Elsie Walker
*Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory.* Oxford University Press, 2015.
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and

Kathryn Kalinak, editor
*Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects*
224 pages; $26.95 paperback; $80.00 hardcover; $26.95 epub/pdf.

Cinema has always been considered a modern spectacle of vision. But, although film substance consists of both sound and images, it is a fact that the aural dimensions of this audiovisual medium have been regularly disregarded in academic and journalistic reviews. On the other side, there have also been certain works that deal with the so-called “film musicology,” which tend to employ extremely specialized music-centred examples, comparisons and terminology that are mainly accessible only to a small number of musicology experts. Today, scholars wonder if there is an alternative: to put it simply, how can we apply cultural theories to film music and sound in order to better appreciate and explain films?

Elsie Walker’s brand-new book *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* tries to answer these fundamental questions in a methodical way. It applies to film music and sound analysis five of the most common critical theories used in film studies, in particular genre studies, postcolonialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and queer theory. This monograph draws attention by means of a rigorous examination of films to the
capacity of both music and sound to reveal diverse filmic meanings, uncovering not only the “unheard melodies” (as earlier scholars of this field would put it) but also the “unseen images” of cinema. Currently serving as an Associate Professor of Film Studies at Salisbury University (Maryland), Elsie Walker has considerable experience in theoretical and educational approaches to film in three different countries: New Zealand, England and the USA. Through her published work, she has also contributed greatly to recent film and sound scholarship. *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* is the outcome of five years of research on how to attentively bringing together film and music/sound studies with critical conceptions of literature and culture. Practically, this multifaceted perspective yields a book that is adequately accessible to a great range of students, tutors and other audiences, whether expert or non-expert in this domain.

The book has an instantly identifiable structure. It is divided into five general parts, each of which is motivated by one of the main theories mentioned above. These parts consist of three individual chapters apiece: the first contains a transparent theoretical preview of the subject matter, whereas the others focus, respectively, on two case studies of film and music/sound analyses. There is also a comprehensive introduction in which the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee, music by Gustavo Santaolalla, operates as an opening case study, and a coda that sums up and, what is more, reassigns the book’s major outlines to a very recent production: *Gravity* (2013), directed by Alfonso Cuarón with music by Steven Price. The book also includes a glossary of terms, an index, as well as a list of films quoted and analyzed. The bibliography cited in the text is placed at the end of each part, thus framing almost autonomous sections of this engaging book.

The first part of *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* starts with Rick Altman’s input concerning joint sound and genre theories of film. After that, Walker continues with the analysis of two westerns, *The Searchers* (1956), directed by John Ford, music by Max Steiner and *Dead Man* (1995), directed by Jim Jarmusch, music by Neil Young, from the perspective of the semantic and the syntactic components of this particular genre. The first one is a mainstream film of an earlier period, the second a present-day independent creation. While these offer two totally different kinds of soundtracks, they make the author’s scholar analyses more productive.

The second part of the book is titled “Postcolonialism” and it begins with a brief prelude by Robert Stam and Louise Spence on colonialism, racism and representation. Based on the above mentioned theoretical perspective and trying to highlight the ways that the musics, sounds and voices of Australian Aboriginals have been handled by the cinema, the author carefully inspects two independent Australian films of the 00s: *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), directed by Phillip Noyce, music by Peter Gabriel and *Ten Canoes* (2006), directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr. This part also poses a number of critical questions about authenticity and representation concerning Gabriel’s world music score.
and the unsophisticated soundscape of *Ten Canoes*.

Laura Mulvey’s extensively quoted article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” introduces the next part (“Feminism”). This section addresses gender issues as they relate to acoustic aspects of films. Derived from Mulvey’s neo-Freudian psychoanalytic framework, where concepts like voyeurism, fetishism and phallocentrism intersect with film theory, the author questions the gendered mode not only of seeing films, which has been privileged in traditional analyses, but also of listening to their soundtrack in order either to legitimize or destabilize widely established cultural and political (in a broad sense) beliefs. Walker gives two examples: *To Have and Have Not* (1944), directed by Howard Hawks, music by William Lava and Franz Waxman, and *The Piano* (1993), directed by Jane Campion, music by Michael Nyman. It is unsurprising that as these are two films from completely different periods, their music differs: the one is a typical score of the classical Hollywood era and the other offers a postmodern minimal soundtrack. Walker brings to light hidden aspects of gender identities within their music/sound milieu.

In line with the previous part, the next section titled “Psychoanalysis” is based on Jacques Lacan’s three orders, specifically, the “imaginary,” the “symbolic” and the “real,” as explored through Todd McGowan’s “‘Looking for the Gaze’: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes” and implemented in the films *Bigger Than Life* (1956), directed by Nicholas Ray, music by David Raksin and *Shutter Island* (2010), directed by Martin Scorsese, which contains no original background score but a compilation of pre-composed material. At this point, Walker focuses especially on the subversive patterns that musically identify the films’ protagonists and present their subjectivities.

The final part (“Queer Theory”) involves the post-structuralist perspective of film studies theorist Judith Butler who, inspired by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, directs attention to the ambivalence of sexual identities, subverting the conventional binary schemes. The review of Butler’s work is followed by a close inspection of two representative films: *Rebecca* (1940), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, music by Franz Waxman, and *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), directed by Peter Jackson, music by Peter Dasent. Using queer theory, the author tries to defy heteronormative conformities and sets up a debate on how music/sound track strengthens our perception of the queerness of the films’ main characters.

*Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory* is a pioneering book in that it painstakingly synthesizes existing theoretical perspectives with issues of film music/sound theory. It offers plenty of case studies and musical examples from various films, both from the classical period of Hollywood cinema and from contemporary mainstream and alternative productions. It enlightens our perspective on the analysis of filmic soundtracks in a way that has been missing from this field of study for a long time.

There is also another volume released in 2015 that deals with films’ sonic facets: *Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects*, an anthology edited by the distinguished Professor Kathryn Kalinak from Rhode Island College. The book is part of the series “Behind the Silver Screen” launched
by Rutgers University Press that calls attention to various practices of filmmaking, including, among others, acting, cinematography, costume and makeup, directing, editing and special visual effects. Here, sound is also understood as a key aspect of a film and conventionally divided into three discrete components, namely human dialogue, music, and sound effects, either natural or studio-constructed.

The book offers a chronological account of the technical, economic and institutional procedures of sound in cinema, organized in six main chapters, each one dedicated to a major period of the phenomenon. The focus is on the Hollywood system of production but also on the transformations of audience reception through the years. In the introduction of the book, the editor briefly describes the involvement of sound in cinematic experience and gives an overview of all the chapters. The volume has an extended appendix that is comprised of two catalogues of the Academy Awards for Sound and Music and a glossary of terms. Since Kalinak has a great deal of experience in analyzing and writing about film music and sound, she creates a stimulating collection of articles written by numerous prominent film music and sound scholars.

The first chapter, “The Silent Screen, 1894-1927,” is written by James Wierzbicki and it touches on the so-called “silent cinema” period. This text offers the provocative suggestion that, actually, “silent films” have never been soundless. The chapter that follows (“Classical Hollywood, 1928-1946”), written by the editor of the volume, draws attention to the typical American studio system of the second quarter of the 20th century through a more straightforward lens, that of the studios’ personnel.

In the third chapter (“Postwar Hollywood, 1947-1967”) Nathan Platte re-examines an uncertain period in Hollywood’s artistic, productive and economic system. Moreover, he discusses the modifications in the apparatus, marketing and aesthetics of the films’ music/sound that differentiates the era from the prior one. The arrival of television marks the revision of established cinematic practices. This step leads on to the subsequent section of the book titled “The Auteur Renaissance, 1968-1980.” Jeff Smith, who authors this chapter, argues that both the technological and the stylistic developments of this epoch, such as the exploitation of the Nagra sound recorder, the genesis of the Dolby sound system and the use of high technology effects and ambient soundscapes, resulted in the emergence of what he describes as “sound auteurs,” such as Robert Altman, Walter Murch, Ben Burtt, Alan Splet and John Williams.

Jay Beck and Vanessa Theme Ament, the authors of the volume’s fifth chapter (“The New Hollywood, 1981-1999”), look at the last two decades of the 20th century innovations in film music and sound. They emphasize the films’ sound design and the specialization of sonic practices during the production and post-production of films, since audiences expect an enhanced acoustic architecture in cinema. Finally, in the last chapter (“The Modern Entertainment Marketplace, 2000-Present”), Mark Kerins points out the present-day embrace of digital processes in sound and music technologies that join new possibilities in visual projection (i.e., the 3-D format).
and affect the experience of modern cinema spectators.

Even though *Sound: Dialogue, Music, and Effects* focuses almost exclusively on the Hollywood system, both books reviewed here should be considered as major contributions to the developing discipline of film musicology and sound studies. The first book is closer to an anthropology of film music and sound, while the second is an excellent history of film music/sound practices and technologies. These two works would make ideal textbooks for relevant university courses but they will also appeal to film music/sound enthusiasts.

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