

Ah(men): Dramatic Vocalization as Signifier of the Numinous in Hollywood Biblical Epics

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Unlike the *vocalise-étude*, a tradition based in conservatory test pieces, dramatic vocalization—typically a wordless chorus used as an extra-musical signifier—stems from lower-class entertainments such as the phastasmagoria, popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Influenced by this new resource, composer Carl Maria von Weber included an early prototype of dramatic vocalization in the “Wolf’s Glen” scene from his opera *Der Freischütz* (1821). Dramatic vocalization, as in this example, is phenomenal: singers are removed from the audience’s view; the audience is seldom sure whether the onstage characters are able to perceive their contribution.

With the addition of sound to cinema in the late 1920s associations between certain modes of expression and corresponding musical representation found in nineteenth-century opera, including dramatic vocalization, were transferred from the stage to the screen. The use of dramatic vocalization to suggest a religious or numinous connotation developed as a theme during the course of the 1940s and ’50s through its inclusion in several Hollywood Biblical epics. In this paper, I present an overview of this development then proceed to examine musical similarities in Nativity scenes that include dramatic vocalization from such movies as *Ben-Hur* (1959), *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and the parody *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979).