

Anahid Kassabian: *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*.

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Illustrations, bibliography, videography, index.

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Readers of this journal will likely snap to attention if they read, in the Prologue, that this book “calls for a major shift in the study of film music” (p. 2). Reactions of different sorts might be triggered, however, as soon as it becomes apparent that what Kassabian means by “film music” is in reality just a narrow slice of the field and that her thesis is fueled by a strong personal agenda. Although she indiscriminately uses the terms ‘film score,’ ‘film music,’ and ‘soundtrack’ and suggests that they all mean the same thing, it is clear from the start that the focus of her study is popular songs of the type that for the last several decades have figured prominently in Hollywood films. It is also clear that the study will be self-consciously interventionist. Regarding her decision to go against the grain of recent film studies, Kassabian writes:

Decades of political struggle by women and people of color have made possible films—*Mississippi Masala*, *Mi Familia/My Family*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Mi Vida Loca*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and *Malcolm X*—that would never have been made under the classical Hollywood studio system. These films have not only changed the narrative

landscape of mainstream moviemaking, but they have also significantly broadened its range of musical materials. I have chosen to work on contemporary Hollywood film because I find some versions of the return to historicism in film studies disturbing. . . . My focus on [compiled scores from] the 1980s and 1990s allows me to consider film music’s role in the changing pressures of identity formations such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (p. 4).

Kassabian wears her postcolonialist feminism on her sleeve, and her turgid prose is fraught with jargon. She is only persistent, however, not strident, in her subordination of traditional film scoring to songs that in one way or another call filmgoers’ attention to the situations within narratives of cultural Others. Throughout the book, Kassabian maintains that film music in general is “a gendered discourse” (p. 11) and that traditional modes of scoring represent not just “the only musical lingua franca in contemporary western industrialized societies” (p. 8) but also a hegemony that has long been associated with white males. Unless one is predisposed to it, such banner-waving after a while grows tiresome. Still,

there is something to be said for Kassabian’s main premise: that freshly composed film music in large part seeks to manipulate the responses of its audience while pre-existing material offers, relatively speaking, more room for individual interpretation.

So long as it is not construed as a strict formula that cries out for deconstruction, the polarity makes sense. But the labels Kassabian affixes to the polarity’s elements are vague, for Kassabian expounds here not as a musicologist but as a swimmer in the Critical Theory mainstream.¹ Her concern is not with music *per se* but with how music of various sorts functions within filmic contexts. In particular, she is concerned with the relationships that exist between the music (or, more often, the lyrics associated with the music) and members of the film’s audience. Composed film scores, she writes, “try to maintain fairly rigid control” over a linkage that for the most part is forged as the film unreels; such scores are typically

¹ Kassabian was an associate professor of communications and media studies at Fordham University and a participant in that school’s programs in both literary studies and women’s studies. She is now the James and Constance Alsop Chair of Music at the University of Liverpool.

“structured to draw perceivers into socially and historically unfamiliar positions,” and thus they condition what Kassabian calls “assimilating identifications” (p. 2). In contrast, compiled scores feature music with which most filmgoers have already entered into a relationship; filmgoers “bring external associations with the songs into their engagements with the film,” Kassabian writes, and thus compiled scores offer “affiliating identifications” (p. 3). Unfortunately, nowhere does the author define “assimilating” and “affiliating” (or “desire,” “agency,” and other buzzwords that sprinkle the book). For the uninitiated, the language at first might seem impenetrable, yet eventually—perhaps because the theme is repeated so often—one gets the gist of it.

Eventually, too—especially as Kassabian begins to explore the use of pre-existing music in particular films—one finds oneself nodding in agreement. Doubtless many readers will resist the idea that compilations and original scores are the yin and yang, respectively, of film music. I imagine that few would quibble, however, with Kassabian’s suggestions that in filmic contexts the functional differences between pre-existing and new music are great, or that the standard diegetic/nondiegetic dichotomy cannot accommodate music “that belong[s] to a third ‘in-between’ category” (p. 47),² or that the filmic use of pre-existing music—diegetic, nondiegetic, or otherwise—is

fertile ground for commentary. Writing in the vein of postmodern literary criticism, Kassabian often dazzles with her hermeneutic readings of the songs in such female-centered films as *Thelma and Louise*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Bagdad Cafe*, *Desert Hearts*, *Dangerous Minds*, *The Substitute*, and *Mississippi Masala*, and her treatments of the allegedly macho scores for *The Hunt for Red October* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* are at the very least entertaining. Near the end of her set of case studies she summarizes the essential difference between the two types of music-audience interactions:

Rather than assimilating perceivers into one particular subject position, . . . identifications [triggered by pre-existing music] make affiliations that do not require absorption of one subject into another position. Unlike assimilating identifications, affiliating identifications can accommodate axes of identity and the conditions of subjectivity they create. They can permit resistances and allow multiple and mobile identifications. . . . [The compiled score] is the condition of possibility for these affiliating identifications—it opens opportunities for perceivers and our histories that scores offering assimilating identifications work very hard to foreclose (p. 139).

By this time Kassabian has offered examples aplenty that prove her point, and the argument about identifications seems perfectly convincing.

Not so convincing, alas, is most of what Kassabian has to say about music. In her Prologue, she notes that she has “chosen to avoid the technical language of music studies wherever possible” (p. 9). This is not because she questions the language’s usefulness but because “it would oppose one of [her] main

purposes,” which is to release music from the bonds of its “expert discourse ideology” so that film scholars in general might deal with it “comfortably and willingly as a routine part of their work” (p. 10). Certainly this is a good intention, but one suspects that Kassabian eschews musical terminology largely because her understanding of music is benighted.³

Rather than tread lightly on the topic, Kassabian precedes her tantalizing case studies with a pair of knotty chapters titled “How Film Music Works” and “How Music Works in Film.” The most cogent sections, vis-à-vis traditional film scoring, are borrowed directly from the familiar theoretical writings of Claudia Gorbman and Kathryn Kalinak and from the not very well-known 1971 “how to” book by Earle Hagen. But these are balanced by a raft of sweeping generalizations that reveal a skewed perception not just of music as a whole but of how music is regarded by persons to whom it matters. Taking what seems to be a defiantly anti-academic stance, Kassabian suggests that “institutionalized music studies” today remain almost exclusively positivistic, that musical aesthetics are still based—as they were once upon a time for Hanslick and, later, for Adorno—on strict principles of formalism, that music critics throughout the twentieth century have been concerned far more with written scores than with aural reality, that musical semiotics is a field that has yet to be discovered, and that ethnomusicology is the only area within the larger discipline that deals with ways in which music might be somehow meaningful. It

2 For Kassabian, the “in-between” category consists mostly of newly composed, dramatically affective music that is presented in the guise of source music. But this category would also include pre-existing material that begins as source music and then transforms, with no significant change in the music itself, into underscore, e.g., the rock ‘n’ roll songs in *American Graffiti* and the Giordano aria in *Philadelphia*.

3 *Hearing Film* contains eleven musical examples, all of them apparently based not on scores but on aural experience, and all of them transcribed by someone other than Kassabian.

is hard to tell whether Kassabian truly believes all this or is simply setting up straw men that can be easily demolished by her feminist barrage. In any case, she reveals her narrow view of the situation early on when she claims that “no significant body of criticism actively includes analysis of film music” and that “not only has film music scholarship failed to ignite broad swaths of critical imagination, but the music itself has, for the most part, been bracketed from film scholarship altogether” (p. 5).

Despite the hackles that such pronouncements are likely to raise on their necks, scholars who do engage seriously with film music might do well to follow Kassabian’s lead at least to an extent. She writes that “the important textual, historical, and theoretical studies of Gorbman, Kalinak, [et al.] make it possible and fruitful now to consider other kinds of questions about film music, such as what film perceivers hear” (p. 37). What she means, of course, is that there is something to be

gained by considering *what film hearers perceive*, not just when they are exposed to music composed especially for a film but also when they confront pre-existing music whose associations possibly reflect on the film’s narrative.

Almost from the start, film music has encompassed more than just “assimilating” underscore. Audience identification with “The Ride of the Valkyries” in Breil’s accompaniment for the 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* must have been just as “affiliating” as when the same music is encountered today in screenings of Fellini’s 1963 *8½* or Coppola’s 1979 *Apocalypse Now*. Because the biographies and levels of engagement of filmgoers differ, only the individual filmgoer can describe the exact nature of a given affiliation. But it cannot be denied that certain bits of music, or the lyrics attached to them, can serve as potent signifiers in a rich sign system comprehensible by a great many filmgoers. Whether the example is a passage from a nineteenth-century German opera or the hook of a year-old country-

western song, such music is iconic precisely because it bears cultural baggage whose content is generally familiar and whose meaning is generally understood.

As Kassabian demonstrates in her best chapters, there is much that can be ‘read’ into the filmic use of pre-existing music. Clever filmmakers of course have known this for a long time, yet it seems that the subtle nuances of their musical appropriations often go ignored. Kassabian’s target audience seems to be academics who share her lit-crit approach to film, but certainly there is a message here for the larger community. In the long run, after her writing has been stripped of its all too obvious political agenda, Kassabian is simply suggesting that more attention be paid to *all* the music that occurs in film. Especially for film-music scholars who sometimes get wrapped up in sketches, short scores, and orchestrations, this seems to be good advice.

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