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“Lusamine’s Theme”: A Storyline of the Senses

Lusamine; A self absorbed, beauty-obsessed, abusive mother, who also happens to be the stylish president of a nature conservatory that doubles as a secret alien research facility to fuel her xenophilic obsession with what lies beyond her world. She is the main villain of *Pokemon Sun and Moon*. Like all major characters in the mainline *Pokemon* games, a short loop of music no more than a minute long called a “character theme” is set to play when the player sets eyes on her for the first time. It’s meant to reflect her personality, everything the listener should know about her. How could all of that be embedded into no more than fifty-eight seconds of music? The phenomenon of a video game “character theme”, where the personality of a character is presented through an instrumental piece, reflects Susan Sontag’s opinion in her essay *Against Interpretation* that form can carry just as much meaning as content through provoking a sensory reaction in the audience (9). Through masterfully chosen instrumentation, melodies, and strangely discordant notes, “Lusamine’s Theme” depicts to the listener the portrait of a serene, loving person with something unsettling lying just beneath the surface, reflecting Sontag’s assertion that the way art is constructed is more important to its meaning than what its contents are.

Without words to guide a viewer, a composer’s first weapon in order to provoke understanding from an audience is instrumentation. In a character theme, the instruments must be chosen precisely to reflect the personality of *who* the audience is listening to. A theme written in

harpichord gives off a regal feeling, whereas militant drums may paint a picture of a soldier on the march. In reflection of her complicated character, Lusamine's theme is written with a swath of instruments intent on creating an atmosphere of sophisticated grace. In Lusamine's theme, soft piano and chimes are mixed with harp to create a sense of delicacy and lightness. The harmonious strings and flute-like synths serve to provide warmth to the song, which is underscored by its calm tempo at the edge between *andante* and *moderato*. This piece is light, but not without substance, complex but harmonious. All of the instruments that make up its main melody are traditionally considered to be beautiful. These decisions are all purposeful. With no content to pay attention to, no spoken word from Lusamine herself, the listener is made to pay attention to the way they feel, allowing them to indulge in the sensory experience of art, in order to "*see more, to hear more, to feel more*" as Sontag thinks audiences should (9). Thus, the form evokes feelings, which become the content for interpretation, rather than the art being reduced to mere content itself. All the feelings the chosen instruments stir in the listener allow them to put together that the person they are listening to is elegant, someone who exudes a sense of untouchable beauty and serenity, solely through the form of the instrumentation.

The second tool a composer has in order to represent a character is melody; more specifically, their leitmotif. Throughout "Lusamine's Theme", as well as all other music composed for her, a central melody is present: the chimes, playing one pattern of notes throughout the piece endlessly. It's the first thing that the listener hears when the song opens, four bars long and repeating in segments throughout the song as the other instruments join the melody and weave around it. It's the only constant in the piece. The simple, repeating melody resembles a lullaby, eliciting a feeling of serenity. The listener can then, perhaps, infer that "Lusamine" herself may be a kind of maternal character, as this melody alongside the warmth

of the instruments chosen for her theme would be fitting for a caring mother. This assertion may appear to be an interpretation on the part of the listener. However, due to the piece lacking examinable content, all the analysis a listener can do is on the impression the song leaves on them. This, therefore, does not “violate” the art of the song itself as Sontag suggests content-based interpretations do (6), and allows the piece to dodge interpretation once again.. The song forces the listener to pay attention to how the song makes them feel, and to interpret their feelings about the melody and the instrumentation in lieu of any content handed to them, allowing for the composer to entwine a deeper appeal to the listener’s emotions beneath the base layer of instrumentation.

For a listener who truly pays attention to the shape and form of the music, the piece begins to reveal a completely different layer of character through “off” choices in its composition. The choice of the chimes to represent the main melody in the piece are surprisingly cold compared to the rest of the instruments. This perhaps strikes the listener as an odd choice, considering that pattern is the source of the maternal melody, whereas the chimes feel harsh and unfeeling against the warmth of the violins. The piece is entirely accompanied by syncopated, robotic percussion that varies in accented beat measure by measure, as well as an underlying, pulsing synthetic bass. These technological instruments clash with the rest of the natural, warm instruments in such a way that generates an off-putting feeling in the listener. Before the song loops, there is a ten second section where the violins, bass, and flute synth cut out, leaving a hollow feeling devoid of the warmth of those instruments as the chimes play Lusamine’s leitmotif again. The syncopated percussion suddenly becomes louder and more present as a main instrument than an accent, skipping a bit as if glitching. The harp playing arpeggios underneath the chimes slips in notes discordant to the key of the song. Ten seconds, and the entire energy of

the piece is briefly changed, thrown off kilter before looping back around to the refined, serene melody at the beginning. The strange choices are woven so precisely into the music that it evokes an uneasy feeling in the listener, even if they are not able to pinpoint why. The composition and instrumentation of the music all work together to produce a sensory experience for the audience that is too cohesively put together for the listener to individually go through and pick out why they're made to feel that way— they simply do. The video game “character theme” is an example of Sontag’s ideal media, a media so pure and transparent that it is experienced as it is, without room for interpretation (9). The listener is forced to focus on what they hear, to pick out the shape of the sound that is making them uneasy, and to pick apart the theme for its construction rather than content.

Through only listening to the music that accompanies her entrance, a player of *Pokemon Sun and Moon* is able to extrapolate that the character Lusamine is a graceful mother who may not be exactly what she seems. Without even an image of the character or a word of dialogue from her, a listener already knows not to trust her completely. “Lusamine’s Theme” escapes interpretation by having a surface so powerfully cohesive that the work is allowed to simply be, as Sontag says, “what it is” (7), and yet, it still clearly has depth and meaning that can be derived from the way that the song makes the listener feel as they listen to it. With such artistic competency for such depth of character to be pumped into fifty-eight sections competently, one would expect a large amount of praise to surround this feat of masterful composition— however, the phenomena video game “character theme” is never lauded as anything more than a good song. Due to video games being seen as childish, all media surrounding it is often dismissed by art critics, or people looking to dig into something as cinema was during Sontag’s time (7). Video game music has to do even more heavy lifting, as it contains no content, only form, and is

devalued and overlooked by a society which values only what can be interpreted. The snubbing of video game music juvenile dissuades an audience from understanding how much thought is put into its construction. However, the most unassuming of media, beautiful craftsmanship is present and can be admired if only audiences are willing to see it.

#### Works Cited

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation*, Picador, 1966, pp. 6-9.