

## ***The Idée fixe in Film***

It was Berlioz who invented this predecessor of the leitmotif, the *idée fixe*. He wrote a theme that is repeated a few times throughout his *Symphonie Fantastique*. This “recurrent idea” is re-interpreted each time, because in between, there is a lot of information that develops the musical narration. As the music tells us “its story” (or at least as Berlioz intended it to), the interpretation of the theme changes. In soundtracks, the *idée fixe* is not as specific as in Berlioz’ music. But we can use this notion because of its difference from leitmotif. While leitmotif is always “the leitmotif of someone or something”, *idée fixe* is a kind of “presence” in itself, pointing out and connecting things. Things, persons, situations, etc, seen at different moments and not having a clear link between them, will be somehow connected by this invisible string. *Idée fixe* is a resource that makes us notice key elements of the plot.

In Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, there is an audio / visual version of *idée fixe*: on the one hand, the well-known motif played by toys, aborigines, etc; on the other, the “peak-less” mountain form that is seen in the shaving cream, in the mud of the garden, etc. These related elements allow us to understand what the film is really about. François Truffaut, presented as “the greater specialist in the field” (filmmaking? human emotions?) is leading people - who do not necessarily know each other - to meet and to share a destiny. Whether the aliens are angels or simply an excuse is irrelevant. *Idées fixes* enhance the capacity of the listener to recognise the nature of this special connection.

Finally, in Terry Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkeys*, we can find two more examples of audio / visual *idée fixe*. We are tempted to think of Piazzolla’s theme (from *Suite Punta del Este*) and the monkeys’ icon as the leitmotif of *The Army of the Twelve Monkeys* (Brad Pitt’s gang). But besides its literal reference to the absurd teen-like organisation, the elements point towards different things. Every time James Cole (Bruce Willis) finds a clue to discover the army’s operations, we notice they have no chance of being so terrible. The *idée fixe* marks precisely the opposite: The Army of the Twelve Monkeys is not responsible for the biohazard disaster. But this false information gives us a path to think of the other *idée fixe* of the film: the obsessive dreaming of airports and killing. What James is dreaming of is his horrible destiny: he is condemned to escape to his own death. This dream is almost an equivalent to the original idea of Berlioz, and we rethink the sequence and the whole plot (including the monkeys) in order to understand the actual cause of world and personal apocalypse. The strength of Piazzolla’s motif becomes the sadness of Paul Buckmeister’s adagio (that includes a tango-like violin-sound litany).

### ***Idée fixe: types, links, functions***

A repeated motif is an *idée fixe* only when it is not clearly linked to a person, object or situation; at the same time, this motif must reveal an invisible link between apparently unconnected things. Not all plots or narrative structures are able to include leitmotifs or *idées fixes*.

## IDÉE FIXE IN CINEMA

<i>Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Function</i>
Sound	Repetitive and disturbing sound not connected to the same character or thing every time it appears	Reveals an instance of new signification of the sources or the associated elements
Musical	A theme whose style, orchestration or character somehow differs from the emotion of the scene	Reveals hidden or invisible connections (even antagonism) between characters or different elements in the plot
Audio/ Visual	Two metonyms (a sound or musical theme / an image) related to a place, person, divinity, etc	Reveals places (sacred, special, cursed, enchanted) or hidden aspects of a character

### ***The Idee Fixe – The later years***

The idea of the idee fixe returns later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the piece "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Mussorgsky, where the composer uses the "Promenade" theme to link together the various sections of the piece, themselves used to musically describe the paintings they represent. Following Mussorgsky's death, Maurice Ravel re-orchestrated the piano piece for full orchestra. It is in this reimagining that we can observe the development of the Promenade sections through different instrumentations – yet another way to transform the idee fixe.