James Buhler, *Theories of the Soundtrack*

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Like proverbial showbiz stories of overnight success, the sudden rise of “sound studies” within academia is a development several decades in the making. The past fifteen years have seen the appearance of new journals, new scholarly interest groups, new professional organizations, and several new compendia of published research. Contributions to this field represent a wide range of different approaches drawn from a vast array of more established disciplines: linguistics, semiotics, psychology, musicology, narratology, and media studies. Its main areas of inquiry also run the gamut, displaying a concern with aesthetics, technology, and culture. The result of this intellectual ferment is an arena ever more difficult to navigate. Thankfully, Oxford University Press has published a new book that can help guide intrepid newcomers: James Buhler’s *Theories of the Soundtrack*, an ambitious survey of sound’s role within more than a century of media theory.

Buhler notes in his acknowledgments that *Theories of the Soundtrack* was inspired by the work of two film theorists: Dudley Andrew and Francesco Casetti.¹ Andrew’s and Casetti’s influence is palpable not only in the specific topics that Buhler covers, but also in the book’s overall design. Two chapters are dedicated to classical film theory, a framework that seeks to legitimate film as an art form by specifying the bases of its aesthetic potential. The remaining chapters

consider perspectives more broadly associated with contemporary film theory. Buhler begins with theories that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. He then turns his attention to several approaches that emerged as a response to this continental strain, including neoformalism, cognitivism, feminist film theory, post-colonial theory, and queer studies.

The sheer breadth of Buhler’s compass indicates the richness of film music and sound studies in its current constellation. Yet it also illustrates the immense challenge that Buhler has set himself. In seeking to summarize such a large swath of academic literature, Buhler attempts to place these theoretical perspectives in dialogue with one another, revealing the gaps, limitations, and contradictions evident in the work of particular scholars.

Buhler’s introduction previews the structure of the book and highlights three concepts that thread through the various chapters that follow. The first premise involves the hybridity of sound film. Here Buhler lays down a marker that indicates he will problematize or reject certain theoretical formulations of the sound film based on considerations of medium specificity. To put it another way, if sound film is inherently a hybrid form, then theories that define film’s aesthetic potentials based on their medium-specific properties are inevitably doomed to failure insofar as they cannot adequately account for cinema’s multimedial or intermedial qualities. The second premise is related to the first in underlining sound film’s status as an audiovisual medium. This idea will seem self-evident to modern viewers.

¹ See Dudley Andrew’s *The Major Film Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) and *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945–1999* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

But it is important to remember that cinema's audiovisuality took a quite different form prior to the innovation of synchronized recorded sound. Many classical film theorists initially conceived of cinema as a photographic medium, privileging its visual dimensions over that of its soundtrack. By emphasizing sound film as an audiovisual medium, Buhler seeks to challenge these assumptions by treating cinema as a *combinatoire* of expression, to borrow Claudia Gorbman's phrase, rather than as communicative form that contains separate channels of information.² Lastly, Buhler also cites K.J. Donnelly's notion of "occult aesthetics" and its attendant emphasis on mimetic synchronization as a normative aspect of classical cinema's representational strategies. This, too, proves to be a through line in Buhler's account as some theorists rejected such techniques as redundant, and therefore uninformative, while others sought ways of overcoming or refining such aesthetic tendencies.

Indeed, the apparent problem posed by mimetic synchronization proved to be a vital question for theorists writing during the transition to synchronized recorded sound. As Buhler shows in his analysis of this period, early film theorists struggled to identify a proper role for the soundtrack in their accounts of the "talking film." Theorists from the Soviet montage school, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, argued that sound film best fulfilled its aesthetic potential by using sound as a counterpoint to the image. Others, however, objected to the dominance of dialogue on most soundtracks as being duplicative and overly theatrical.

Without question, the most important exponent of this position is Rudolf Arnheim, whose book *Film as Art* offers a formidable summation of silent film aesthetics. Buhler provides an excellent overview of Arnheim's key premises, such as his emphasis on asynchronism and his resistance to simple mimesis. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Buhler focuses most of his attention on Arnheim's writing in the early 1930s, ignoring his more comprehensive account of the talking film in "The New Laocoön," first published in 1938. In that essay, Arnheim compares the talking film to other widely accepted artistic composites, such as opera, ballet, and theater. Unlike cinema, these audiovisual media found proper ways to balance their audio and visual components by placing them in strict hierarchies and by emphasizing principles of parallelism wherein each part of the whole

communicates in a completely autonomous manner. Buhler's omission proves important insofar as it complicates his conclusion that Arnheim's perspective "requires a homogeneous material, a single medium" (p. 51). Buhler's characterization of Arnheim undoubtedly rings true. Yet it also neglects certain nuances of Arnheim's position by failing to tease out the distinction between artistic composites and truly hybrid media.

Buhler generally fares better in his précis of theories related to classical sound film. Notably, the term "classical" here refers not to music but to films produced within the classical Hollywood studio system between 1930 and 1960. The theorists surveyed by Buhler are mostly practitioners, like composer Aaron Copland and documentary filmmaker Raymond Spottiswoode. On the whole, these individuals are less interested in furnishing an internally consistent set of aesthetic principles and more concerned with providing practical advice about particular norms for both sound design and musical accompaniment.

Buhler's analysis of this body of work nicely captures the range of opinion regarding the functions and purpose of the film soundtrack. Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno famously criticized the style and technique of most Hollywood scores in their pioneering study *Composing for the Films* (1947). Many others are far more accepting of these techniques in highlighting the ways film music can suggest time and place, convey characters' interior states, and support narrative continuity in a formal system that often manipulates the order and duration of story events. As David Bordwell observed, the classical Hollywood film is "an excessively obvious cinema."³ To that end, the semantic redundancy that concerned so many theorists during the transition to synchronized recorded sound became a hallmark of the style, an attribute widely accepted in the name of communicative efficacy.

After covering the basic functions and principles of classical sound film technique, Buhler moves on to the work of three theorists who treat sound within a framework that mixes phenomenology with semiotics: Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, and Gilles Deleuze. At first blush, their inclusion in this volume might seem a bit puzzling. They are all giants in the field of film theory, to be sure. Yet they also proffer fairly scant observations on the specific role of sound in cinema.

² Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 16.

³ See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.

Metz's reputation as a theorist of the soundtrack rests mostly on a fairly modest essay he published on the concept of "aural objects."⁴ In Deleuze's case, comments on the soundtrack are scattered throughout his ambitious two-volume study of different image types.⁵ Since Deleuze does not develop a theory of the soundtrack *per se*, Buhler's section on him mostly aims to extend the philosopher's Bergsonian ontology and Peircean semiotics to a consideration of common types of film sound devices. In doing so, Buhler tries to find points of correspondence between certain sound techniques and their equivalents in Deleuze's basic taxonomy of movement-images.

Buhler's efforts to tease out these implications in Deleuze's theory furnish the most original insights in *Theories of the Soundtrack* even as they sometimes beg more questions than they answer. Anyone who knows Deleuze's work knows that there are six movement-image categories (the perception-image, the impulse-image, the affection-image, etc.). Yet each category also yields three specific types that correspond with Peircean concepts of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Thus, there are ultimately eighteen different movement-image types. Buhler only finds correlates to about half of them. For example, his emphasis on point-of-audition sound as an aspect of the perception-image seems right. Yet one wonders what the sonic equivalent would be for the rheume or gramme, expressions of liquid and gaseous modalities markedly different from normal human perception.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine neoformalist theories of the soundtrack and narratological approaches, respectively. Like semiotics, neoformalism offers a particular model for analyzing the soundtrack. Yet, rather than emphasizing codes and syntax, neoformalism highlights the specific functions and motivations of film sound techniques and devices. Buhler identifies Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell as the chief exponents of neoformalism within film studies. Yet he also adeptly illustrates how neoformalist principles inform the work of a quite divergent range of scholars, such as Noël Carroll, Kathryn Kalinak, Nicholas Cook, and Annabel Cohen. In contrast, the chapter on narratology not only underlines the important contributions that literary theorist Gérard Genette has made to the study of film sound, but also surveys several different perspectives

on music's relation to quite distinct narrative registers, including the notoriously fuzzy distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound. Here Buhler considers the work of Robynn Stilwell and Ben Winters, who have problematized and/or challenged the diegetic–nondiegetic split, arguing that the concepts lack the flexibility to understand the all-too-frequent instances in which the boundary is either evaded or blurred. These sections seem to most fully realize Buhler's ambition to place scholars in conversation with one another. His framing and commentary on the various perspectives presented adroitly illustrates both the commonalities among these theories and their points of divergence.

Identity politics and ideology are topics explored in the next two chapters. This aspect of sound studies is a natural offshoot of film scholarship, where the critical analysis of representations of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexual orientation has been a major area of research for the past four decades. As Buhler observes, musical topics are a key vector in the way these axes of difference are articulated. Their usage can be explained by virtue of their communicative efficiency. Yet such shorthand is often recruited in the construction of an Otherness that positions characters outside the structures of white, patriarchal heteronormativity. Chapter 7 closes with brief analyses of gender and queer representations in *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958) and *The Hours* (2002), ably reinforcing why the stakes of such critical theory are so important.

Chapter 8 examines the role the soundtrack plays in the construction and emplacement of the cinematic Subject. Here, again, the soundtrack theories discussed by Buhler are profoundly indebted to a strand of psychoanalytic and Marxist film criticism that emerged in the early 1970s. More importantly, though, this section of the book also explicates the causal mechanisms that support ideological interpellation by highlighting their roots within the primordial infantile fantasies that serve as a locus of cinematic pleasure.

The final chapter of *Theories of the Soundtrack* considers the impact of digital media on our understanding of music and sound design. As Buhler notes, this shift in representational technologies has significant ontological implications insofar as it problematizes theories that are grounded in the indexicality of photographic and phonographic media. The expansion of digital formats both in production and exhibition has greater import for the apprehension of film images insofar as the folk belief that "seeing

4 Christian Metz, "Aural Objects," trans. Georgia Gurrieri, *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 24–32.

5 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

is believing” has endowed the visual dimension of cinema with an apparent truth value. The same cannot be said of the soundtrack. Aside from a brief period during the transition to synchronized recorded sound, both silent and sound cinema exhibit what Rick Altman describes as a “ventriloquist” effect. During the silent era, live musical accompaniment and sound effects were occasionally used to represent acoustic phenomena that issued from the fictional spaces depicted onscreen. In classical sound cinema, the “ventriloquist effect” was even more pronounced as library sound effects, Foley work, and dialogue looping were used to augment or replace sounds recorded during production. If anything, the digital soundtrack has opened up even greater possibilities for acoustic “worldbuilding,” enabling audio technology to play an even greater role in the creation of cinematic spectacle. As Buhler rather pointedly observes, techniques and workflows once thought to be the purview of studio animation units are increasingly the norm for live-action filmmaking.

As a snapshot of the field, what Buhler accomplishes in *Theories of the Soundtrack* is genuinely impressive. The breadth of topics covered is truly breathtaking. The critical acuity Buhler displays in his evaluation of particular theorists’ work is also remarkable. Although one can certainly imagine other ways to approach and organize this material, one should not gainsay Buhler’s achievement here insofar as the book mostly succeeds in what it sets out to do. I say “mostly” because the scope of Buhler’s ambition would seem to demand a book even larger than the one he has produced. After all, Dudley Andrew’s survey of major film theories was divided into two separate volumes. The same is true of Noël Carroll’s pioneering studies of classical and contemporary film theory, which were also conceived as discrete tomes.⁶ Moreover, because all of these books were written in the 1970s and 1980s, Buhler has the added challenge of covering approximately thirty years of more recent theoretical work. I’ve referenced the books by Andrew and Carroll in order to set the scale of Buhler’s project into even bolder relief. Writing a brief summary and critique of any book or journal essay is a daunting prospect in and of itself. Repeating that process for several dozen other canonical works doesn’t make it any easier, especially if one’s aim is to take the individual parts and synthesize them into a new

whole. Not surprisingly, Buhler’s treatment of specific theorists sometimes seems a bit uneven.

For some readers, perhaps a more vexing issue is the relative dearth of music theorists and musicologists cited by Buhler. Although Buhler mentions a handful of music scholars in passing, such as Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Lawrence Kramer, Susan McClary, Fred Lerdahl, and Ray Jackendoff, other titanic figures are neglected entirely. (I’m thinking here of people like Leonard Meyer, Carl Dahlhaus, Eugene Narmour, Robert Gjerdingen, and Joseph Kerman.) Personally, I’m not particularly troubled by Buhler’s overall emphasis on film theory. For one thing, he announces this in his introduction in his citation of Dudley Andrew and Francesco Casetti as specific role models. For another, such emphasis seems appropriate to the extent that Buhler considers the whole soundtrack—that is, dialogue, music, and effects—rather than theories of film music *per se*. Still, one could imagine an alternative history of film music theory that would track more closely with changes wrought by developments in music studies. In such an account, recent film music scholarship by Annette Davison, Scott D. Murphy, Peter Franklin, David Cooper, Frank Lehman, Joan Titus, and William Rosar would loom much larger than it does here.

If all of this sounds a bit grumbly, it shouldn’t. Buhler’s appraisal of the field is both thorough and forward-thinking. Moreover, his commentary on specific theoretical positions is always clear, well reasoned, and provocative, even if it might brook some disagreements among the scholars profiled herein. In short, although Buhler has set himself an almost impossible task in *Theories of the Soundtrack*, the very fact that he hits his mark as often as he does makes his accomplishment in the book all the more noteworthy. *Theories of the Soundtrack* offers a little something for everyone from novices to seasoned academics. For anyone interested in sound studies, the book is an essential addition to your library.

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⁶ See Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems in Classical Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); and *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).