GENERAL INTRODUCTION

So, you're expressing something and you're hoping that somebody else will listen. Maybe there's a message in it. The message in it is not gonna be something that Western Union can carry, but it's gonna be a message.

—David Raksin, composer for *Bigger Than Life* (Duffie [1988] 2008)

Cinema overall is 70% sound. Because your ears are far more developed than your eyes. You cannot stop yourself hearing, even if you put your finger in your ears, you still hear. Because it goes through the cheek bones and everything. But eyes are. . . you can shut your eyes and that's it.

—John Currie, sound designer for *Ten Canoes* (Starrs 2009, 249)

In 1988, the prolific film composer David Raksin hoped we might be listening to his scores. In 2009, the independent sound designer John Currie asserted that we have no choice but to hear cinema. The contrast between these perspectives parallels a sea change in scholarly approaches to sound tracks over the last several decades—overall, there is a collective shift from making readers aware that cinema must be heard, to finding new ways for readers to understand the aural elements of cinema.

In 1987 Claudia Gorbman published one of the most influential works in soundtrack studies: *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. It was the first book to focus on film music within contexts of contemporary film theory, and this set it apart from earlier works by critics and practitioners.[1] As Kathyrn Kalinak explains, *Unheard Melodies*

[1] As Kalinak points out in her review of Gorbman's book, the first wave of critics and theoreticians of film music emerged in the 1940s. One key influence on *Unheard Melodies* is Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno's *Composing for the Films* ([1947] 2007), an important treatise on creating scores that challenge the ideological norms of Classical Hollywood. Though numerous other anecdotal, instructional, and historical books on film music preceded Gorbman's book, hers was the first to analyze film music in relation

came out at a time when film music was "yet to be absorbed into the mainstream of writing on cinematic history, theory, and criticism" (1988, 56). Kalinak herself has done much to challenge the visual bias of film scholarship: her book *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (1992) is another key work, especially as it explores the enduring conventions of Classical Hollywood scoring.

The surge of new attention to film sound tracks since the 1990s is overwhelming, so much so that we can only cite a few important examples here: *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* edited by Rick Altman (1992), *The Sounds of Commerce* by Jeff Smith (1998), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* edited by Phil Powrie and Robynn J. Stilwell (2006), *The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television* by K. J. Donnelly (2008), and several books by Michel Chion, including Gorbman's English translations of *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (1994), *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), and *Film, A Sound Art* (2009). Two leading journals devoted to sound tracks have also emerged in the past decade: *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* (University of Liverpool, founded in 2007), and *Music and the Moving Image* (University of Illinois Press, founded in 2008). The latter journal is affiliated with an annual conference of the same name that brings together composers, sound personnel, graduate scholars, and professors to discuss the relationship between music, sound, and the entire universe of moving images (including film, television, video games, iPod, computer, and interactive performances).[2] The strong presence of university faculty at the Music and the Moving Image (MaMI) conference indicates that sound tracks are not only increasingly researched, but also increasingly *taught* in film curricula all over the world. In 2011 alone, more than sixty different tertiary institutions were represented at the conference.

The MaMI conference reflects a more general global awareness of the aural power of cinema. Films, in turn, seem to be increasingly created with the expectation that audiences will *hear* as well as see them. In 2013, Gorbman herself directly addressed this trend with the title of her paper: "Heard Music." Where *Unheard Melodies* is a demand for new attention to Classical Hollywood sound tracks that have all too often been neglected, and which themselves seem to dissuade conscious perception, "Heard Music" is an analysis of contemporary "background music" that self-consciously demands to be perceived, especially in the films directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory is a response to the increasing emphasis on sound tracks within film scholarship and university curricula, especially

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to theoretical trends that had transformed cinema studies (especially semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis) (Kalinak 1988, 56–57).

[2] This quotation comes from the call for papers for the 2014 MaMI conference: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/music/scoring/conference/.

as it reflects a growing expectation that many filmmakers *assume* we are aurally alert. This book follows in the footsteps of *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History*, by James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer (2010), a book designed for undergraduate tertiary courses. *Hearing the Movies* offers a comprehensive introduction to the study of sound tracks, along with providing crucial industrial and historical contexts for understanding their construction and power. *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* builds upon this strong foundation by being written for those who are already familiar with the terminology and methodology introduced by *Hearing the Movies*, and who are interested in studying sound tracks further with regard to specific theoretical approaches. It is primarily designed for film scholars, at the upper-undergraduate, or graduate level, and beyond. But it is also written for anyone interested in challenging what Kalinak refers to as the "visual chauvinism" of much other scholarship, across many disciplines (1988, 56).

Although we have seen a great boom in critical attention to sound tracks, the presumption that film is a visual medium is still pervasive. In his recent study of complex cinematic representations of reality, tellingly titled *The Eyes Have It*, Murray Pomerance refers to film as "one form of pictorialization" (2013, 4). This is but one representative example of the enduring visual bias within film scholarship. Moreover, many of the foundational theoretical works which have inspired this book reveal a similar visual bias, and this all too often goes uncontested. Indeed, one of this book's primary objectives is to challenge the visual emphasis of many influential theoretical works by redirecting their arguments towards sound tracks.

As Anahid Kassabian has written, dominant studies of music tend to be written for those who are already musically trained and therefore able to read scores (2001, 21). Similarly, studies of sound tend to be jargon-heavy or weighed down with overly technical emphases. This book redresses the balance by introducing readers to new ways of analyzing sound tracks without requiring much formal training: anything beyond basic film and music terminology is briefly defined. There is also a select glossary of musical terms that move beyond the basics of melody, rhythm, tempo, texture, dynamics, and harmony. Even though some musical transcriptions are included, the arguments of this book are not reliant upon the reader's ability to interpret them: this is, in other words, a book for "musos" *and* "non-musos" alike.[3] Moreover, the theoretical arguments of each chapter resonate with other contemporary scholarship in music, history, politics, literature, and culture, as well as film studies.

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[3] Here we borrow Phillip Tagg's terminology in an important article about democratically teaching sound tracks (2012).

Each chapter of this book is organized as follows:

1. First, we explore some fundamental concerns of a particular theory. This introductory section is anchored in close attention to a representative example of foundational and/or influential scholarship within that theory's history.
2. We use the representative example of scholarship to generate a list of specific questions about applying the given theoretical approach to sound tracks.
3. We then apply the set of theoretically driven questions to two specific films. The films are selected because they strongly resonate within a given theoretical context. That said, each of the two films selected in relation to a theory resonates quite differently, demonstrating the malleability of the theories and the related questions we generate from them. Each film analysis is primarily influenced by the representative example of scholarship already introduced, but also enlivened with references to contemporary examples of the given theoretical approach. We begin every film analysis with a brief plot summary before developing our approach in relation to close readings of particular scenes and sequences. Along the way, we give due consideration to historical, industrial, and artistic contexts for analysis.

This book gives most attention to the music of films because it is a necessarily selective approach to sound tracks. *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* is also best contextualized in relation to other scholarship on film music. However, this book also breaks a dominant trend within soundtrack studies. As Stilwell points out, music is too often misleadingly segregated from other elements of sound tracks in close film analyses (2006, 48). Given that the study of sound has been such an important growth area in film studies for the last two decades, this enduring segregation is strange. Each close analysis of this book includes some consideration of *the interplay of* sound effects, dialogue, and music. Investigating how and why certain sounds work together and/or are used hierarchically is crucial for fully understanding the aural power of cinema.

Since all aural elements work together, we will open out the concept of "film musicality" beyond its literal meaning: in other words, we will apply musical principles to all the interconnected elements of film sound tracks. In the feminism chapter, for instance, we will consider the relative volume, pitch, and tempo of Lauren Bacall's speaking voice in addition to her singing one, as well as in relation to other aural elements of *To Have and Have Not* (1944). It is important to explore ways in which dialogue and sound effects are used "musically," with a sensitive ear for all aural structures. Some scholars, such as Gianluca Sergi, argue vehemently against the application of musical terms to non-musical sounds (2004, 6), for fear that it perpetuates a bias towards music at the expense of other

elements of film sound. However, we shall find there is much to be gained from applying the rich vocabulary of musicology to everything we hear in cinema. Here again, we build upon the precedent of *Hearing the Movies*, a book that uses concepts of musicology to highlight the compositional intentionality of all kinds of film sound.

This book is not an effort to fix the meaning of anything we hear, but to open up possibilities for hearing cinema through various important theoretical approaches. Though each chapter places theoretical limits on how to analyze each sound track, the final section of this book is a short consideration of how all theoretical approaches might be meaningfully combined. This "coda" is followed by a series of films for "further perceiving." Like Kassabian, we shall think of the hypothetical *perceiver* of a film, rather than using the much more common term "spectator." The word "perceiver" allows for subjective impressions, along with allowing for *aural* as well as visual impact (2001, 110–11).[4]

To preview the preoccupations and assumptions of this book in more specific terms, let us consider the first three minutes of a film: *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). From the outset, the sound track of this film works in self-consciously affective and intertextual ways. Moreover, the interplay of *all* aural elements—music, dialogue (or lack thereof), and sound effects—matters.

The action of *Brokeback Mountain* focuses on two cowboys named Innis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhal) who first meet while sheepherding on Brokeback Mountain in 1963. Both men are painfully aware that their relationship is socially taboo in mainstream American society. They both marry women and start young families. But they also risk a long-standing romantic affair with each other, though it is limited to sporadic meetings over a period of almost seventeen years. The film ends after Jack is tragically killed, and though his wife describes his death to Innis as an accident, it is visually presented while she provides this explanation as a violent hate crime. This is but one example of the film's self-conscious emphasis on the power of that which is seen *in relation to* what can be heard.

Brokeback Mountain is a deeply subversive response to classical examples of the western that preceded it. It aurally recalls other westerns, just as it plays with our expectations of what its sound track "should" amplify. The very first sound of the film is wind, a common aural motif in westerns, especially in connection with vast, inhospitable landscapes. Then comes the sound of a single guitar and a lone truck winding its way

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[4] Kassabian challenges the notion that all possibilities of interpretation may be theoretically anticipated by generally applied, psychoanalytically determined paradigms. Her work reminds us that audiences bring individualized and social histories (of gender, race, class, sexuality) and "many other axes of identity" into the movie theater (2001, 110–11). Further, unlike the theoretical spectator of traditional psychoanalysis, the "perceiver" engages (both consciously and unconsciously) with aural messages in *addition to* visual ones.

down the empty road. The guitar dominates Gustavo Santaolalla's original non-diegetic score for the film. It is an instrument much-associated with the western genre, but its usage varies widely: from traditional folk songs, to lyrical themes, to contemporary, fragmented cues.[5] That said, as Michael J. Blouin writes, Santaolalla's music is not a conventional "narrative melody" in the sense that it "does not follow traditional tension/release structure; instead, it is constructed of drawn out notes that are not seeking any familiar resolution (hence, [an] 'uncontained' quality)" (2010, 1185).[6] This distinguishes it from the music featured in more sonically conventional westerns, such as the melody-driven score by Max Steiner for *The Searchers* (1956), which we analyze in due course. This music from the opening of *Brokeback* is also distinguished from the traditional country tunes associated with heterosexual romance later in the film (Blouin 2010, 1185).[7] The music itself thus suggests a kind of generic and narrative subversiveness—it carries meaning beyond the already heard and the already familiar.

Santaolalla's guitar line is a series of fragments that are first associated with Innis del Mar, especially as he jumps out of the truck and stands alone by a cabin where his soon-to-be employer will arrive. The guitar line anticipates his own speech that is similarly hesitant, fragmented, and economical. In this first scene, though, he is the *silent* image of the quintessential cowboy, leaning against the cabin with his legs casually crossed, head bowed under a cowboy hat (see Figure 0.1).

As we see Innis this way, the fragmented line of guitar music begins to be answered by a group of harmonizing strings. However, this aural harmony fades away quickly as, all at once, our view of him is disturbed by the entrance of a freight train, its black silhouette rushing past the camera with as much aggression as its sound. Then, a second truck enters the scene: the old, stuttering, backfiring vehicle driven by Jack Twist. Jack kicks the truck when he climbs out, a futile gesture of frustration, soon overtaken by the sound of wind and the silence of the two men as they wait together. Jack eyes Innis in a somewhat suggestive way, especially as he momentarily poses against his truck (see Figure 0.2), but he says nothing.

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[5] To cite but a few specific examples: in *The Searchers* (1956), a character named Charlie (a parody of the singing cowboy) accompanies his own traditional songs with guitar; in *Unforgiven* (1992), a haunting and lyrical guitar theme (composed by lead actor and director Clint Eastwood) poignantly reinforces the film's emphasis on romanticizing its hero despite his condemnably violent deeds; and in *Dead Man* (1995), Neil Young's improvised, distorted, and heavily reverberating music for electric guitar is a crucial example of the film's defamiliarization of western conventions.

[6] Blouin here writes of the famous main love theme associated with Jack and Innis, rather than this opening music, but his argument nevertheless applies.

[7] This same music re-enters much later in the film when Innis anticipates a visit from Jack [1:01:30–1:02:12], this time without being cut off, suggesting the possibility of their transcending circumstance (albeit tragically temporarily).

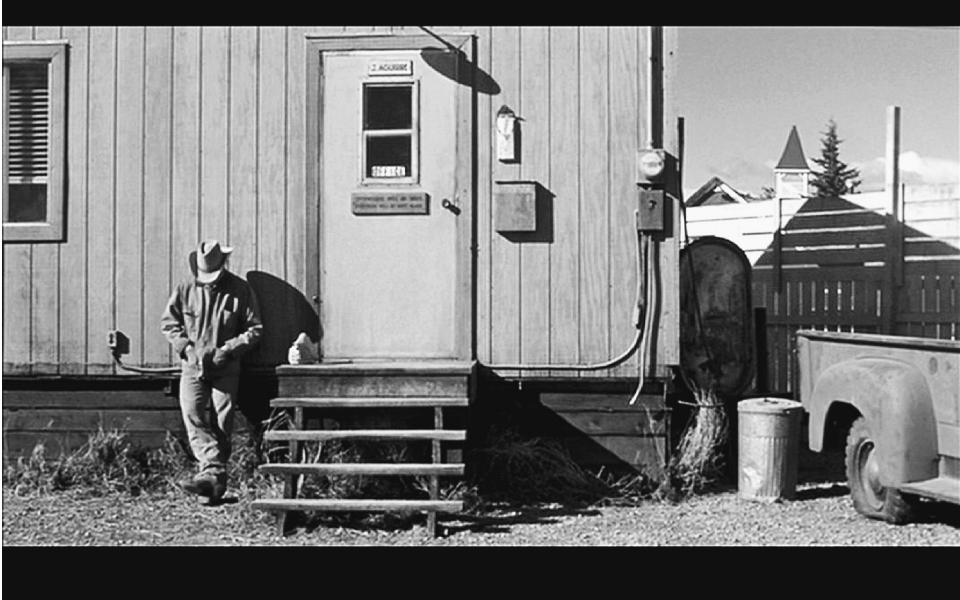

FIGURE 0.1 Innis del Mar, the archetypically withdrawn and silent cowboy.

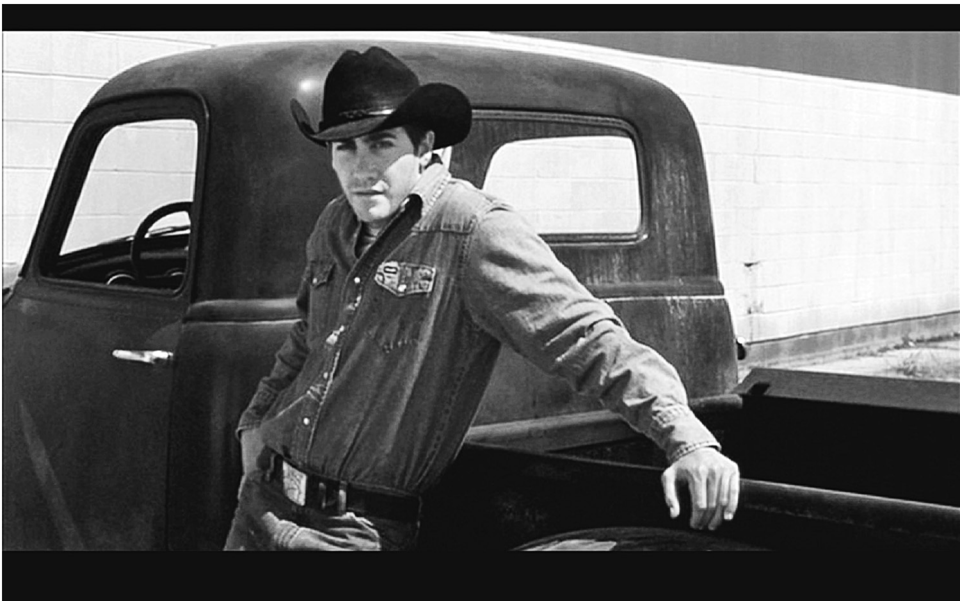

FIGURE 0.2 Jack suggestively eyes Innis: there is no need for words.

While Innis and Jack both steal looks at each other, their mutual silence prompts us to consider that which cannot be spoken. The wind that was barely perceptible at the start of the film now "speaks" loudly in the place of words, pointing to the absence of their direct communication.

Let us pause on what the sound track has already established, even before either character has spoken a word. First, the two characters are clearly established as ironic counterparts to each other. Innis's ride through the landscape of the film is smooth, driven by another, and makes little sound. Jack's ride through the same terrain is independent, faltering, and "messy," suggesting his inability to be discrete and in control of his own presence. The film thus aurally announces their differences before we even see them. On a deeper level, the film suggests that Innis can travel through the terrain of the western without calling attention to himself too much. Innis's comparatively quiet presence relates to his fearfulness: he is a character haunted by what it means to define oneself against the "rules" of dominant masculinity, especially when he later recalls his father showing him the mutilated corpse of a gay man. Jack, on the other hand, willfully speaks out against the limitations of the world as it oppresses them, literally shouting at Innis against the backdrop of Brokeback Mountain while he insists on the possibility of their living together. Jack is much more sonically subversive than Innis, but he is also punished for it. The film amplifies his presence, but it also emphasizes the tragic cost of his aural rebelliousness.

The musical score of this opening subtly suggests a kind of yearning, gesturing towards the possibility of an "answer" that is suddenly interrupted by the *forte* entrance of the train. In being the "iron horse" that replaced horses and stagecoaches, the train alludes to the expanding world of the contemporary western. Its sight and sound also emphasizes the power of the world intruding upon Innis's space, a power that interrupts his music and the film's focus on his silently iconic power. Innis's silence is important because it initially connects him with a long line of taciturn and stoic cowboys who define themselves in terms of action more than words.[8] But the silence he then inadvertently shares with Jack suggests something more: it is a full silence that suggests an understanding between them, albeit tentative at first. In combination with the furtive glances that they steal of one another, this silence is "queer."[9] It raises the possibility of their subtextual, mutual desire within a recognizably western context.

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[8] For more on this tradition, as well as important exceptions to it, see Kozloff (2000, 139–69).

[9] Santaolalla's score might be meaningfully discussed in relation to other queer sound tracks for contemporary films. Some recent examples (from the journal *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*) include: Miguel Mera's explanation of the subversively beautiful music he composed to underscore the emotional truth of Salvador Dali's gay relationship with Federico García Lorca in *Little Ashes* (2009); and Todd Decker's analysis of a queer dichotomy in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) between established

Brokeback Mountain was released after seven years in preproduction, and its reputation as a "gay western" was well established before its première (Kitses 2007, 23). Thus, even its first audiences were primed to read this silence for its suggestive power. Even the wind that dominates the sound track, in place of the men's words, suggests the tumult that they come to embody within a generic context. From the outset, the sound track positions us to sympathetically perceive its gay characters—to smile at Jack's awkwardly noisy entrance, to be intrigued by the protagonists' silence, to shrink from the sound of the train, and to seize hold of those fragments of melody that suggest something hopefully, even if cautiously, different.

This analysis of just three minutes establishes several fundamental preoccupations of this book:

1. First, a challenge to the hegemony of the visual.
2. Second, an emphasis on the most heard *and* the less perceptible elements of sound: here, the subtlety of the wind motif and the absent dialogue, in addition to Santaollala's award-winning musical score.
3. A consideration of how all aural elements work interdependently.
4. An awareness of how using theoretical frameworks can deepen our understanding of why sound tracks resonate: understanding the above example entails consideration of genre studies and queer theory.
5. A belief that there is much more work to do in analyzing sound tracks, and that this area is fertile ground for genuine contributions to film scholarship. Much has been written on how *Brokeback Mountain* subverts the traditional narrative and visual implications of the western, but there is plenty more to say about its aural density.[10]
6. The assumption that sound effects, dialogue, and silences are as carefully "orchestrated" as film scores.[11]

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classical music (associated with genuine gay desire) and popular jazz music (associated with conformist heterosexuality).

[10] See Erica Spohrer's 2009 article for but one strong example. As of December 4, 2013, there are 137 articles about *Brokeback Mountain* listed by the MLA International Bibliography, but only one that focuses primarily on its sound track. Even this example (by Blouin) gives only four pages to the film in relation to several other western sound tracks.

[11] As Sergi points out, there are often numerous personnel involved in the creation of a final sound track, including sound mixers (involved in different areas of sound effects, dialogue, and music), foley artists, re-recording mixers, music supervisors, composers, sound editors, and sound designers (2004, 183). We could also add the importance of musicians performing the composed score, and actors delivering dialogue or, equally, providing silence, as well as the directors and producers who may have controlling power over any aural dimension of the film. We will only mention someone by name (such as a composer or sound designer) where the agency behind something we hear is easily identified. That said, we will always take it as a given that every element of a sound track belongs more to a film as a collaborative creation than to any one person involved.

7. The belief that close analyses help readers hone their own skills, as well as contributing to the field of soundtrack studies (even the relatively well-established subfield of film music analysis). As recently as 2008, and despite so much attention to film music over the last three decades, Peter Larsen wrote that close analyses of scoring for "specific, individual films are in short supply" (2008, 8).

This book is organized in terms of theoretical approaches that logically follow on from each other. However, the reader may well decide to read the parts out of order: though they become exponentially more ambitious, the book is designed so that no part is contingent upon any other. Only with the coda do we assume the reader's familiarity with everything before it. This final section is an anticipation of the further analyses that will combine theoretical approaches, and it focuses upon a recent release: *Gravity* (2013). Throughout the rest of the book we focus on a wide range of films dated from the Classical Hollywood era to the present day. No matter which film is being discussed, we shall find that the visual bias in film scholarship is still strong enough that even the most canonized films provide fertile ground for new, aurally based research. This is an exciting prospect for any film scholar: from *Rebecca* (1940) to *The Piano* (1993), there is still much more to hear.

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