with us on our cell-phones or an MP3-player, or music we hear on the radio while we are doing other things. Even though we are not attentive to the music, it does something to us, something which is often related to the generation of moods and feelings.

With the focus on background music in films and on TV, this article will discuss the relation between music and emotions, arguing for a theory that couples the experience of musical structures with emotional structures. Thereafter I will discuss in what way music, coupled with the audiovisual context, contributes to generating different forms of emotional experience. I will introduce the essay with a brief analysis of music in a Danish TV-documentary with the focus on a single scene, and let it be the starting-point for and concretization of the further theoretical considerations.

1 The Queen No-One Wants to Dance with

On January 30, 2006, the Danish public service TV station TV 2 showed the documentary program Ballets dronning (Queen of the Ball), which was a portrait of Pia Kjærsgaard, the controversial right-wing leader of the Danish People’s Party. The programme was arranged by journalist Helle Faber, lasted 40 minutes and was shown in prime time. Faber followed Kjærsgaard for three weeks during the election campaign of 2005, which ended in a great electoral victory for the Danish People’s Party on February 8. The portrait reveals a powerful, strong-willed leader, and
at the same time, a vain and sensitive person who meets a lot of resistance, especially among her own colleagues at Christiansborg, where the Danish parliament meets. There is pre-composed background music in almost half of the program, most of it from the number “Uberholen hat kein Zweck” by the Danish hybrid band EPO-555 (from the album Mafia, 2006). Generally speaking, the music has the same character all through the program despite variations in the motifs: a mixture of “real” instruments, electronic effects and synthesizers give the music a modern sound together with an ambient, dreamy inwardness. It is characteristic of this type of semantically open music that it does not create para-musical associations, but communicates primarily via the expressive forms of the musical structures, which on this general level can generate the experience of an introverted loneliness and a constant vibrating restlessness, which sometimes also has the character of a playful lightness – experiences which in most cases are related to the main character, Pia Kjærsgaard. The newspaper Ekstra Bladet, writing about this programme, commented that “loneliness can be felt just under the surface”, and it is my view that the background music played a decisive part in this experience.

Space and time prevent me from going through the whole program and its music here, but instead I will choose a central scene to look at and listen to more closely. Despite her great electoral support, Ballets dronning also thematizes how the other party leaders refuse to meet with Pia Kjærsgaard (probably due to her controversial opinions and anti-immigrant attitude), “but” as the speak relates 30 minutes into the program, “…at the last party leader debate, they have no choice”. This comment is followed by a scene, not from the televised party leader debate, but from a bar (apparently connected to the TV studio) where the party leaders can have a beer afterwards, while they meet the press the day before the election. The scene runs as follows: Pia Kjærsgaard goes up to the bar, where the three party leaders Mogens Lykketoft (leader of the Social Democrats), Bendt Bendtsen (Leader of the Conservative Peoples Party) and Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Prime Minister and leader of Venstre, Denmark’s Liberal Party) are laughing together with a number of photographers standing in front of them. She stands close to Lykketoft and orders a beer. He at once leaves the bar, saying “Yes” (meaning “I must be off”) without having any contact with her. She then moves into his place, so she is now standing beside Bendtsen and Fogh Rasmussen. They react in exactly the same way as Lykketoft and leave the bar immediately without noticing her. It is clear that the real sounds have been edited and selected, so the “yeses” of the embarrassing silences are accentuated, whereas the bartender’s chat in the background cannot be heard. Pia Kjærsgaard is now alone in the bar and gets handed her beer. She turns and looks round but meets no-one’s eyes.
Everyone is busy looking away or talking to others. She is leaving the bar, but changes her mind and orders a beer with the sentence, “Can I also have one for a, er,...who also wants one?” Then there are a number of clips where she is standing alone drinking her beer, and looking round at the same time. The camera represents her gaze and focuses particularly on Lykketoft, who is standing and talking to a journalist. Finally she goes over to Marianne Jelved (leader of the Danish Social-Liberal Party), who is being interviewed. Kjærsgaard interrupts with a “Well, Marianne...”, after which they both laugh uncertainly. Kjærsgaard insists on hearing what color jacket Jelved has planned on wearing on election night, so they do not turn up wearing the same clothes. The conversation, however, is awkward and difficult to keep going. It ends with Kjærsgaard capitulating (the only place in the program) with the exchange: Kjærsgaard, “I suppose it does not matter very much.” Jelved, “That’s what I feel.” (Long pause). Kjærsgaard, “Yes, well, that was that.” Once more there is an embarrassing pause, she looks towards Lykketoft again and then walks over to her husband to go home. The whole scene is full of a strained atmosphere and forced socializing; this is of course due to the constant surveillance of the politicians by journalists and photographers, but it is emphasized by both the visual and auditory editing. But the stage is also set for a feeling of sympathy (and maybe empathy, too) for Pia Kjærsgaard in this scene, as well as a feeling that it is unjust and rather a shame for her – feelings which the music helps to generate.

The music is relatively prominent in this scene, where very little is spoken and few words are stressed. The music, which can be divided into two motifs, starts when Pia Kjærsgaard goes towards the bar. The first motif is typified by rapid semiquavers played on something that sounds like a marimba together with a touch of strings, which also hold the notes a little longer a couple of times. Above this there is the sound of a flute, which marks the 1 and 3-beat lightly and with staccato in the same note, and in the following bar shifts to the unstressed beats (4-and, 2-and). This two-bar period is repeated several times. Just after Lykketoft has left the room and Kjærsgaard moves up to Fogh and Bendtsen, this merry flute motif is replaced by a six-bar long string motif. It is played legato and starts on the 1-beat and lifts itself sluggishly a sixth on the 2-and beat; this is a figure that is first sequenced down three times and then moves up again and ends on a high long note. Both motifs run fluidly and without any build up of tension, but they are in contrast in a number of ways. Whereas the flute motif is whirling and more cyclically stationary, the expression with the maintained string motif is focused, gains direction and a darker toning. The two motifs interchange during the scene, starting and finishing with the flute motif. The second time the string motif takes over is when Pia Kjærsgaard in close up is standing alone with her beer looking round at
the gathering and especially at Lykketoft. The music of the scene ends with the flute motif, which gradually fades out when Kjærsgaard approaches Jelved. The motifs establish two spaces with their different expressions; the outer, teeming and light mood space of superficial socialising and Pia Kjærsgaard’s inner and more focused emotional space; in our experience of the music, we move in and out of the two spaces in time to the music. It is obvious that as soon as the string motif takes over, we move inside Pia Kjærsgaard’s space. With the sequencing of the motif, we dive down, so to speak, into her emotions and return to the outer reality again on the high concluding note.

This is my analysis of the role of music in the bar scene. I have described the nature of the music and coupled it with the experience of a light mood, injustice and disappointment, sympathy, etc. This sort of coupling can be found in the majority of analyses of background music, which, however, rarely relate to how and why this link from musical structure to emotions happens. It is this link I shall attempt to bring out in the following. I will also argue that the metaphorical descriptions of music such as, for example, whirling, flowing, light, supple, dark, clear, tense and redemptive are not simply based on subjective feelings, but are anchored in bodily experience which is common to all humans.

2 Cognitive and Musical Structures

By taking my starting-point in the cognitive semantics of Mark Johnson, I assert that we fundamentally understand and experience musical structures based on our bodily experience with the physical world. Based on this experience, some cognitive structures (Johnson calls them image schemata) are generated, which we employ via metaphorical projection both when we consciously think about and speak of the importance of the musical experience and also when the music communicates with us on a pre-conscious level of perception.

On the most general level, one can maintain that no aspect of human experience and understanding is independent of the nature of the human organism. Thus the bodily cognition should also be central, not in the meaning of physical, bodily reactions, but as the body as a cognitive structure. As Johnson says, “Our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movement, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interactions with objects” (Johnson 1987, p. xix). According to Johnson, this interaction with the world will always involve the use or exercise of force, which thus plays a decisive role in our understanding of the world. There is force everywhere around and in us, and so we are rarely conscious of it. We only notice it on the occasions when it surprises us by being surprisingly small (a weak handshake).
or particularly great (a strong gust of wind). Weight is also a force governed by gravity. Similarly, a movement will always be due to some form of influence from a force. Thus schemas arising from the force gestalt will typically be involved in all understanding of “music as acoustic movement”. Force is always experienced via a form of interaction or potential interaction. Thus there will always be a structure or causal sequence involved. The door shuts because I or the wind shut it. The note sounds because I blow the trumpet, press the key or squeeze air out through my larynx in a particular way. In this way, force is a means of achieving causal interaction. The agent of this causal sequence can be living and focused; it can be an object or an occurrence. Besides, force has always a given direction and strength or intensity. The directional aspect means the force is usually experienced as having a source, a course and a goal. In other words, our experience of force involves the movement of an object or mass through time and space in a certain direction. This is also the definition of a vector in physics – a concept which thus gathers central aspects of the experience of force unto itself. If one employs this concept to define a superior schema within the force gestalt (the vector schema), then three schemas can be adduced from this; the movement schema, the object schema and the intensity schema. I think that these three are activated in particular in the experience of music; by this is meant that experience with movement, objects and intensity from our physical world are projected into our understanding of music both pre-reflexively and on a more conscious conceptual level.

The movement schema arises from the bodily experience of moving oneself or an object from one place to another. All movement is characterised by a number of points on a course – a continuum of values – and the registration of the movement produces the experience of a beginning, a duration or a sequence, as well as an end. Music can be defined as arranged sound in movement, and there is movement on many levels in music. The melody with its (usually) different pitches creates a movement in a vertical and horizontal space. At the same time, the dynamics of music can also create the experience of movement in depth – in the third dimension – so music is experienced as moving “forwards” and “backwards” in the sound picture. The movement of music, or phrasing, divides music on a more superior level into phrases with a beginning, a sequence, and a conclusion. The course of the movement can also be circular. We know cycles from the heart beat, the breath, the day’s rhythm, the seasons and so on. Harmonious rounds are a concrete cyclical movement in a lot of music. Similarly, a repetitive rhythm in music is also a cycle, whether it is a single, repeated note, a beat or a rhythmical figure which is repeated. The experience of movement in music can thus both contain the experience of development and also that of regularity. The movement schema
is also fundamental for more superior metaphorical descriptions of the musical experience. Dowling and Harwood compare the musical experience with walking on a path – i.e. from the metaphor that “listening to music is like walking on a path” – which can either be broken off, blocked or hindered by fallen trees and the like, so the listener is forced to take another and maybe more beautiful path. The walk can also be carried out unimpeded and flexibly at a fast rate (Dowling & Harwood 1986, p. 214).

Our experiences with movement usually implicate the experience of something being moved. Via the object schema we experience the structures of music as objects with a certain substance and a certain texture. This finds expression in descriptions of the surface of the music as e.g. rough, angular, or smooth, flowing or firm, or in the description of the body of the tone as being heavy, ample, slender, light, dense or transparent. These perceptions of music as an object can give rise to tactile experiences. For example, the string orchestra so often used as background music (or the string pad synthesizer effect) can give the feeling of a pleasant viscous mass. Similarly short, shrill metallic tones can be experienced as stabbing. To experience music as an object also involves the experience of it belonging in time and space. Music can be close or distant and relate to other sounds in the sound picture, by means of which a virtual space is created, and which is both defined by the spatial positioning of the tones in relation to each other as well as the music’s ambitus (the space between the lowest and the highest note). Via metaphorical projection, the object schema can thus be used to say something about characteristic properties of the material of the tone or sound, its size and character, which can again be related to a (virtual) source of sound as being large or small, of wood or metal, organic or synthetic, etc.

The experience of music as objects in a space leads to another schema, which is relevant in connection with experiencing music, and that is the verticality schema, which we employ when we hear notes as either high or low, or series of notes as ascending or descending. The verticality schema thus relates to both the movement schema and the object schema. Describing notes as high or low is not universally valid, however. Other cultures describe notes using the conceptual metaphor “the relationship between notes is a relationship of a physical size”, because they describe them as large and small tones. The Suyá tribe in South America call high and low notes respectively young and old, using the metaphor “the relationship between notes is one of age” (Zbikowski 2002, pp. 67-68). It is still unknown why we prefer one metaphor instead of another, and it raises the question of how far making metaphors is culturally arbitrary or, whether - as Lakoff and Johnson think - they are motivated by our physical interaction with the world around us. It can seem
arbitrary, for example, that in western culture, we choose the up-down metaphor. All notes are in a line on a piano or guitar, and are thus on a horizontal rather than a vertical axis; on a cello or double-bass one has even to move the hand downwards to get the higher notes. But when we sing, the metaphor makes sense from the body’s structure, as when we sing low notes, there is a resonance low down in the chest. This does not happen in the same way when we sing high notes. Here the sound is experienced as being closer to the head, which in the waking state, as we know, is most often above the chest. It is very likely that written notation also plays an important part in the way our culture perceives notes as high or low.

The intensity schema is also implicated in the movement schema, as all forms of movement involve the experience of a degree of intensity or energy, which indicates the force of the vector as strong or weak. As far as the musical experience is concerned, intensity is partly created by the strength or volume of the music, but it is not just a question of perceived decibels, because a tone can well be intense even though it is not strong in volume. In such cases, the intensity will be more perceived in the form of the heart of the tone or nerve (cf. the object schema). We also experience intensity in music’s duration, temporal density (i.e. rhythmic density) as well as the distinctness of a note, which is determined by the note’s attack and decay. A note’s attack defines how quickly it reaches a certain strength, and decay describes how quickly it fades away. The sharpness of the tonal colour and the duration of the sound can also create a form of intensity. If the sound is constant, our attention to it is weakened, but if the sound moves or alters, our auditory attention is stimulated. We know this from our experience of listening to the neighbor’s music through the wall or the sighing of the ventilation channels when we are trying to get to sleep. The latter can be almost calming, whereas the former draws attention to itself.

An important aspect of our experience of music in general and background music in particular is the experience of tension and its relaxation, which is also related to our bodily experiences with force. This aspect of the musical experience stems first and foremost from the intensity schema (intensity coming from Latin intendere, meaning to tense or strain), while at the same time it implicates both the movement- and object schemas.

Movement-, object- and intensity schemas can give an understanding of how we experience music as a dynamic vector field, which unfolds in both time and space; it is a field which implicates the experience of objects moving in certain directions and with a certain degree of intensity, or which stand almost still in circular movements (cf. the two motifs from the bar scene). On the basis of our bodily experience with force and vector dynamics in the physical world, these
experiences are projected into the more abstract musical domain, and make it possible to express the musical experience in words. These *image schemas* create the basis for fundamental, ontological statements about the musical material such as, for example, “this interval creates tension”, “high notes are up” and so on. These are structures which are both activated in the experience of the micro-level of music (how one note relates to the next) and in the longer sequences (cyclical rounds, closed phrases, the overall texture of the music), both when we perceive reflectively and non-reflectively, and are right “up” in our way of conceptualizing music and theorizing about it. We are thus looking at important structural interdisciplinary metaphors, which musicology also employs to structure, investigate and reflect on music. How these musical structures relate to emotional structures will be examined in the following.

3 Music and Emotions

The question of the connection between music and emotions has absorbed people since antiquity. Musical meaning is often related to emotions, not least in the audio-visual context, and music is spoken of as the language of emotions. Presumably some form of emotional experience is an important reason why we listen to music at all, but there is no general agreement as to what it is in music that gives rise to certain feelings, or for that matter, what feelings are at all. The emotional reactions that are easiest to understand are those directly related to our biological survival, such as fear, for example. It is more difficult to account for feelings in connection with music, and it is possible that emotions generated by music are fundamentally different from other emotions. There is also a great variation in what are called emotional reactions in connection with music: sensing a state of tension in the body, coolly appreciating technique, crying, getting goose-pimples, getting associations to an old love affair, etc. (Have 2006, pp. 30 ff).10

There are two theses in connection with theorizing about music and feelings, which have roots in the properties that were associated with music in ancient Greece; *mimesis* (the imitation and transformation of an external reality) and *catharsis* (the cleansing of the soul through an emotional experience).11 In cognitive research one speaks in a similar fashion of the expression theory and the arousal theory respectively12, and music philosopher Peter Kivy, who has been a strong representative of the first position over the last 15 years, again differentiates similarly between the cognitive and the emotive positions. The deliberating which has gone on throughout the years - and which is still going on – about music and emotions deals in part with the question of whether music
represents emotions which are recognized by the listener, or music brings about felt emotions in the listener. The two may well coincide, but this is not always the case. We can register Pia Kjærgaard’s loneliness in *Ballets dronning* without feeling it ourselves. In the same way, sad music does not necessarily make us sad, although it can do so.

When one speaks of music expressing or representing emotions in connection with the expression theory, one does so from the point of view that musical structures correspond to our emotional structures. There are more or less radical versions of this view, e.g. the affect-theory of the Baroque, where music was regarded as the bearer of clearly definable and demarcated emotional factors. The idea that music does not directly represent a concrete feeling but that its dynamic form has a conventional likeness with the form of emotions is more plausible. This idea has its origin in Eduard Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch Schön* from 1854. He was the pioneer of what was called the cognitive theory of emotions, working from the assumption that only when one can explain the “moving forms” of music, is one able to explain how it moves. It is, however, most often philosopher Susanne K. Langer who is described as the representative of the expression theory with her ideas of music achieving semantic meaning through symbolization of feelings – a meaning which is considerably different from the verbal meaning.

> Because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach.  
> (Langer 1951, p. 155)

The arousal theory stands in contrast to the expression theory, and takes as its departure point the notion that music does not only represent but also generates emotional reactions in the listener. When hearing is activated by a sound hitting the eardrums, it causes a state of attention, an arousal. The consciousness becomes aware that something has happened. Our hearing then focuses on the occurrence (what is the source of the sound, where is it?) and attention is increased and maintained by an emotional response. Even when we are asleep, our hearing is in readiness and can warn us of dangers we cannot see. When we are surprised by a sound, it can cause a feeling of fear, which makes us flee; or a feeling of aggression, which makes us go on the attack. Arousal manifests itself as physiological changes in the autonomous neural system, several of which can be measured. In the course of an arousal, electrical resistance in the skin is lessened, pupils expand, breathing becomes either more rapid or slower and unstable, blood pressure and heart rhythm tend to rise and there is an increase in the tension of the muscles, which is often accompanied by physical
restlessness. Furthermore, sweat condensation and finger temperature also become lower. These “arousals” point towards some form of biologically determined prelude to being on guard before a possible action. Hearing is not designed for listening to music but for survival in the world; but according to the arousal theory, our cognitive reactions in connection with music have many similarities with the way we react to our surroundings altogether. Music in commercials and various signature tunes and ringing tones of course exploit the fact that a fundamental characteristic of the sense of hearing is the awakening of attention.

Psychologist Carol Krumhansl has undertaken some comprehensive empirical investigations which confirm the arousal theory (Krumhansl 1997, pp. 336-352). Several of her results showed a mutual relationship between test persons’ verbal descriptions of their emotional experience of some specimens of music and the physiological reactions and states of activation which were simultaneously measured in their autonomous neural systems. One of the results demonstrated that sad music caused the greatest changes in pulse, blood pressure and finger temperature, for example. Music which was described in terms of the emotion of fear showed the greatest fluctuation in blood flow, and happy music had the greatest effect on breathing. From this, Krumhansl could conclude that musical emotions seem to have their own pattern of physiological symptoms, and that we register emotion directly from these physiological changes in the body. But the results did not accord with investigations of the physiology of non-musical emotions: A feeling of happiness not caused by music does not show the same changes in breathing as the feeling of happiness caused by music. So even though we use the concepts for the categorized feelings when we describe music, there is much that suggests that musical emotions are different from these. Consequently, it is also problematic that it is the categorized feelings that form the basis of Krumhansl’s investigation, and that she thinks at the same time that they occur independently of a cognitive evaluation of them.

Hanslick, who was mentioned earlier in relation to the expression theory, argues, as do so many others, from the standpoint which holds that in order to exist, emotions need an object. His point is that music can never in itself mean the emotion itself, but only the adjectives describing the emotion, their nuances or the toning of the emotion: love can be tempestuous, mild, etc. (Hanslick 1885, p. 22)

What, then from the feelings, can music present if not their content? Only that same dynamic mentioned above. It can reproduce the motion of a physical process according to the prevailing momentum: fast, slow, strong, weak, rising, falling. Motion is just one attribute, however, one moment of feeling, not feeling itself.
... Motion is the ingredient which music has in common with emotional states and which it is able to shape creatively in a thousand shades and contrasts.\textsuperscript{14}

Peter Kivy agrees with Hanslick insofar as music in itself cannot express emotions which demand an object (e.g. love, jealousy), but can express for example joy and sadness which do not demand an object (Kivy 1990, p. 165). Hanslick and Kivy both use their own pictures to describe how music expresses these emotions – by comparing it with a cypress and a St. Bernard respectively. The music sounds sad in the same way as they look, not because they are sad but because there is a correlation between their appearance and a sad person’s appearance and expression. As representatives of the expression theory, they thus think that music is neither sad in itself nor can it make the listener sad, nor even that the composer was necessarily sad when he or she composed it. Music presents the outer form of sadness, however, and here movement is quite central, as is also apparent from the Hanslick quotation above.

Hanslick, Kivy and Langer all put forward their own arguments for similarities between music and feelings as being more intangible than what the established categories of feelings can contain.\textsuperscript{15} In some way or other, categorial emotions seem to be too limited and reductive for the fleeting musical experience. Hanslick says in the quotation that music can represent the \textit{dynamism} of emotions. That \textit{movement} is what music and emotions have in common, but this movement cannot be characterized as emotion. I do not believe it can, either; not in the categorial sense, at any rate, and not in connection with emotions that demand an object.

Developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern has, however, elaborated the concept of \textit{vitality contours} to include these more dynamic emotional properties (Stern 1985). Vitality contours are emotional states that are not connected to any definable object, but still seem directed towards something. They do not have the focused content of categorial emotions, but rather reflect the way a certain action is executed. Stern developed the concept when he lacked a designation for the sort of emotional properties that are experienced here and now, in real time, and he thus brings the time dimension into the definition of feelings. Vitality contours are the continuous alteration in emotional phases, which are best described in Stern’s words with dynamic or kinetic expressions like roaring, paling, flowing, explosive, crescendo, decrescendo, bursting, long-drawn out, sluggish, energetic, merry etc. (Stern 1985, p. 64).\textsuperscript{16} These concepts in themselves give associations to the musical experience. So, in connection with vitality contours it is a question of properties that have similarities to our bodily experiences with force and thus with the three \textit{image schemas} connected with intensity, object and movement. Vitality contours are amodal, i.e., they can be extracted from
the world of stimuli within all the sensory modalities (hearing, sight, feeling, taste and smell). They come and go like thoughts and influence the organism at the same time as the ordinary categorial emotions come and go. Stern points out that sometimes it is the categorial emotions that are central in our experience, at other times vitality contours. They both contribute meaning to the experience for the sender and the receiver. We experience vitality contours in connection with facial expressions, physical posture and ways of walking, among others; again these are things that are difficult to define but which have an effect and communicate a wealth of meaning. Vitality contours last a couple of seconds (one to three, and rarely more than five seconds) corresponding to the short-term memory, also called the perceptual present, the extended “now” or the subjective “now”. Thus we experience them as a sequence with a foreseeable end: breathing, palpitations, tears, sniff, hunger, sigh, the synchronous blinking of the eyes, walking and various other bodily movements are all experienced with well-known vitality contours.

Stern introduces the concept of vitality affects in his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* from 1985, which builds on observations of babies’ communication with their surroundings. He later introduced the concept of vitality contours in an article from 1999, among others. His definitions of the two concepts can be difficult to separate from each other, but Stern himself says that vitality contours constitute a wider category, which includes but is not limited to vitality affects (Stern 1999, p. 70). We experience vitality contours in the world and ourselves and translate them into vitality affects, cf. the following quotation from Stern:

What we mean, then, by vitality contours are the continual shifts in arousal, activation, and hedonics occurring split-second-by-split-second that are evoked by events taking place in the body and mind of the self and others and which are integrated into temporally contoured feelings. (Stern 1999, p. 70)

The analogous translation of the experience of another person’s behavior into feelings involves, via the internodal ability, the perception of timing, intensity and form being transformed into perceptible vitality contours in ourselves (Stern, 1985, p. 168. Translated from Danish)

Stern’s definition of vitality affects thus links the expression theory and the arousal theory, as he speaks both of the recognition of vitality contours in our surroundings and ourselves, and of how these contours can also be directly transformed into experienced vitality affects. Where image schemas are mental structures, vitality affects are emotional structures based on the same parameters of movement, intensity and object. Just like vector structures, vitality contours are a basic unit that is isomorphic with the phenomenon it describes – in this case, music. Music, with its
character of auditory vitality contours, has therefore privileged access to representing and thereby causing vitality affects.

Stern’s field of concern is not music, but his descriptions of vitality affects and especially vitality contours have much in common with the ways in which expression theoreticians describe the ability of music to represent feelings as form. Langer says, for example,

There are certain aspects of the so-called “inner life” – physical or mental – which have formal properties similar to those of music – patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change etc. (Langer 1951, p. 228)

Hugo Münsterberg, who is regarded as being the first real film theoretician, writes in a similar and interesting way about the aesthetics of films from 1916, when films were still silent:

We come nearer to the understanding of its [IH: the film’s] true position in the esthetic world, if we think at the same time of … the art of the musical tones. They have overcome the outer world and social world entirely, they unfold our inner life, our mental play, with its feelings and emotions, its memories and fancies, in a material which seems exempt from the laws of the world of substance and material, tones which are fluttering and fleeting like our own mental states. (Münsterberg 1970 (1916), pp.72-73)

The weakness of these statements is, however, that they do not specify what “the inner life” – to which they both refer - is.. I have attempted to get closer to a specification using Stern’s research within developmental psychology, even though there is still a lack of clarity in Stern’s definitions. I will postulate that the introduction of Stern’s work into this discussion suggests that the study of the musical experience can teach us something about feelings, just as the study of vitality affects can teach us something about the musical experience. At the same time I believe that by using a focus on the structural, form-related similarities between music and emotions, one can employ the theoretical framework in this article in a discussion of the relationship between the emotional and the aesthetic experience of music.

Independently of Stern, neurologist Antonio Damasio has developed a concept corresponding to vitality affects, which he calls background feelings. He “Background feelings help define our mental state and colour our lives” (Damasio, 2000, p. 287). In the quotation below, he compares background feelings with the experience of minimalistic music and thereby confirms the
similarity between these feelings and the experience of simple, withdrawn background music, which is also in play in *Ballets dronning*:

I call it background feeling because it originates in ”background” body states rather than in emotional states. It is not the Verdi of grand emotion, nor the Stravinsky of intellectualized emotion but rather a minimalist in tone and beat, the feeling of life itself, the sense of being. (Damasio, 1994, p.150)

If one accepts that background music can communicate these shades of emotions, then it is a question of it being able to communicate nothing less than “the feeling of life itself, the sense of being,” in Damasio’s words. In extension of Stern’s and Damasio’s theories, I will assert that background music can contribute to promoting the experience of something real – adding vitality to the audio-visual whole, which cannot only be represented in pictures and speech. In connection with documentary representations, music has a particularly discreet and precise way of communicating these feelings. If the speaker in *Ballets dronning* had had to communicate verbally what Pia Kjærsgaard was feeling when her colleagues turned their backs on her, the program would, for one thing, lose its objective credibility and, furthermore, the shades of those feelings would be lacking.

4 The Coupling of Music to the Narrative Context

In the same way as we experience our surroundings, we experience narrative audio-visual expressions as a dynamic network of categorial and vitality affects. In extension of Stern, it is my belief that it is primarily in the shape of vitality affects that we experience music. But on the same level as the weather and the hormonal changes in the body, music can also be a catalyst without it being the object itself of more focused emotional experiences. In the program *Ballets dronning*, I primarily experienced the musical current as vitality affects. When I describe music in my analysis as being the symbol of, for example, loneliness and disappointment, it is because I define the importance of music from – or via – the linking of action and the pictures. I will indicate linking possibilities in the following between music and the narrative context, thereby demonstrating how music’s communication of vitality affects can be a part of the experience of more focused feelings.

In his book *Den lyttende tilskuer* (The Listening Spectator), Birger Langkjær points to three mutually independent instances where the spectator relates to and understands the expressivity of music *vis à vis* the fiction film: the fictive (or actual) person’s subjective condition, the dramatic situation and the spectator’s superior sympathy structures. In his book, Langkjær’s analyses
confirm that the three instances cannot be held apart in real life, as the processes of focusing often function simultaneously and interchange, so that in the end, everything is related to reception and is thereby determined by the receiver’s varying degrees of attention. Music attaches itself to the action via these three instances and contributes to shaping an emotional experience.

When we experience that music attaches itself to certain persons in the narrative and conveys an emotional experience, there is a difference between to what degree we register and understand a feeling in a person we see on the screen and to what degree we feel an emotion ourselves (cp. the difference between the expression theory and the arousal theory outlined in the above). When we experience feeling something ourselves, there is a further difference as to whether our feelings are identical with or different from those of the person on the screen. The connection that arises between recipient and the person depends to a high degree on the recipient’s attention and empathetic abilities, too. Concepts like identification, sympathy and empathy are central for these processes. It is natural for us, via what film theoretician Torben Grodal calls “cognitive identification,” to try to simulate the subject’s perception and feelings based upon the context the person is in (Grodal 1997, pp. 88-89). It is a biologically determined characteristic of humans, which can also be found in animals, and which equips us for social communication and makes it easier to understand other people’s motives for their actions (cf. Grodal 1997, pp. 86 and 79).

Cognitive identification does not necessarily need to imply empathy (empathetic identification), but it often does so in the recipient’s search for motives for a certain action or reaction in the subject. In the bar scene from Ballets dronning, we will possibly experience a feeling of pity for Pia Kjærsgaard, a feeling which she might have herself, but in all likelihood does not have, as it is to a high degree staged by the editing.21

The spectator’s superior sympathy structures are also in play in the emotional experience of the bar scene. Pia Kjærsgaard is a controversial politician, towards whom most adults in Denmark have a clear attitude. Bitter opponents will experience the scene quite differently from her supporters, and instead of pity will more probably feel malicious pleasure, however much the portrayal lays the ground for the first feeling.

With respect to the linking of music to situations, I think we have an example of this with the lively semiquaver-accompaniment and the flute motif in the bar scene. The flute motif with its light, whirling, diffuse character generates an unfocused mood, which – precisely – does not attach itself to persons, but to the superficial socializing in the situation at hand.
I would like to mention a fourth aspect as a supplement to Langkjær’s three instances, through which music can be interpreted and experienced – the fictive person’s subjective condition, the dramatic situation and the spectator’s superior sympathy structures: This fourth aspect is made highly topical in documentary program in particular, though apparently not in *Ballets dronning*. This is the sender or enunciatory aspect. The linking of music with the sender (for example in the shape of the journalist in documentary programs) does not necessarily give rise to a mood or a feeling, but perhaps a more distanced reflection on what is related. My point is that when music points to, or is pointed out by, the enunciatory level, it can give occasion for reflections about the music’s presence: what does it want from me? What are the intentions or motives behind the music? This happens in another documentary which portrays another Danish politician, the Prime Minister, in *Fogh bag facaden* by Christoffer Guldbrandsen (DR 1, 2003). In this, well-known themes from grandiose Late Romantic orchestral music are employed. In contrast to the music in *Ballets dronning*, this music gives occasion to several para-musical associations like, for example, the EU (the final movement of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, known as the official EU hymn), teasing childishness (“Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy” played on the celesta, from Tchaikovsky’s *Nut-Cracker Suite*), sad decadence with a little admixture of (circus) comedy (Shostakovich’s Waltz Number 2 from *Jazz Suite 2* with saxophone and trombone). The music lifts itself above the narrative itself and becomes self-demonstrative and functions as external (ironic) comment. The role of music in documentary programs is therefore not limited to contributing to an emotional experience of identification or sympathy. Music can also create an associational space for analytical distance and reflection. I found no examples of this in *Ballets dronning*, however: Here the music communicates by way of auditory vitality affects, which link themselves to the context in various ways, and are therefore experienced as deeply integrated in the narrative, in contrast to a great deal of the music in *Fogh bag facaden*.

Our experience of music in films and on TV is so extensive that most people are extremely competent and fast with regard to extracting meaning from music, but this usually takes place on a pre-reflective perceptual level. As I commented in connection with the concept of vitality affects, our way of experiencing background music has a common feature with the way we read body language, facial expressions and other non-verbal forms of communication. We are similarly experts in observing and creating meaning from other people’s gestures, facial expressions and voices, and we often draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of these pre-conscious
registrations. Scientific (though the validity is debated) research by American psychologist Albert Mehrabian, among others, has suggested that a person’s facial expression and voice are far more important for us than what she actually says. The same is true of background music. Even though a person is portrayed visually and verbally as barbaric and unsympathetic, gentle, balanced and calm music or jolly barrel organ music can alter and bring light and shade into the experience of this portrayal.

Some questions of a more ethical nature arise in connection with the use of background music in serious documentary portraits of politicians like Ballets dronning. They are programs which are widely disseminated to many viewers and which in all probability influence our views of politicians and consequently democracy also, although there are no precise measurements of this. Fogh bag facaden was named by political commentators as the main reason why Venstre, the Danish Liberal Party, lost 8% of its (mainly female) voters in the period after it was on television, as it portrayed Fogh as a strong, but also emotionally cold and arrogant chief negotiator who treated his colleagues badly. And in connection with Ballets dronning, there may not be a very great distance between feelings of sympathy and identification and feelings of authenticity and trust, which are essential for democracy. But one can also ask the question whether it is at all possible to disagree with a person one feels empathy for? And how far this feeling will endure when we hear Pia Kjærgaard, for example, give her opinion in another context. There is no doubt that politicians are highly aware of these mechanisms. In an interview in Ekstra Bladet under the headline “Tears Flowed When Pia Kjærsgaard Saw the Evening’s Documentary about Herself”, Kjærsgaard said, “I think the TV programme shows me as I am. The real Pia, the true Pia”, and when asked the question whether what we see in the bar scene is not just one more example of Fogh’s chilly side, just as we saw it in Fogh bag facaden, she answered openly again (cf. note 21) but still with a clear message, “I leave that completely up to the viewer at home to judge. But as we know, during an election Fogh is, more than anyone, incredibly controlled. He is almost like a mask. In contrast to me, I would say. I try to be myself all the time.” Here she manages to emphasize the picture of herself as sensitive, genuine and reliable in contrast to the Prime Minister. With the increased tendency towards the aestheticizing and emotionalizing of political communication, feelings have become an important parameter in the portrayal of politicians today. I do not see this as a problem in itself, but increased knowledge of the aesthetic means by which feelings are generated and constructed in programs like Ballets dronning will without a doubt equip us to be better citizens in a democratic society.
Literature


TV Programs:

*Ballets Dronning*, Helle Faber, TV 2 dok., 30 January 2006.

*Fogh bag Facaden*, Christoffer Gulbrandsen, DR 1, 22 April 2003.

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1 This article is an English reworking of the article “Baggrundsmusik og baggrundsfølelser”, *Psyke & Logos*, vol. 28 no. 1, 2007, p. 228-248. The theories in this article have previously been presented in the PhD thesis *Det musikalske underspil (The Music in the Background)*, at The Department of Musicology, University of Århus, 2004. Certain points have, however, been sharpened and developed since then. The analytical object of the article (portraits of politicians in Danish TV-documentaries) is part of an on-going research project about the aesthetics of documentaries, as part of the

2 That the music does not immediately refer to anything outside itself makes it particularly suitable as background music in documentary programs that weight impartial, objective presentation. In my investigation of background music in 37 Danish documentary programs from the year 2000, electronic ambient music was also by far the most frequently used (Have, 2004).

3 Pia Kjærsgaard actually has her husband with her, but we do not know this at this moment, and the sentence has the effect of underlining the experience of the lonely person who has no friends, but has to pretend she has.

4 In the program it becomes clear that Pia Kjærsgaard very much wanted to have a public debate with Lykketoft and tried to get one, but he refused time after time.

5 My starting point is primarily in Johnson’s book *The Body in the Mind – the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1987), which is not, however, about music but appears to me to contain useful concepts for a closer understanding of music.

6 The vector concept has also been used outside the world of physics. E.g. psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) employed the concept in connection with psychological forces whose directions vary according to e.g. instinctual needs. Kurt Lewin, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*, New York, 1935. Andrew Paul Ushenko has later used the concept in connection with aesthetic force or energy – a perceived force with a direction and a size. Andrew Paul Ushenko, *Dynamics of Art*, Bloomington 1953, pp. 60-119.

7 In connection with electronic and digital recordings however [PLEASE BE MORE SPECIFIC HERE! A CD IS TECHNICALLY], the sound can be manipulated to such a great extent, that we cannot recognize the space as a physically realizable place.

8 I differentiate between ‘tone’ and ‘sound’, as I think that the latter has acquired a broader meaning than ‘tone’. Whereas ‘tone’, in my opinion, characterizes an instrument’s direct generation of notes, and thus is close to tone production, ‘sound’ refers more broadly to the acoustic-musical phenomenon’s ‘spatial’ characteristic, which is often created by several simultaneous sounds and/or tones.

9 I have observed on a thoroughly unscientific basis that children under the age of six often use the metaphor ‘small and large notes’ instead of ‘high and low’ when talking about sounds and music. These observations suggest that cultural learning plays a role with respect to our perception of the relationship between notes.

10 Part of the content of this chapter has previously been printed in the article:”Music and Feelings in Danish TV-Documentaries”, *Mediekultur* no. 40, October 2006.

11 These concepts stem from Aristotle’s *Poetics*.


13 Among contributors to the arousal theory can be mentioned musicologists such as Carol Krumhansl, Patrik N. Juslin and Alf Gabriëlssoon.

14 Cited from Geoffrey Payzant’s English translation from 1986 of Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalish Schönen* (the most recent in English) here quoted from Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition*, 1993, p. 271. For an elaboration of Hanslick’s position in this discussion see the fourth part, “Music and Emotion”, in *The Fine Art of Repetition*, pp. 229-324.

15 According to the categorial approach to emotions, we experience feelings in demarcated categories such as *happiness, anger, sadness* and *fear*. These constitute the heart of our categorizing emotions, and all other emotions develop from these fundamental levels.

16 Hanslick provides similar descriptions of common features in music and emotions such as ‘strength, speed, rising, falling, rushing, hesitating, fusing, movement’. *Om det Skjønne i Musikken*, 1885, p. 22.
This is a structure to be found in many places in our way of expressing ourselves and experiencing. The construction of a sentence in spoken or written language normally lasts three to five seconds. Similarly, two seconds is the duration of gesticulations or facial expressions; D. Stern, “Vitality Contours”, op. cit. p. 72. Stern refers to research carried out by P. Fraisse, *The Psychology of Time*, 1963.

Stern refers to Langer in several places.

It is, of course, not only music that communicates vitality contours. They can also be read in a person’s movements, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.

Birger Langkjær, *Den lyttende tilskuer*, ch. 3. The parenthesis: (or actual) is my addition.

In an interview with *Ekstra Bladet*, Pia Kjærsgaard’s own comment on this scene and the interpretation of it as her colleagues’ rejection of her: ”Yes, it looks quite pronounced on TV, I remember the episode very well.” *Ekstra Bladet*, January 30, 2006, first section, p. 18. Thus she neither confirms nor denies the experience of rejection.

Vedfelt refers on page 158 in the book *Bevidsthed* to Albert Mehrabian’s experiments published in *Silent Messages* 1981, pp. 76-77. Results showed that our attitude to the person we are talking to does not depend so much on what the person is saying, but more on the timbre of the voice and the facial expression. Translated into percentages, Mehrabian’s experiments showed that verbal expression constituted 7%, the qualities of the voice 38% and facial expression 55% of the total impression.