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Sound, Voice, Music

Editorial

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Not so long ago, film music scholars complained habitually that, despite its established and powerful role in the media economy of film, music was being neglected by film and music studies alike. The multidisciplinary nature of film music studies was often cited as a possible reason for this state of affairs: film scholars felt they lacked sufficient musical education, or simply the terminology, to address the matter, while musicologists sniffed at what seemed to them a demeaning appropriation of music in the service of mere illustration or mood-setting. The division between film theory and film music theory was further exacerbated by the perception cultivated by some film scholars that music represented an addition to, rather than an integral part of, film (Kalinak). Not that the early literature on film music did much to suggest otherwise: largely anecdotal in nature, it documented the use of music in silent and early sound films in ways that seemed to reinforce the notion of music as post-production in practice and an after-thought to theory.

However, the study of film music has matured impressively in the last three decades, growing into a strong discipline informed by film and cultural as well as musicological studies. Although in the UK and Ireland it has generally been cultivated in music departments, the (interdisciplinary) body of research on film studies has increasingly found a home in film, media and cultural studies departments—essentially wherever research into the production, dissemination and spectatorship of mixed-media forms is undertaken. Signs of interaction between traditionally separate disciplines were seen, for instance, last year when NECS (European Network for Cinema and Media Studies) dedicated its annual conference to film sound, following the example of the *Screen* conference in 2008. Dedicating an issue of *Alphaville* to Sound, Voice and Music seems timely, then, not least in the year which marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Claudia Gorbman's seminal publication *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. In hindsight, the publication of Gorbman's book in 1987 can be seen to mark the birth of the field of film music studies, inspiring the wave of important books that followed it in the 1990s (Kalinak, Flinn, Smith, Brown, Kassabian).

One possible explanation for the recent narrowing of the theoretically imposed gap between the aural and visual aspects of film might be that, as they have matured and expanded

their horizons, both film music and film studies have discovered one overlapping area of interest and research: film sound. That boundaries between music and sound design are becoming increasingly blurred in contemporary cinema has affected film music studies by expanding the scope of its analysis beyond traditionally composed or compiled scores. At the same time, film scholars have become more adventurous in their exploration of sonic aspects of film—including speech, sound effects and music—in their textual and cultural analyses. Thus, it seems that opposed notions of the score as an element of film usually ignored by film scholars on one hand, and film sound as a topic beyond the expertise of film musicologists on the other, are finally breaking down as each recognises the complexly interwoven relationships between image and all aspects of the film soundtrack, not only music. The soundtrack—understood in this broader sense—is now attracting the scholarly attention it deserves, a development confirmed by the topics and approaches adopted by the contributors to this themed issue of *Alphaville*.

The first two articles consider music-related practices in Hollywood. Michael D. Dwyer traces the development of the nostalgia wave during the Reagan era in the United States, a period in which America's entertainment industry mined the 1950s for nostalgic tropes, styles and images. Focusing on music in the soundtrack of several Hollywood films of the 1980s, Dwyer inverts the familiar notion that songs can attach different or additional meanings to film and argues that film can create new historical meanings for the songs. In this nostalgia wave, he concludes, the ventriloquising of 1950s songs by teenagers and the concurrent resistance to disco, glam and new wave were characteristic of a broader, conservative socio-political view that rejected loose morals in favour of “good clean fun”. Focusing on the relationship between gender and performance in the Hollywood film musical, Michael Charlton investigates two distinct periods in the genre's history: the studio era and the surprising return of the musical in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Charlton compares the impact of female star personae in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) and *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) with the role of irony and parody in the purportedly postmodern *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) and *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002). He concludes that not only were the studio-era musicals more subversive of gender roles than their overtly parodic successors, but that they anticipated the postmodern by fragmenting narrative with arresting, self-aware “performances”.

In the following pair of articles, the focus turns to maverick and independent American filmmakers. In his discussion of the work of Hal Ashby, Aaron Hunter contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on the technique of “trans-diegesis”. Taking Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978) as a case study, Hunter shows how Ashby's use of trans-diegetic music—music that crosses narrative layers—forms part of a consistently playful approach to cinematic form and functions on several levels: as a tool that allows for a merger between moments in time, as a device to create a transition between incongruent events within the diegesis, or as mechanism to create a temporal confluence between apparently sequential events. The fourth article focuses on Shane Carruth's indie science-fiction film, *Primer* (2004). Nessa Johnston shows how *Primer* abandons the soundscape conventions associated with Hollywood films of the same genre; far from being a sound spectacle, *Primer* is a lo-fi, screen-centred soundscape that even eschews 5.1 Dolby surround sound in favour of stereo. The soundtrack of *Primer*, she concludes, focuses on temporality (in keeping with the film's narrative focus on time-travel), in contrast to the spatial focus characteristic of big-budget science fiction films.

Moving from film to television, Ioana Literat considers how R. Kelly's cult series *Trapped in the Closet* (2005–present) re-appropriates the conventions of the soap opera and the music video to create a new genre, “hip-hopera”. Investigating the promotional strategies employed by Kelly, Literat views *Trapped in the Closet* as emblematic of fusion and crossover between media in broader contemporary popular culture. In turn, she argues, these new combinations demand greater awareness within scholarship of the role and potential of transmedial practices in the production and distribution of cultural texts. The issue concludes with a return to sound in Hollywood cinema, but from a novel perspective. Christopher Holliday's essay on the vocal performance of children in computer-animated films discusses the pleasures inherent in the meaningless “babbling” of the character Boo in Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). Holliday reveals that a movement away from adults-as-children to children-as-children was set in motion by computer-animated films, marking a pronounced shift in the practice of voicing. Drawing on Roland Barthes's notion of the grain of the voice, “Emotion Capture” proposes that these new practices celebrate childhood by foregrounding the untutored verbal and vocal qualities of a real child rather than those of the trained (adult) actor. For Holliday, taking pleasure in the materiality of the child's voice unmask the narrative illusion that the film otherwise works hard to sustain. It is a moment of rupture, when we become aware of the potential of film sound to reveal, and break out of, the apparatus to which it has been assigned. This special issue of *Alphaville* aims to be just one such moment, in which film sound, voice and music are singled out by the analysis in ways that both reveal their profound imbrication in the textual whole and shed light on the apparatus and its cultural, ideological and aesthetic workings.

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