

*The composer Max Steiner is generally credited with the invention of nondiegetic space as conceptually distinct from offscreen space through the development of close dramatic underscoring based on musical sync points and structural spotting. Discuss the three basic oppositions of image and sound that characterize the practice of classic Hollywood sound film: onscreen/offscreen, diegetic/nondiegetic, and foreground/background. Cite at least three examples of these dialectics from films you have studied. Include support or argue against this citation from James Buhler, that music “grants insight into what must otherwise remain unseen and unsaid: psychology, mood, motivation.” (from “Analytic and Interpretive Approaches to Film Music (II)”).*

Music in film shapes mood, motivation, and mental state of both the story world and of the viewer. In the last few minutes of the Great British Baking Show, the screen displays silent faces, waiting and pensive, dreading, yet eager to hear who will leave. The sour emotions elongate time. The background of the shots show the outdoor tent in a field with flowers, close to a sheep farm and adjacent to a pond with splashing water fowl. Not a single natural sound emanates from the surround sound as it has in previous scenes. Then, as pairs of different colored eyes swipe across the screen, a violin note descends onto the air – a steady halo note on D<sub>6</sub>, followed after a few long seconds by a second violin producing a fast tremolo two octaves lower. The offscreen, nondiegetic music hits the consumer with its intended foreground effect, causing an illusionary freeze frame. Does the still note prompt apnea? Does the fast tremolo induce hyperventilation? Does the contradiction double how much the viewer cares?

In the above scene, the absence of diegetic sound and the presence of nondiegetic sound creates additional unease but also spurs apathy thereby manipulating mental status. The music disengages a spectator’s feelings of impatience and lures them into the thrill of a moment. As the first violin begins, this promise of an emotional spike draws in the audience. These complicated sentiments rush through a person’s veins and nerves, successfully altering motivation. The show will not be turned off and a craving for the next show will be instilled. Without the music, would

the viewer have as much information? They may understand the expression of the shown contestants, but also on set, the judges and spokespersons feel a mix of emotion. The overly sterile sound palette represents the discomfort of having to rank people and exclude someone. Audience members of The Great British Baking Show fit in the entertainment realm of audience participant, different from voyeuristic movie bystander. Even in this arena, music impacts information given by the show and felt by the consumer.

Sometimes music can be used as a vehicle for expression. In *Too Many Girls*, the female lead sings “I Didn’t Know What Time it Was,” confessing her shortcomings and declaring a once reluctant affection to the leading man. With the rocks and flora of the Albuquerque desert surrounding them, what the lovers couldn’t say comes out in song accompanied by full orchestra. Before the song, the characters pined unhappily. During the song, the ambiguous tonality which switches between major and minor, the rhythmically fast accompaniment, and the slow melody of many long notes reflects the process of disclosing what was once private and protected. The song ends in major, justifying the hope represented in the upbeat instrumental parts.

Thirteen years later, the same song appeared in the film version of *Pal Joey*. Joey performs this song on stage with a microphone, accompanied by a band and pianist. The camera moves to the backstage girls peeking through a curtain chatting about Joey’s talent and about rumors of his bad reputation. In *Too Many Girls*, the singing does not fit the diegesis whereas it does in *Pal Joey*. However, the lyrics hold relevance in the first film, not the second. The manner in which Joey sings shows he doesn’t care about what he’s singing and that he has no one in mind to sing for.

In the first movie, even though no other action or dialogue competed with the song, the music served as background to romance. Romance ranks high in the all-inclusive entertainment

package because it taps into hopes, memories, and desires. It looms high in subconscious hijacking. The presence of music eases the audience in romantic moments, enabling a mystifying sense of privacy in a public broadcast of intimacy. A debated concept of nondiegetic music corresponds with whether the characters can hear the music.<sup>1</sup> The two characters in *Too Many Girls* hear each other sing, but they can't hear the instruments and without the singing, what would they be doing? The presence of music aids the suspension of disbelief in the unnatural act of turning speech into song. The film needs music to smooth over the awkwardness of baring one's heart. Otherwise the characters would be left in an awkward moment of unspoken feelings. In the second movie, the song lives in the narrative, takes place both onscreen and offscreen, and all the characters in view can hear the music. As the club owner judges Joey's performance, the music undertakes a foreground role. When the dance ladies begin chatting, the music volume drops to a background role. "I Didn't Know What Time it Was" had become an American jazz standard by the time of the filming of *Pal Joey*. The audience at that time would have had association with the song, making them feel a part of the movie world as it played. *Pal Joey* as a story, musical, and film, challenged the public with its conman antihero, a sugar mama, and its dark message of sordid love. Eliciting the audience's inclusion benefits the perception of the movie, a profitable strategy.

Two movies used the same song for different effects but how would two different orchestral pieces work for the same scene with similar effect? The fifth movement in Poulenc's *Gloria*, the "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei," begins with bassoons playing a quick, half-step lower neighbor on G, followed by a burst of horns on a G major triad with an added G#. Shortly after,

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<sup>1</sup> Randolph Jordan, "Forum 2: Discourses on Diegesis: Does Anybody Hear?," Offscreen, last modified September 2007, [http://offscreen.com/view/soundforum\\_2](http://offscreen.com/view/soundforum_2).

the piccolo plays a melody of successive minor thirds starting on Bb, while the bassoons play alternating eighth notes on E and F (the same notes as John Williams' *Jaws* death theme.) This opening paints an eerie mood, appropriate for a scene in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* when the audience first meets the royal vampire family in Volterra, Italy. The original score by Alexandre Desplat captures the sinister introduction in G minor. Both the original score and the *Gloria* utilize large chromatic intervals that cause visceral reactions such as stomach flops and vertigo. Gently spoken dialogue first opens the scene where the main male character explains to the main female character the history of an oil painting of four fancifully robed aristocrats on a golden balcony. The music creeps in softly, remaining background music as the camera zooms into the picture which morphs into a live scene. As the camera zooms into an imminent decapitation, the narration subsides and the music volume swells in tandem with a vampire pulling another vampire's head. The music competes with the sound effect of ripping, a necessary foreground device to pound the viewer with loud sound. The larger the impact, the larger the disgust. Gruesomeness, like romance, needs mind-altering music to retain an audience's suspension of disbelief. Gory theatrics without effective music turns into comedy. Upon viewing the same scene with either score, the Poulenc works better. The lush, Romantic style orchestration imparts an epic feeling better than Desplat's simpler scoring.

Returning to Buhler's stance that music "grants insight into what must otherwise remain unseen and unsaid: psychology, mood, motivation," an audience member receives more information about the story world, characters, and interplay of all entities through the powers of music. Broadening Buhler's statement, the viewer can also be brought into the story world and have their mental state, mood, and motivation manipulated by music. The viewer transforms from passive observer to active participant. Gorbman writes that music "encourages imaginary

identification with the film.”<sup>2</sup> Even though a viewer may feel involved within the movie, in essence they are subjects of the film’s all-inclusive sights and sounds. They are being acted upon. Music aids film by supplying information about the psychology, mood, and motivation within the story and by influencing the psychology, mood, and motivation of the viewer.

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<sup>2</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1987), 72.

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