

UNDERSTANDING SOUND TRACKS THROUGH FILM THEORY

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Most times film music has been conceived and analyzed via musicological terms and theories. Since traditional musicology originates from typical literary and historical studies and faces music as a universal language that can be explored through preset textual approaches lacking critical research for the most part, it is common that film musicology often concentrates on the formal aspects of the presence of sound and music in films. Yet, lately, novel methodologies of film studies that mingle diverse (sometimes opposing) theories of cultural studies have come into sight. Philosophy, psychology, anthropology, phenomenology and semiotics advance the contemporary academic consideration of films, regarding not only their visual but also their aural attributes and contexts.

The reviewed volume written by Associate Professor of Film Studies Elsie Walker succeeds higher standards in film music/sound analysis that merge long-established with innovative methods of seeing, hearing, reading, feeling and understanding the audiovisual corpus of films. This kind of critical stance is very important, in view of the fact that — as is already widely identified — music and sound tracks can reveal a film's deeper structures, meanings and emotions. The book launches new-fangled methodologies for film music/sound analysis in respect of five of the most common but essential critical theories that have already been applied to the scrutiny of films, specially genre studies, postcolonialism, feminism, psychoanalysis and queer theory.

Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory comes out as a result of the author's extensive preoccupation with mutual appreciation of film, music/sound and cultural studies. This particular aspect allows for an effectual awareness on the book's themes by a rather inhomogeneous readership, which — as Elsie Walker states (9) — may vary from "film scholars, at the upper-undergraduate, or graduate level" to "anyone interested in challenging what Kalinak refers to as the 'visual chauvinism' of much other scholarship, across many disciplines."¹

As mentioned before, the volume consists of five parts that cover five predominant film theories, which have been mainly applied on general film analyses until the advent of Walker's innovative approach concerning an integrated study of both film and music/sound. Furthermore, each part is composed of three individual chapters, which offer, in that order, a quick look on the theoretical framework and two case studies on specific films. Besides that, the book begins with an extensive introduction and concludes with an afterthought chapter, which encapsulates the most important suggestions about bringing together film theories and music/sound examination. Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013) become the corresponding case studies for the introductory and the closing sections respectively.

Genre has been a fundamental theoretical scheme in contemporary film studies. Rick Altman's contribution has also been crucial for formulating this field of analysis. In the initial part of her book, Walker applies Altman's theory of the semantic and syntactic components of film genre² in conjunction with film music/sound examination to the study of two westerns. The first one is a classic Hollywood movie of the fifties titled *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), and the second one is the recent independent production of the nineties, under the title *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995). This also signifies two totally different kinds of soundtrack but also makes author's scholar analyses more productive.

The following part has its roots in the work of Robert Stam and Louise Spence, i.e., "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction."³ Walker brings foreword some of the most significant issues of contemporary societies, associating them with the way that music, sound and the human voice are presented and perceived (not only on the local stage but also globally) in two recent Australian films: *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, 2006). The author concludes that filmic soundscapes play a substantial role in the construction of (post)colonial, racist and nationalistic representations.

Influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey became an emblematic figure in feminist criticism through her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"⁴ which altered the cinematic theory from the authoritative textual analysis to a (cultural-political) examination of gender in films. Walker tries to implement this type of scrutiny in the study of film music of two different (yet, totally appropriate) films, that is *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Her intention is to look into how the films' soundtracks of classic and post-modern

tradition operate in line with the “male vs. female” distinctions by means of both an intra-filmic and an audience approach.

The next section is directly related to part III, because of their parallel theoretical frameworks. Its topic derives from Lacanian psychoanalysis as illustrated in Todd McGowan’s article “‘Looking for the Gaze’: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes.”⁵ As Walker herself conveys in page 245, she uses “McGowan’s reapplication of visually biased Lacanian film analysis to generate new questions for analyzing sound tracks”. As a result, this portion of the book offers a three-part interpretation (“imaginary,” “symbolic” and “real”) on the issue of subjectivity, identity and self-presentation as they are musically interconnected with the main characters of the films *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956) and *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010).

The final part of the volume, under the title “Queer Theory”, deals with an extra crucial perspective of current film philosophy debates. Walker chooses the work of another major academic, the post-structuralist critical theorist Judith Butler. Her related text “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” challenges and subverts the standards of the conservative understanding of sexual identity binaries.⁶ How can music and sound in films like *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994) be engaged in the deconstruction of typical gender norms? The author tests Butler’s ideas using a “reading against the grain” method of questioning and repositioning homo- and hetero-sexual personas in films through their sonic milieu.

The book under review fills an existing gap in film music studies literature: the lack of a systematic dialogue between film musicology and modern critical film and cultural theory. Citing numerous films from different periods and cinematographic traditions, *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* becomes a paradigmatic course book for scholars dealing with the cultural analysis of films and their music; not only film music *per se*. Moreover, it brings back to light the usually ignored supremacy of the aural (as opposed to the visual) aspects of cinema by linking the sensorial/empirical approach (seeing and hearing films) with the theoretical/conceptual one (talking about films). Walker manages to sustain the magic of the films’ music and sound, which — although their non-referential substance — may represent more than filmic images do!

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1. Kathryn Kalinak, "Review of *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* by Claudia Gorbman", *Film Quarterly* 41/4 (1988): 56-58.
 2. Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre", *Cinema Journal* 23/3 (1984): 6-18.
 3. Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction", *Screen* 24/2 (1983): 2-20.
 4. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16/3 (1975): 6-18.
 5. Todd McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes", *Cinema Journal* 42/3 (2003): 27-47.
 6. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Ann Garry, Marilyn Pearsall (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 371-87.