Film, Music, and the Narrational Extra Dimension

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ABSTRACT

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Film, Music, and the Narrational Extra Dimension

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This thesis addresses the role of so called nondiegetic film music, also known as background or score music, as it pertains to the overall structure of processes involved in cinematic presentation. Some of the questions that are normally asked here are: Where is this music supposed to be coming from? Who is responsible for it? What is it really doing? In addressing this common filmic feature we will clear up several foundational concepts in film, provide a rough categorization of film music, critique Jerrold Levinson’s recent attempt to answer the above questions, and ultimately arrive at a consideration of nondiegetic film music as a kind of narrational extra dimension. We will ultimately reject the view that music is instrumental in building narrative facts, in favor of one that holds music to be significant to the very processes of film narration, affecting how a film is presented.
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CHAPTER 1: FILM FUNDAMENTALS

Introduction

The main issue I wish to address is the relationship that so called “nondiegetic” film music, i.e. music that is heard by audiences but not by characters in the film, bears to the overall narrative logic in a film. One reasonable way of framing this inquiry is as an analysis of music’s function in film, specifically from the perspective of narrative processes. In other words, by examining the presentational processes of fiction film, along with music and narration more generally, I hope to place this particular kind of film music in the larger scheme of things, and highlight its cinematic significance.

This kind of inquiry is important to expanding our understanding of what goes on “behind the scenes” during the viewing of a film, and will ultimately allow for more accurate evaluation of filmic works. Unfortunately, most previous study of film music has taken this kind of theoretical placement for granted, focusing on the practical effects of film’s employment of music, while most work on film narration has neglected to consider music as an important factor. Perhaps the most important attempt to address the above issue was undertaken by Jerrold Levinson in his recent work “Film Music and Narrative Agency”; however, I would like to show that this approach ultimately gets some things wrong and try to provide a better framework for our understanding of nondiegetic film music.

Our approach will be based on two foundations, one in film narrative and the other in film music. In the first chapter, we will begin by establishing a clear picture of what film narratives are generally taken to be, what they consist of, and how they are conveyed or presented to audiences. This will be important to get out of the way early so
that we can later speak unequivocally about the many concepts in this terrain, i.e. story, content, presentation, narrative, narration, narrators, etc. In the second chapter, we will build up a rough taxonomy of film music and acquire some more terminology to better reference the specific kinds of music we will be focusing on. We will also consider preliminary options for linking film music and film narrative in order to set the stage for our later theorizing, thus completing our two-part foundation.

In the third chapter, we consider Levinson’s attempt to characterize film music, and see where some problems lay. Building off the spirit of Levinson’s inquiry, we then construct our own framework, relying on previously established concepts and conclusions from chapters one and two, and ultimately end up with a picture of film music highlighting both the importance of music use in filmic presentation and the means by which this role is executed. I argue for the consideration of nondiegetic film music as an extra narrational dimension, holding that nondiegetic film music often plays a much more central role in film presentation than many other theories allow. That is, this kind of music in a film can be characterized as a part of the narration, but not the narrative, in the same sense that a verbal narrator’s vocal patterns and word stresses may be considered part of the particular telling, but not part of the story itself. Significant instances of nondiegetic music should be seen as a kind of narrational inflection, guiding the spectator’s experience of the audio-visual story presented by the film, but importantly without actually adding additional story content.

Finally, in the last chapter, we look at a variety of examples illustrating this thesis, covering a wide range of cinematic genres and periods. We consider a few significant consequences of our theory, and explain why this particular approach proves to be
advantageous. Ultimately, this framework will provide new ways of considering film music, film narration, the role of cinematic narrators, and will help to ground the work of other theorists regarding significant uses of music on the silver screen.

Narratives

We should begin by getting clear on what makes a story a story. Probably most of us have some sort of intuition associated with deeming certain sets of statements to be narrative or story-telling while other sets are not. But examples in this area are numerous, and before we continue, a terminological note needs to be made. It should be noticed that “story” oftentimes is used interchangeably with “narrative.” “A narrative” functions differently from the adjectival use of “narrative,” and it is the subject form of narrative that is sometimes replaced with “story.” Thus we might say that a narrative or story features such and such a character. Separately, we might also say that a character performs an important narrative function, by which we mean some function importantly related to the narrative or story. Similarly we might mention narrative events, as in events which take place within a narrative or story, but we do not mean to imply that any of those events are in themselves narratives or stories (though that might coincidentally be the case). Finally, we sometimes refer to “narrative” as a sort of proper noun or in a class-like way, just as we might say “America loves pizza,” or “The Polar Bear is endangered.” Thus, we might explore the properties of narrative in general, such as being “temporal” or “representational,” meaning them to apply broadly to the class of things whose tokens we would call narratives.¹

¹ In case the analogy remains unclear, when we say “America loves pizza,” we do not mean to imply that America is itself a thing that loves pizza. Rather, we mean to extend the predicate “loves pizza” to the class of people denoted by the proper noun “America.” Similarly, when we say “The Polar Bear is
The important takeaway message here is that, roughly speaking, noun forms of the word “narrative” (a narrative, the narrative, narratives, etc) can be considered as functionally equivalent to “story,” while adjectival forms (narrative, narrational, etc) must be kept separate. Care must be taken to avoid confusion when exploring the literature surrounding narrative as many writers do not explicitly distinguish the different senses involved with their usages, and this should be borne in mind throughout what follows. For the sake of clarity, we will refer to narrative only as narrative, reserving the use of story for other purposes which will become clear shortly.

There is one other interpretive note that bears mentioning at the outset. It is sometimes presupposed that narrative simply describes those states of affairs where there is some sort of easily recognizable narration going on, or more plainly, the presence of a narrator telling the narrative. The issue with a preconception like this is that the seemingly straightforward relationship between narrator and narrative turns out to be much more troubled than one might initially suppose. That is, though we might be willing to admit that any state of affairs which boasts narration is a case of narrative, it is far from clear that every supposed case of narrative must include some kind of narration, obvious or otherwise. This relation will also be explored further in what follows.

For starters, narratives are pretty clearly representational. They are abstractions or representations of certain events and not the actual events themselves. When we see John walk to the store and buy a soda, this is not a narrative. However, the recounting, recollection, or consideration of those events could constitute a narrative. The endangered,” we usually do not mean to pick out some particular bear, but rather refer to the entire class of animals denoted by the proper noun “Polar Bear.” In this way, we sometimes talk about and ascribe properties to classes of things, and the point here is merely that we sometime use the term “narrative” in this same way, as when we say things like “narrative is more entertaining than documentary.”
fundamentals of representation are a disputed area in aesthetics, but roughly speaking $A$ represents or is a representation of $B$ if $A$ purposefully or intentionally exhibits or denotes a sufficient set of properties belonging to $B$, such that $A$ is taken to conform to or stand for $B$. Purpose or intention of some kind is important to the concept since mere similarity between two objects is not enough to say that one represents the other. A “sufficient” set of properties is admittedly a loose notion, but the idea is that a certain amount of similarity between our two objects must be recognizable to a given perceiver.

Now, narratives need not be shared with anyone in order to be classified as such. An untold story is just as much of a story as one which is shouted to the masses. What is important to the essence of a narrative is that it represents in some way, publicly or privately, some set of events. Now, of course, such a requirement is intentionally open ended, and we need not place further restrictions upon whether such representation is direct, implied, diegetic, mimetic, etc.

So, it would appear that representation provides one basic criterion for our consideration of narrative, \(^2\) however, it is not the only piece of the puzzle we shall need to acquire. This second basic criterion may prove to be somewhat more difficult to capture. Let us imagine, for example, a few beautifully rendered still life paintings of various subjects. Though we will certainly want to admit that these works can be representational, it remains difficult to see readily how any one or even the set of images is narrative. The reason, it would seem, is because each painting merely represents some subject. To take another example, we might think of a series of images, beginning with a

\(^2\) It is worth mentioning that David Bordwell actually picks out (aside from representation) two additional ways to fundamentally construe narrative, namely as a process and structurally. Though he himself prefers to treat narration as a process, Bordwell goes on to note that “in practice, the three approaches often crisscross” (Bordwell xi).
lonely looking boy, followed by the same boy chasing after a dog, and finishing with the boy and dog reunited in happiness. In this case, it is easier (though far from indisputable) to see how one might construe this set of images as a narrative.

The crucial difference between these two thought experiments seems to lie in the perceived relations between individual representations. But, importantly, neither of these sets of images explicitly creates the relevant relations between representations. That is something that a perceiver must do. As it happens, the second case makes it easier for us to do just that; it takes less work on our part to construct the relevant relations because the initial representations are themselves more conducive to narrative construction. But if this is the case, then we need to look further into what these “relevant relations” are and how they are usually constructed.

To do this, we will need to break down narrative into its basic components. For Bordwell, there are three, namely fabula, syuzhet, and style, derived from Russian Formalist thought. Bordwell constructs a fairly convincing framework, but rather than going through all the considerable details of that account, we will attempt to simplify matters by drawing up our own, admittedly indebted, analog constituted by story and style.

First, the constructed series of events that lives in the mind when we are presented with narrative events is what I will call the story. What is known as the “fabula” for Bordwell, the story is neither a physical object, nor can it be captured and stored in any physical media. It is an “imaginary construct,” which is created by viewers “through assumptions and inferences” (Bordwell 49).
According to a standard constructivist account of story comprehension, these inferences and assumptions arise through “organized clusters of knowledge [which] guide our hypothesis making” or what Bordwell calls *schemata* (31). Essentially, during the apprehension of a narrative, a perceiver is making his best guesses about the story environment, the objects in it, and what is going on, based upon his own “repertoire of schemata” (Bordwell 31). These “hypotheses” range in complexity and might include things like “there is gravity” or “that is a barn” or “so and so seems to be the villain.” As the story progresses, these postulations are confirmed or disconfirmed by information we continue to receive. So perhaps we find out that the protagonist is really on an advanced space station with artificial gravity, or that the person we suspected really was the murderer. In either case, viewers will be continually changing or reinterpreting their understanding of what they perceive. As Bordwell notes, “[l]ike all inferences, perceptual experience tends to be a little risky, capable of being challenged by fresh environmental situations and new schemata” (31). In this way, even in everyday life we build up available schemata to guide our inferential processes, and this fundamental perceptual capability is one that film narrative regularly exploits.

The second basic component in our picture is *style*. This element accounts for more than what we might usually label “noir” or “gothic,” in reference to certain stylistic features. Style, especially for Bordwell, is an entire system of its own, encompassing various conventions and techniques (some specific to certain mediums). This system includes at the least “mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound,” but presumably there are many other aspects potentially at play here (Bordwell 50). The important thing to note is that style captures the particulars of narrative transmission. We
can easily imagine the same story being presented with different styles. Whether we are thinking about the kinds of shots being used, the general ordering of the story, or other idiosyncratic elements employed to convey the story, these kinds of things belong to narrative style.

There is one further consideration which needs addressing here, given the present framework. What do we mean when we do say that a film is stylistically “film noir” or a “crime drama”? In other words, is there a place for film style, as opposed to narrative style? The answer is yes, but it is important to note some crucial differences between these concepts. Often the idea of film style is tied up with genre, and the driving idea is that certain features are being exhibited which we can single out for categorization purposes. Thus, crime dramas usually involve crimes and the working toward justice, while fantasies often involve fantastical creature or locations, and romances typically feature, as you might guess, romance. Importantly though, this kind of style is usually external to the process of constructing the narrative. It is a classificatory kind of style, or a sort of post facto style. Certainly aspects of narrative style may come into consideration in thinking about overall film style; however, whereas elements of narrative style are employed directly in the conveyance of narrative, film style tends to be a classification that is imposed upon the film as a whole after the fact. For instance, the presentation of a film in reverse chronological order is a kind of narrative style, and might well be instrumental in the building of suspense as the narrative progresses, but our stylistic classification of such a film as a crime drama is usually based on broader considerations and comparisons that occur outside of the film’s narrative progression.
What we will call the film’s narrative, then, is simply *story* in conjunction with narrative *style*. So during a film, it is these components which describe our process of apprehending the narrative. Through stylistic structuring, a story is presented and apprehended by viewers. The process involves assumptions and inferences, or schemata, since the story is never *materially* present in the film.

Importantly, when talking about the “film’s narrative,” we should be careful to note that the narrative itself is also not some material thing contained within the film. Being that a narrative has story as one component, the narrative itself should be considered an abstract object. All that a film literally contains is AV content, so by saying the “film’s narrative” we actually mean to reference some *standard* narrative which is causally dependent upon viewing the film. To elaborate, since narrative construction is based on inferences and assumptions by the viewer, each film viewer will construct a slightly different individualized narrative from a given film. However, this construction is subject to some constraint because the narrative is also dependent upon stylistic choices. Thus, we might say that the range of narratives constructed by viewers is constrained by a given film’s AV content, so that a change in that AV content will ultimately affect the range of constructible narratives. In other words, there is arguably a limited range of narratives to be constructed from any given film, but we tend to talk about a singular standard narrative which could be reasonably constructed by an average viewer. This standard narrative is significant, but not because it is actually present in the film in some sense.³

³ This view of film narrative goes a long way toward explaining differences in understanding amongst film audiences. Probably most everyone has experienced an argument with a fellow viewer about what is “actually” going on in the film. Now it is important to note that simply because most prevalent Hollywood
It is important to notice at this juncture that our basic narrative criteria of representation and relevant relation are largely medium unspecific. Aside from some aspects of style, being representational and having a general process for building narrative relations are applicable to many different art forms. This is likely where many of the difficulties arise in deciding exactly what can count as narrative and what does not. For instance, disagreements grounded in whether paintings or music are representational can eventually lead to conceptual confusions about their potential status as narrative. It will not be possible herein to dispel many of these issues, and such a task would likely lead us astray. Rather, we will be focusing on film music in particular, and will do our best to clearly work out its relation to the above picture of film narrative.

Content

There remains a further point to be made about a film’s content. We have already been discussing content loosely, but it has not been explored in detail. We now return to idea of content a bit more thoroughly and provide some reasons for holding the view espoused herein.

At first blush, the question of what a film’s content is seems to have an easy answer. It is simply that which is “in the film.” However, it is perhaps equally easy to see how this kind of response quickly leads to problems when pressed. For one, should we include things like the title sequence or end credits? And more central to our concerns, what about music played during the film? Since, as we have already noted, a films leave very little to interpretation and that subsequently there is very little argument over the standard narrative of the film, this does not mean that there really is a narrative within the film somewhere. Films can obviously boast more or less ambiguity in their presentation, and strong consensus due to little ambiguity is simply a testament both to how consistent the film industry is in its use of stylistic cues and to how cognitively uniform film viewers are when it comes to interpreting those standard filmic conventions.
narrative is partially constructed by the viewer, should we include those constructed elements in the narrative content? In the extreme, should a Marxist reading of *The Wizard of Oz* be part of the narrative content? At a more mundane level, what about the innumerable examples in film where the killer’s face is obscured, or we find out that our previous knowledge about the film’s state of affairs was possibly mistaken? Ambiguities like these are presented such that there is no single clear inference to be made by a viewer. Do we then include all possible inferences as content? Or only those which tend to be standardly inferred?

There is an oft referenced distinction which is intimately related to these concerns about content. That which is referred to as “explicit” in the film is sometimes pointed to as the true content, as opposed to any “implicit” inferences which we might draw based on explicit content. We need to think, however, about what exactly it means to be “explicit” in a film. I will attempt to motivate the difficulty surrounding this concept with a particularly interesting example.

In *The Book of Eli*, Denzel Washington plays the role of Eli, a loner traveling through the post-apocalyptic United States. Throughout the film, Eli encounters many challenges which he must face and overcome, such as finding food, navigating rough terrain, defending himself from scavengers, and evading an organized group of thugs out to steal the book he is carrying. In true action film style, Eli accomplishes these feats with power and grace, making his tasks look quite trivial and easy. Then, near the very end of the film, we are given a shocking bit of information: Eli has been blind for the entire course of the film. At this point, the film does not provide us with convenient *Sixth Sense* or *Fight Club* styled flashbacks to help retroactively reveal the twist, and a
common initial reaction is one of disbelief. How is it possible that Eli so efficiently navigated stairs, doors, and terrain? How could he have fought against multiple attackers so well and come out unscathed? How is he able to effectively shoot animals from a distance for food? We are left to take it on faith (a running theme in the film) that this is possible, and the film ends without much more revelation.

So the main question here is this: is Eli’s blindness explicit in this film? After it is revealed near the end perhaps, but what about during the majority of the film where by all outward appearances we assume Eli possesses normal sight? Is it perhaps implicit that Eli is blind? Or is it only implicit that Eli is sighted, and this implicit assumption gets overturned explicitly in the end?

Now, in addition to this difficulty, a peculiar thing happens upon re-watching the film. The second time around, having the prior knowledge of Eli’s blindness, an attentive observer will begin to notice very subtle details carefully placed in every scene which hint at his condition. He frequently holds his hands in front of him when approaching doors, and he taps the next step of stairs with his toe before stepping up. In the fight scenes, he only responds to an attacker after they have fired a shot or made a conspicuous noise. The consistency and care with which these now quite obvious cues are placed is remarkable. One is left wondering how it was missed in the first place. So let us ask once again: is Eli’s blindness explicit in this film? Well upon a second viewing we would seem to have stronger evidence for this conclusion. But why do we miss it the first time around? If it were really explicit, shouldn’t we have picked up on it?

The power of this case is in its ability to blur the seemingly clear line between the explicit and implicit, and it is just one example of many. I mean to maintain that this
distinction is actually very poorly supported, and that we would do better to think about
narrative cues as being more or less clear, or more or less prominent. As we know from
previous discussion, the construction of a narrative is partly an individualized process,
and as we can see from the above example, some bits of narrative information may be
missed by some or all audience members. Given this, what ought we call “explicit”?

Berys Gaut says at one point, “[c]omparatively little of a fictional world is made
explicit, and we are required to imagine many other states of affairs to interpret correctly
what is explicitly fictional,” but we should be careful not to take these categories as
definitely as Gaut seems to be treating them (245). Elsewhere Gaut says, “[v]ery many
features of fictional worlds are left implicit – we are not usually told that characters have
blood in their veins, that they are not robots masquerading as humans, and so on” (245).
Although it is true that there are very many things which we may not quibble about at all
when using “explicit/implicit” terminology, even in these supposedly uncontroversial
cases, there is still room for debate. Suppose we see an actor get shot and bleed. Does
this mean we have explicitly confirmed our implicit assumption (i) that the characters
have blood in their veins? Or only for this individual character? Does seeing many
characters bleed, without any references to robotics or science fiction provide some
explicit reason to believe (i)? In *Bladerunner* (1982), where we find out early on that we
are sometimes dealing with robots masquerading as humans, do we still implicitly hold
(i) in some sense for the rest of the population? These sorts of questions and examples
abound.

The good news is that we do not need to clearly establish explicit and implicit
categories for narrative information in order to understand what is going on in the story.
As we have already seen, much of the work we are doing in watching a film draws from schemata that have been developed in everyday life, and we are already used to dealing with “implicit” assumptions in navigating our “explicit” everyday world. The kind of information processing that happens during a film is not that radically different from our normal perception of events, despite certain accepted incongruities. So at the very least rather than trying to strictly enforce artificial categories like “explicit” or “implicit,” we ought to remain flexible in their application.

Although it may be tempting to include matters of viewer inference or appeals to explicit representation in discussions about content, this kind of stance ultimately leads down a blind alley. There is simply no way to arrive at clear and uncontroversial criteria allowing for this sort of treatment of content. A better solution, I think, is to treat matters like this as a kind of leveled system.

At the most basic level, we have content. This is, as mentioned previously, simply all the relevant audio-visual material in question. If we are talking about film content as a whole, then this will include the various pre- and post-feature images and sounds usually associated with modern films (titles, credits, etc). If we restrict ourselves only to presented narrative content, then we include only those images and sounds directly associated with the narrative itself (the film “story”). At this level, we do not include film music, or any kind of viewer activity, regardless of whether it is what we usually call interpretation, or whether it is just basic recognition of objects. This is the level of raw AV data, and this is what we will be referring to herein as “content.”

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4 Such as the artificial presence of editing, music, or voiceover dialogue. But the point in question is not whether the experience of a movie parallels the experience of life, but rather that the processes of perception which enable the understanding of a film are similar to the same perceptual processes which occur in everyday life.
At the next level are the processes which involve Bordwell’s schemata. That is, this is the level of basic recognition of objects and actions in the film’s content. When we see and recognize Denzel Washington as the protagonist in *John Q* (2002), we are performing mental or cognitive operations on perceived sights and sounds which come from the film content. We might call this the framing level, to borrow a psychological term, and it is essentially the manifold at which objective recorded content interfaces with higher order subjective interpretation, processing, and understanding.

The final level is that which houses highest order interpretation by the subject. This level would include predictions about the plot or Marxist readings of the subject. It is obviously based upon the two lower levels, but is not restricted to only information obtained from those levels. That is, we often bring in outside contextual information in arriving at our interpretations of a given film. These high level interpretations are not to be confused with content nor with basic perceptual recognition.

It is perhaps the second level, or framing level, that is most often lumped in with content, since it seems to proceed so automatically and naturally for most viewers. After all, human beings make a sort of career out of being able to effectively recognize and reason about all kinds of perceptual data. But confluence and widespread agreement in our processing capabilities or “natural” tendencies is no basis for inclusion in what ought to be a plainly objective concept like content.

Although the schematic presented above has the advantage of being quite clear about what to count as content, there probably remain some questions to be tackled regarding the overall model. Particularly, where do we draw the line between mere framing and interpretation? I suspect there is some give and take, and perhaps there are
even more nuanced levels to be found upon further inspection. The defense of this schematic is, however, not the main focus of the present project. It will suffice for our purposes simply to be clear about matters of content at the lowest level, regardless of higher level questions which may stand unaddressed.

Narration

With a clearer idea of narrative in mind, we can now turn to another fundamental matter which will need sorting out before we can turn to cinematic music. This matter involves the act of narrating, i.e. narration. Before we get into particulars of narration, it should be noted that both narration and narrative are actually ideas that arise from literature. One general problem then is whether, broadly speaking, concepts from one medium can be applied to other art forms. For example, editing is something that can occur in film, but obviously cannot occur in theatre, while monologue is something that would seem to be present in both. Specifically though, the question at issue is whether literary and film narration are, in Gaut’s words, “symmetrical” or “asymmetrical.”

For a symmetry theorist, both film and literature exhibit the same “structural features of narration” (Gaut 234). It is important not to saddle this view with the stronger claim that features are shared in toto between the two mediums, as the theory does allow that “the mode of communication of the narrative varies – cinema narrates by showing, literature narrates by telling” (Gaut 234). Asymmetry theorists, on the other hand, hold that one or more fundamental aspects of narration are different between film and literature. “[F]or instance, the asymmetry theorist may hold that whereas narrators are ubiquitous in literature, they are hardly ever found in film, or may hold that cinematic narration is not mediated in the way that literary narration is” (Gaut 234).
Gaut himself argues for an asymmetry view, primarily by restricting the role that narrators play in film. However, interestingly, Gaut also attacks the ubiquity of narrators in literature via his other arguments for restricting film narrators. Now it is not exactly clear as to how restrictive Gaut’s move will be, but one might reasonably suppose at least a similar effectiveness as his application of it to film. If this is the case, though, then do we really have asymmetry between literature and film? Or more pointedly, do we have asymmetry based upon the scope of narrator restriction? Gaut’s moves here at the least leave something to be desired, and may be indicative of larger problems for the whole symmetry/asymmetry distinction.

I do not wish to formally tackle the general problem of symmetry or asymmetry here, other than to say that whatever the case may be, it certainly seems that film exhibits something close enough to literary narration that we be able to use the terminology unproblematically. It should be borne in mind that there is likely some dissonance between strict literary interpretations of narrative and narration, and cinematic usage to the same effect, but any discrepancies are surely minor enough that we can still abstract and apply the concept of narration in a useful way.

Proceeding with this commonsensical conclusion, let us take a moment to further consider, as promised, the relation between narrative and narration. As was mentioned briefly at the outset, this relation is actually more complicated than simply being biconditional. Consider cases where a narrator is supposed to be explicitly present. Classic literary examples might include Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* or Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and some filmic counterparts might be Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) or James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997). Logically, it may seem that a
narrator’s action by default entails narration. Similarly, this logical point might be extended so that any case of narration then also entails having a narrator. However, the above conception can become problematic if one construes the further relation between narrative and narration in a similar manner. If we want to apply the same kind of reasoning as before, holding that instances of narration are logically narratives and that narratives entail some sort of narration, then we find ourselves in a bit of a bind when it comes to accounting for actual examples of film. Commonly, narrative film is taken to be roughly coextensive with fiction film. Of course there are other labels, such as documentary, biography, etc, but narrative film has come to describe roughly any production which tells a story. That story might be more or less definite and might be told in a variety of ways, seemingly with or without a narrator. But, if we hold to the above logical structure, then it would seem all of fiction film should include narration and narrators.

Now, certainly proponents of ubiquitous narrators might prefer to take this sort of line, insisting that there is not a problem, since all of these narrative films really do have narrators, that some are just “implicit.” However, short of this contentious universal conclusion, we have a choice to make. Either we admit to massive mis-description of examples as narrative or we must loosen our construal of the logical relations between narrators, narration, and narrative. I propose we take the latter route, by not requiring that all cases of narrative entail narration, and rejecting also that narrators entail narration. So, narration entails a narrator, but a narrator does not entail narration, and while narration also entails a narrative, a narrative does not entail narration.
With this move, we shift the logical focus to narration and are saved from the above uncomfortable conclusion about the pervasiveness of narrators, allowing us to maintain that most fiction film is narrative without necessarily requiring narration and narrators. The alternative, to insist that we simply misuse the term “narrative,” should be avoided I think for at least the following reason. We deem certain examples of work “narrative” largely because of their mode of conveyance of the story information. As opposed to mere description, rhetoric, or exposition, narratives employ a narrative style, or a “story-telling” mode that seems to be commonly understood. This narrative mode is recognized simply by the fact that a story is being told, and not in virtue of there being someone identified as telling that story. Given this, it would not make much sense to argue for our misuse of narrative based primarily upon considerations about narrators.

So, if narratives do not entail narration, we need to make room for an additional mode of narrative presentation; one which I will call basic telling or presentation. Both modes of conveyance fall under the general category of “presentation.” Narration, though, has a particular character. Although in film it is sometimes thought of primarily in reference to paradigm cases of voiceover, there is a much richer conception to be found by identifying instead the underlying function of narration. Basically, it provides what we might loosely call “meta-information,” in addition to the basic presentation of narrative. That is, basic presentation consists in the simple conveyance of the fundamental elements of narrative, i.e. representations of events in temporal relation, but narration supplies additional qualities, character, or perspective to the presentation. In the paradigm case of voiceover, for example, this might include the providing of point of view, extra contextual information, clarification of depicted events, evaluative statements
regarding events, or explication of the narrator’s emotions toward events, but the central
point to be made here is that these sorts of additions are unnecessary to the basic process
of narrative conveyance. In other words, the *story* might have been more basically
conveyed without the use of narration.⁵

Now, one of the most important qualities often accompanying narration is a
detectable “point of view.” Paradigm cases of narration, for instance, are often grounded
in an identifiable agential source of narrative information, known more generally as the
narrator. But, though this detectable perspective is often associated with some unified,
identifiable or distinguishable agent, it is important to note that the narrator need be
neither human nor anthropomorphic. In other words, we can easily imagine cases where
our narrator figure ranges from a neighbor down the street, to a little green alien, to some
sort of shapeless telepathic interdimensional being, and it is not essential to this concept
that the narrator be even vaguely human. The important thing to focus on here is the
perspective itself.

One potential misunderstanding to mitigate then is that film shots are actually
*always* inherently perspectival. There is no way (currently at least) to film a scene from
nowhere. By the very fact that a camera (whether virtual or actual) has recorded
something, we have some perspective or point of view. But it would be a mistake to take
this sort of perspective to be the important sense that characterizes narration. In film at
least, we cannot rely on the presence of this kind of trivial perspective to distinguish
narrative perspective or a narrator.

⁵ Note that the contention is *not* that the same *narrative* could be conveyed more basically. Again, the
narrative is importantly constructed by viewers and so the mode of presentation will ultimately be
consequential to that construction.
In literature, it is the presence of cuing phrases and other perspectival hints that usually motivate the countenancing of a particular narrational perspective, and an analogous case can be made for film. Basically, I want to push the idea that, just as literature has developed a set of techniques or cues to signal perspective, so film employs certain cues, not to indicate perspective *per se*, but to indicate a *narrational* perspective. Thinking again about paradigm examples of narration in film, such as Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, Resnais’ *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), Singh’s *The Fall* (2006), or Cameron’s *Titanic*, we see the recurrence of a basic set of techniques that alert the viewer to the presence of a narrational perspective. These techniques, or narrational cues, are certainly not universal across all of cinema, but nevertheless, we commonly see as hallmarks of narration, things like voiceovers, zooming shots, temporal shifts, evaluative suggestions, exemplified emotional dispositions, and as we will be arguing, certain musical cues.

It is crucial to understand at this point that the employment of narration as a mode of narrative conveyance is to be seen as a fluid thing. Often we tend to think of narrators and narration as a kind of “on or off” state of affairs that is applicable to an entire narrative, i.e. there is either a narrator or not; the film is either narrated or not. But, this is a limited view, and it is one that I think falls prey to many of the same criticisms applied to the aforementioned explicit/implicit distinction. In other words, recognition of narration should be understood simply as an epistemic stance which viewers take as a result of prompting by certain film cues. Some scenes may be narrated, others may be basically presented. Even voiceover narration, for example, hardly ever persists over the
entire film, and other sorts of cues, like evaluative or emotional suggestions, usually occur here and there throughout.

Sometimes, or maybe oftentimes, it may even remain unclear how to consider a certain scene. A film might try to be ambiguous about its narration as an aesthetic axe to grind, so to speak, or perhaps it simply does a poor job of presenting its story. We might have very subtle narrational cues, or as is the case in some films, like David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), a late reveal of narrational perspective, casting doubt on previous interpretations of events. Generally speaking though, since clarity and understanding are usually sought after, films tend to be fairly forthcoming with their narrational cues. In *Titanic* for example, we easily recognize the scenes which are presented as current, and the segments which are understood to be narrated by Rose.\(^6\)

But returning to our processes of presentation, it is important not to think of the two as essentially dichotomous. Examined closely, the two concepts form a kind of gradient with unclear cases falling in the middle portion of the field. The case I will make for this picture is based on the same kind of conclusions drawn from the difficulties in formulating a rigorous explicit/implicit distinction.

The crucial point is that filmic cues and techniques can (but need not) establish a narrational context for viewers to apply to the story. In other words, the signifying of narration is an important way to provide auxiliary perspective above and beyond the basic narrative. Basic presentation, on the one hand, is characterized by the simple presenting of minimal narrative information. It consists in conveying, in some basic

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\(^6\) Note though that without Rose’s introductory voice-over, a large temporal gap between the present and the narrated story, or other similar techniques, it would be much more difficult for us to determine where the basic presentation ends and the narration begins.
form, the narrative in question. This kind of presentation does not include the more complex auxiliaries like perspectival, evaluative, or affective information. Narration, on the other hand, consists in the presentation of basic narrative with the addition of these complex auxiliaries. So, not only do we get the basic story information, we also get cues for how we ought to interpret, evaluate, perceive, or feel about that information.

In keeping with our above discussion about the difficulty inherent in distinctly identifying the explicit and implicit, I mean to maintain that presented scenes exist in distribution across a gradient ranging from narration to basic presentation, where the varying factor determining placement is the strength, clarity, prominence, or “explicitness” of the cues prompting narration. Films, then, will include a greater or lesser number of narrated, ambiguous, and basically presented scenes. On the predominately narrational side of things we might list films like *Titanic, Rashomon, The Fall,* or *Citizen Kane.* Conversely, on the basic presentation end of the scale, we might consider films like *Star Wars – The Phantom Menace* (1999), *The Expendables* (2010), or *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (2001-3). Certainly the films which we have listed as primarily employing narration contain segments, portions, or elements of basic presentation, but the strength and number of the narrational cues provided, is enough to push them to one side of the scale. The converse is true of the latter category.

I think it is safe to say on this picture that relatively few films fall under either extreme on the scale. That is, few films can boast constant or total narration, and very few films have claim to complete, uninterrupted basic presentation. Most cases seem to contain elements of both and will fall somewhat intermediately on our scale, though perhaps more left or more right. In other words, the take away message here is that
narration is not an all or nothing deal. Films usually tend to have some clear narration
and some basic presentation. They might have more or less narration than basic
presentation. They might be composed so that it remains entirely unclear whether there
is any narration going on or not. But this is fine because no cases of narration are entirely
explicit; all are understood through the employment of techniques and cues which may be
more or less clear to us. We are interested, therefore, in the strength and frequency of
suggestion for narration in determining how we ought to consider a film.

As a final note, we have argued that narration is really a complex means of
presentation, but whether this conception is ultimately accepted or not, it should at least
be recognized that colloquial uses of the term “narration” are grossly inconsistent.
Sometimes we seem to simply mean “the telling of a story,” and other times “the verbal
telling of a story.” Sometimes we seem to mean “the telling of a story by a particular
person,” while yet other times we mean “the telling of a story by a particular fictional
person.” Sometimes we even seem to hold that narration is just “any kind of conveyance
of vaguely story-like information.” Thus, as one consequence of our framework, some
examples that many consider to exhibit narration may no longer do so, while other
examples that have been thought to lack narration may now include it. This, however, is
a necessary consequence of any attempt to clarify the fractured nature of this concept,
and should not itself be held as a point of rebuttal.

So what does all of this mean for our foundational model of film? We might
summarize as follows. Narrative is a mode of communication which is present in various
media. Fundamentally, a narrative must be representational and must also include certain
relations between the events or states of affairs represented. These relations are not
inherent in the media, but are constructed by viewers. A narrative, thusly, is a product of concrete representation and viewer inference. In a film narrative, *story* is an abstract construct which exists only in the minds of viewers, and structural arrangements along with other technical elements of conveyance are called the narrative *style*. By presenting raw AV content of a film in a certain way (style), a story is conveyed to the viewer, thus constituting a film narrative.

Lastly, there are two ways in which film narratives convey their information. Narration is that mode of presentation by which a story is presented with auxiliary information, often from the perspective of some apparent narrator. Narrators are, then, an integral part of narration. Basic presentation is the second mode that a film narrative might employ. This is usually characterized by (relatively) direct or unbiased, non-perspectival access to story information and usually lacks any apparent narrator. However, it should be noted that the apparent lack of a narrator does not at this point entail either basic presentation or narration, as the possibility and existence of so called implicit narrators has yet to be fully addressed.
CHAPTER 2: FILM MUSIC

Some Distinctions

What then is the upshot of all this foundational work on narrative? It is important to remember that we are primarily interested in music as it is related to narrative film, and will be considering ways in which this relation might be cashed out. So far, we have examined some fundamental structures of film narrative in order to be as clear as possible about the basic operations involved in cinematic viewing. In this chapter, we move on to consider music, specifically in conjunction with film. To that end, we will first establish some basic terminology and distinctions which we can use to talk about film music more clearly. Then we will examine some of the basic functions music can engage in during a film. Finally, we will consider two main possibilities for relating film music to film narrative.

The elements of a film can be divided into at least two basic categories: diegetic and nondiegetic. Diegetic elements are so named for being part of what is called the film’s diegesis; that is, being part of the story world. For example, dialogue, sound effects, the characters, and locales themselves all belong to the fictional universe created by the film. On the other hand, nondiegetic elements are any others present during the film, having no source or causal presence in the story world. The best examples of these include titles, ending credits, and what is commonly called the film’s musical score.⁷

It is important to see that these categories are not just arbitrarily drawn. Film viewers seem to be capable of distinguishing quite naturally between things in a film that

⁷ For those familiar with the literature, my usage of diegetic and nondiegetic roughly parallels modern usage by theorists such as Gaut, Wilson, or Levinson.
belong to the story world and things which do not. For example, we do not suffer any delusions that the film’s universe contains some actual text fragments floating out in space that come together to spell _ALIEN_ in the opening of Ridley Scott’s 1979 horror classic. But we know that the space debris in the same scene does belong to the story world. Similarly, we do not wonder to ourselves where “Ave Maria” issues from in the opening scenes of the 2007 film _Hitman_, and it is simply understood that such music is not a part of the fictional world being presented.

This simplified framework is drawn from a broader three part categorization in film between the diegetic, nondiegetic, and metadiegetic (in Claudia Gorbman’s terminology). This three-part distinction actually originates with Gerard Genette, with slightly different wording, and is importantly not meant to be exhaustive of all possible levels of narration. For Gorbman, the first two terms capture more broadly the same idea applied above, namely, that diegetic elements are those “arising from the primary narration,” while nondiegetic elements are a “narrative intrusion upon the diegesis” (22).

Now, our usage of these terms to describe types of music in film will not strictly follow this broad three-part distinction for several reasons. Firstly, these terms are, for Genette and Gorbman, intended to cover levels of _narration_. However, the question of

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8 It is another question entirely as to how exactly we are able to do this. Perhaps we are conditioned from an early age, growing up watching films, so that we gain an intrinsic sense of this distinction. Or perhaps it simply has to do with basic logic and coherence principles, since it is recognized that there are no floating titles or running soundtracks in real life. Certainly more investigation would be required to answer this question fully.

9 For Genette, the distinction runs: diegetic, extradiiegetic, and metadiegetic, respectively.

10 The final category, metadiegetic, is reserved for cases of “secondary narration,” i.e. a story being told from within a story (Gorbman 22). For instance, a character in a story engaging in his or her individual story-telling from within the larger narrative would belong to the metadiegetic. This category, though, is not relevant to music and shall thus be left aside.
whether film music is actually a part of film narration is still open and shall be more fully addressed later on. Secondly, we have already briefly seen in Chapter 1 why we should not expect every film to include narration, even if every film we are considering is a narrative. So in our general application of Genette and Gorbman’s distinctions, we will need to abstract away from the idea of levels of narration, per se, and think instead in terms of narratives. Thus, we should take this terminological framework as a potentially expandable characterization of filmic elements, useful to us insofar as it helps to distinguish the gross structure of a given narrative film.

Functions of Film Music

For many decades, theorists have devoted time to developing an understanding of musical functions in film. Although individual results have varied, there has been a reasonable amount of overlap. Here we look at a selection of the most common functions in order to get a better idea about the roles music can have in film, providing an important taxonomy for our further discussion.

(1) Perhaps the least theoretically interesting role music can play is that of background filler, or what Stravinsky somewhat derogatorily called “wallpaper music” (Winters 40). “[S]uch music is not really music for Stravinsky, [and] he talks of it fulfilling its wallpaper function ‘by having the same relationship to the drama that restaurant music has to the conversation at the individual restaurant table’” (Winters 46). Paolo Milano also talks about “neutral music,” characterized by a function which “is not aesthetic in any way, but rather ‘practical’” (90). These functions, for Milano, include things like, “neutralizing real or imaginary embarrassment caused by silent projection, [or] possible counteraction to auditorium noise” (90).
This kind of film music is arguably the oldest, stretching back to the earliest silent features.\textsuperscript{11} It should be borne in mind, however, despite the seemingly solid pedigree this type of film music boasts, that its status as a proper category can still be disputed. Gorbman, for example, holds that “[w]hatever music is applied to a film segment will do something, will have an effect – just as whatever two words one puts together will produce a meaning different from that of each word separately” (15). There is perhaps merely a logical point being made here, in that the conjunction of a film and any music will obviously and necessarily be different than either the film or music on its own, but Gorbman’s claim might also be taken to suggest that no music is truly just background, i.e. that this category, previously characterized by Milano as “not aesthetic in any way,” is really a false distinction or idealization. If the latter is taken to be Gorbman’s point, then we might reasonably consider wallpaper music to be a kind of pseudo-category which would presumably denote instances where the aesthetic functions of music are so minor or undetectable that we habitually label such music mere background.\textsuperscript{12}

(2) Another fairly basic and uncontroversial function of film music is what is known as \textit{leitmotif}. The term is slightly amorphous, being derived from Wagnerian opera, but is more or less adequately defined as, “a theme in a film [that] becomes associated with a character, a place, a situation, or an emotion” (Gorbman 3). Jessica Green makes use of this definition in her illustrative discussion of leitmotif:

Most of the time, leitmotifs can be identified as a simple melody, usually only a few measures in length. In order to establish the leitmotif with the object of its identification, the leitmotif is usually repeated a few times to firmly engrain its

\textsuperscript{11} Peter Kivy provides an interesting examination of the origins of film music in “Music in the Movies.”
\textsuperscript{12} The resolution of this interpretational point will ultimately be unimportant to our framework, but is worth keeping in mind. For a useful further treatment of Gorbman’s theory, see Jeff Smith in “Unheard Melodies? A Critique of Psychoanalytic Theories of Film Music.”
essence with the audience. In order to create these themes or meanings, composers repeat the same or slightly altered themes, which the audience learns to associate with characters, places, or emotions. (Green 87)

A very clear example of something like this is the notorious shark theme from Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975), but the technique is made use of fairly frequently to less iconic effect in many other films.¹³

In essence, leitmotifs refer back to previously associated elements in a film. It is a kind of conditioning process, similar to the classic conditioning studies done by Ivan Pavlov.¹⁴ We are presented with a certain visual event or object and simultaneously hear a distinctive tone or theme. Through repeated occurrences, an association is built up between the music and the given visual element, such that the presence of the indicative music is often enough to trigger recognition in viewers without the visual stimulus even being provided. The most important aspect of leitmotif is this built up association, and it should be noted that repeated occurrences of the theme without the expected visual stimulus can begin to lessen the perceived relation between the two. Thus in practice, leitmotif is usually reiterated with its visual component throughout the entire film, in order to preserve the built up association for such an extended time.¹⁵

(3) Related to leitmotif is what might be called “direct response music,” or what Levinson would consider, “the direct inducing in viewers of […] [a] cognitive or affective state” (“Film Music” 156). So called “shock music,” wherein loud, shrill, or surprising tones are suddenly introduced, would most reasonably be included here. The

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¹³ Green primarily analyzes *Braveheart* (1995) for another example.
¹⁴ Though thankfully, we usually do not find film viewers salivating in response to ringing bells.
¹⁵ Note that through all the various *Jaws* films, we very rarely hear the distinctive shark theme without some other indication of the shark. When we do hear the theme on its own, the conditioning effect can be put to good use to build suspense (since we expect to see but don’t actually see the shark). However, if this technique is abused or excessively employed, it can begin to diminish the association effect itself.
hallmark feature of this function is the music’s *direct* effect on the audience. The eliciting of a startle response, for example, is something that bypasses aesthetic reflection or consideration of the music. Similarly, grating high frequency crescendos, often achieved through non-standard use of bowed instruments like violin or cello, can directly send chills down one’s spine or induce tension almost involuntarily. This is not to imply that other functions of music always *require* aesthetic reflection or appreciation, but only to note that direct response music tends to operate at a more basal level than other functions. Sometimes it might even lend itself to being considered more akin to a sound effect than music proper, as it is often short lived and used in conjunction with very particular kinds of visual events, but regardless it is still an example of nondiegetic film music.

(4) Foreshadowing is another important musical function in film. This use of music can be either more or less obvious to a spectator and might additionally involve the use of themed elements like leitmotif. A very clear example is the final funeral pyre scene from *Star Wars – The Phantom Menace*. As the group of mourners is gathered around the burning remains of their fallen Jedi comrade, discussion turns to the yet unrevealed identity of the series’ prominent antagonist, known only as “the Emperor.” The lack of epistemic access to this identity is shared by the characters of the film and by audiences, with all prior shots carefully obscuring the Emperor’s face.¹⁶ As the camera pans across the faces of those gathered, it settles on the (thus far) seemingly helpful Senator Palpatine, and we get a very dark and dramatic musical cue before the film turns to its final ending sequence.

¹⁶ Though inquisitive viewers will likely have begun to form some hypotheses about this mysterious evil-doer before the scene in question.
This kind of musical effect is intended to give the audience some additional insight into the running question of the Emperor’s identity. If a viewer already has suspicions about the character Palpatine, then the foreshadowing effect helps to confirm this, and if the locus of viewer suspicion has yet to be settled, this noticeable cue can help to guide that conclusion. And yet, as is often an important aspect of foreshadowing, the question remains open. We do not develop with certainty the answer to the above identity question, and must wait for future information in order to fully and actually arrive at that answer.

(5) As we begin to struggle with further complexity regarding music’s role in film, we encounter increased difficulty in making the kinds of clear cut distinctions that we are after. As such, I will treat the role of providing clarifying emotional and/or psychological information as a vaguely outlined category, which I will usually refer to simply as “expository music.” This musical function seems to have primarily arisen due to the pragmatic differences between film and literature. In a book for example, we might come across a passage describing the protagonist’s thought process or feelings on some important story matter. However, in lieu of some kind of spoken inner monologue or voiceover, a film has limited options for conveying the same sort of information. One popular way of achieving this effect is to use music to help express, amplify, or focus the sometimes ambiguous emotional or psychological states already portrayed by the character(s) involved.\textsuperscript{17} For example, at one point in Akira Kurosawa’s \textit{Rashomon}, the protagonist, Tabi Hoshi, stumbles across an abandoned hat in the forest. The camera

\textsuperscript{17} This should not be taken to imply that music fills an informational function in the same sense that visual representations do. The capability of music in this regard is one primary theme of the present project and will be addressed directly in later chapters. For now, music should only be considered ‘informational’ in a loose sense.
frames a quizzical look on Hoshi’s face as he examines the hat, but what might otherwise be taken for surprise, concern, or mere curiosity, is solidified as full blown suspicion by the ominous musical tones that accompany the shot. In effect, we are given a musical cue as to Hoshi’s psychological state during the event.

(6) A closely related effect which is oftentimes hard to distinguish from expository music is the cueing of targeted emotions in viewers, or “emotive music.” For example, in the climactic final battle scene in Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), several of the story’s heroes are engaged in one last desperate skirmish intended as a diversion to give Frodo and Sam the time needed to destroy the ring once and for all. When the crucial moment comes, and the ring is destroyed, the black tower of the evil lord Sauron is seen crumbling into dust, and the group of battle-torn survivors is caught up in relief and joy. However, the moment quickly ends as the volcanic mountain where Frodo and Sam have completed their task violently erupts, leaving little doubt in the minds of onlookers as to the two companions unfortunate demise. As a mournful and moving melody plays, we see grief reflected on the survivor’s faces, even tears mixed with slowly fading smiles. It is most likely the case that the sad overtones are meant to temper our own quickly fading elation at the seemingly successful resolution of the quest, but it could also conceivably be that this music is meant to help clarify the character’s feelings. In this specific case, the music is clearly functioning in some sort of emotional capacity, but its precise target is somewhat unclear, and so the crux of our classification here rests on the identification of this target. Namely, if the target is the audience (and I think this is most likely), we indeed have (6) emotive music, but if the target is the set of characters on screen, then we would have a
case of (5) expository music. It might also conceivably be the case that this example highlights a dual function, being both (6) emotive and (5) expository.

(7) The last function we will discuss here is the most nebulous of all. What is sometimes called “atmosphere music” or “mood music” is generally responsible for setting the mood during a given scene. These effects are often rather extended temporally and can span across multiple scenes. Care should be taken to try to distinguish mood setting from the kinds of emotive operations performed by (6) above. As Carroll writes, “[o]ne difference that is often remarked upon by ordinary speakers and sometimes by psychologists is duration: occurrent emotional states are said to be short-lived and punctuated, whereas moods persist over longer time intervals” (Dimensions 305). Additionally, “whereas emotions are directed toward particular objects or have intentionality, moods do not” (Dimensions 306). Carroll’s overarching picture of “emotions proper” and moods is roughly that the latter are non-specific, global, long-lasting affective states, while the former are targeted, particular, and short-lived.

Part of the difficulty in explicating this final common function of film music arises from issues which are held over from the kind of discussion about mood that Carroll is trying to provide. For example, don’t all affective states need to have some kind of object, even if it is very vague? Is it really correct to think about moods as completely object-less? What about long lasting, targeted emotions, like being angry at your father for long stretches of time? Don’t “mood swings” seem to indicate that moods can also be very short lived? These kinds of questions are addressed somewhat by Carroll, but it remains to be seen whether his answer will ultimately prove satisfactory.
What is obvious is that the area surrounding the things we call moods is blurry. But for all that, we can still do some intelligible work to characterize this last musical function.

Mood music is often very subtle, and can be hard to properly frame during a film. Often the mood-scape of the entire film is very consistent, and we may remain unaware of our mood. For example, one consistent theme in many “Batman” films is the dark oppressiveness of Gotham City. Part of this effect is achieved through diffused lighting and cramped spaces in the visuals, but there is also an overarching musical dankness to the films that helps to solidify such a mood. It cannot rightly be described emotively as a feeling of claustrophobia or fear, but is rather a general sort of anxiety or depression.

Another example can be seen in a film like *Hoosiers* (1986). As a generally inspirational movie, many of the extended musical sequences in this film are inspired, uplifting or triumphant. Although many scenes clearly have objects of emotion and appropriate corresponding music, there is a more global sense of accomplishment and elation which is conveyed more generally during the course of the film. So even though we are excited and happy to see the team’s final victory, with triumphant and boisterous emotive music coming in on cue at the pivotal shot, the general mood leading up to this moment has already been established by previous musical expression. We are likely not happy about anything in particular coming into this scene, but rather feel a kind of satisfaction or positivity globally. We do not, if the music has done its job, come to this point in the film feeling depressed or skeptical, and this groundwork is important to the kinds of emotions that are later elicited in response to the team’s victory.

The seven functions I have discussed here should certainly not be taken as an exhaustive list. Levinson, for example, enumerates over a dozen distinct roles, several of
which might be subsumed under the above considerations, and others which might reasonably expand our list (“Film Music” 156). Also, some of our functions, namely (5), (6), and (7), are frequently difficult to pick out or distinguish from one another, but our primary goal in this inquiry is to identify how music is important to film narrative, and I think that our sampling here will be sufficient to motivate the points we will be making later on.

Music as Narrative

Since our focus is largely on how music functions in narrative film, it is important for us to acknowledge whether or not music is itself capable of acting as narrative. Perhaps this is how music fulfills its role in these films. It is well accepted that music can induce or affect moods, frequently operating on an emotional level, though there are a number of ways in which this may be explained.\textsuperscript{18} It may, for instance, be that music triggers some sort of unconscious response, and that we become aware of these changes in our body state through what we’ve come to know as mood or emotion. But it could also be that this sort of music really is representational and/or propositional in some way, and that it operates on us in a narrative fashion (consciously or non-consciously). That is, some music seems to be capable of inducing many of the same feelings and attitudes that narratives can (though the latter arguably has a broader range), so perhaps some music really ought to be seen as narrative after all. We will follow Levinson in examining this last option, and see that there are at least a few good reasons for rejecting it, at least in the case of purely instrumental music.

\textsuperscript{18} See Carroll in “Art and Mood” and Kivy in “Mood and Music: Some Reflections for Noel Carroll” for a more comprehensive treatment of this topic.
“[I]f music is to be narrative: a) it must represent; b) it must represent events or states of affairs; and c) it must represent temporal and/or causal relations among those events or states of affairs” (Levinson, “Music as Narrative” 429). This working definition of narrative from Levinson differs slightly from our own model, but is close enough to be adequate for the present investigation.

Levinson mainly focuses on the importance of representation for any potentially narrative music:

Taking representation to the *sine qua non* of narration, if instrumental music is to count as narrative we will have to establish, first, that such music does indeed represent, second, that it represents non-musical events and third, that such music represents in a narrative mode.¹⁹ (Levinson, “Music as Narrative” 431)

To elaborate, we are not only interested in whether music can be representational, but also that any representation music exhibits be something outside of the music itself. In addition, these ostensibly represented non-musical events must be represented in a “narrative mode,” i.e. with temporal ordering, distinct events, etc.

For Levinson, instrumental music fails right out of the gate, on the first count above. That is, representation importantly involves intention, and it is not enough to allow that expressive music can, for example, cause viewers to perceive motion or gesture. Taking pictorial representation as paradigm, “for a picture to represent an oak tree an oak tree must be seeable in it, to be sure, but the maker of the picture must also actually have intended such seeing-in” (Levinson, “Music as Narrative” 431). On the contrary, according to Levinson, mere expressiveness as is often seen in music can be had without authorial intent.

¹⁹ Note that for Levinson, unlike our framework, narrative and narration are inextricably bound together, and are essentially coextensive concepts.
As a brief aside, the attentive reader might notice that this “strongly intentional” notion of representation seems to reveal a certain shortcoming in our previous framework. That is, regarding the ambiguity surrounding content, some might want to point to the intentional aspect of representation as the discriminating factor in deciding what to include as the content of a narrative. Don’t we now have a method to push beyond the conceptual safety of only countenancing basic AV content? Without digressing too fully from our main inquiry, we can at least say that authorial intent can be a sticky business. Certainly in some cases we have confirmation of intent from the creator of an artwork, but by and large there exist no easy or readily available means of ascertaining that information. Short of calling up the artist or coming across some written affidavit, how are we to really know an artist’s intentions? In the end, it all comes down to inferences and assumptions. By taking this line, we get uncomfortably close to what has come to be known as “auteur theory” in film, a view which has suffered much pointed criticism.  

Ultimately, there still seems to be no clear and uncontroversial way of advancing a more inclusive concept of narrative content. Returning now to the present topic, even acknowledging this representational difficulty and granting music the kind of intentional representation required leaves us with problems. Levinson goes on to note that of all musical examples, sonatas, due to their “form being inherently progressive and developmental,” provide the most promising case for instrumental musical narrative (“Music as Narrative” 436). And yet, despite this seeming promise for musical narrative, the following worry remains:

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20 This theory is traditionally associated with Francois Truffaut. Notably, film in particular provides a difficult case to square intentional claims with, since oftentimes there are so many individuals, from directors to gaffers to Foley artists, collaborating to produce any given work.
[s]till, the most natural construal of a sonata movement is as dramatic rather than narrative […] In the opening movement of Charles-Valentin Alkan’s little-heard Symphony for Piano, for example, one readily hears a protagonist, embodied most clearly in a particular five-note motive, express its peculiar mixture of yearning and suspicion. But one does not seem to hear a voice that tells of a third party. One does not have the sense of a mediator between oneself and the expressive gestures that one perceives in the music. (Levinson, “Music as Narrative” 436)

For Levinson, even the most “narrative” sort of instrumental music, i.e. most seemingly involving expression and representation plus the conveyance of movement and development, still doesn’t seem to “tell” in the same sense that narrative does.

Ultimately, then, Levinson concludes that music as narrative is problematic at best and moves on to his preferred view of music as drama. The details of this further step will be unnecessary for us to pursue, as it should now be fairly clear that instrumental music, which makes up the majority of film music, does not by and large operate as narrative. Even if certain cases remain contentious, we can at least see that proponents of music as narrative generally have significant theoretical hurdles to overcome, namely, the working out of representation for music and the lack of a sense of voice.21

Music Acting on Narrative

If the above approach to understanding film music is rejected, what kind of options do we have left? Though it may seem wrong to say that music is or can be narrative, it still seems correct to admit that music has or can have certain effects on film narrative. In other words, it seems at least prima facie likely that the depth and richness

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21 Admittedly, little has been said about lyrical music use in film, but this type of nondiegetic music is only modestly employed and serves as an unnecessary complicating factor in our attempts to build a basic framework for understanding film music. This diverse class of music considered retroactively, after we have our basic theoretical foundations in place, might easily enrich and broaden the theory, but considered prematurely, it would likely only lead us astray.
of musical expression ought to be able to, in some cases, exert some kind of influence or effect on accompanied narratives. Recall from Chapter 1 that narratives include a constructive component which is contributed by viewers. Since music can clearly have some effect on viewers, it makes sense that it might at least minimally have an effect on narrative construction. So the questions we ought to ask are if and how music might accomplish this.

The “if” question is relatively straightforward and easy to answer. A simple thought experiment can provide us with good motivation for an affirmative response. Consider an iconic film such as Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993). The original score by John Williams has become a very recognizable and oft performed piece. Now, trivially, we might convince ourselves that the film just wouldn’t be the same if any other music were to stand in place of that score. In other words, the basic logical point may hold that a change in the film, even if only in the music, will result in a different film. But this does not by itself motivate the conclusion that the Williams score has any kind of appreciable effect on the narrative.

Let us imagine instead that the film not only has a different score, but that the entire musical accompaniment is ragtime. Will this affect our perception of the film? Of course the answer here is yes. At the very least, most would probably think that the score is ill suited to the narrative. But why is that the case? Why do we have a strong sense of musical misapplication when we engage in this kind of thought experiment? I suggest it is because the kind of flippant or comic effect engendered by the use of ragtime for this film seems too opposed to our dramatic sense of the narrative. Suppose on the other hand that we are considering substituting ragtime for the score of *The Three Stooges Meet*
Hercules (1962). This application tends to seem much more apt since it is readily understandable how the kind of expressive qualities ragtime embodies are suited to the comic narrative style.

Suppose further now that we consider the above films not in their entirety, but focus just on particular scenes. The dramatic Tyrannosaur chase scene in Jurassic Park is one which often conjures feelings of suspense, danger, and excitement in viewers. If music really does have important effects on the narrative, then the shrill, upbeat tones which accompany this scene ought to contribute to or inflect this sense. Once again, if we imagine replacing this score with ragtime, it is easy to see how the emotional upshot of this dramatic scene would change quite drastically. And similar points can readily be imagined where slapstick comedy is concerned. Heavy, intense, or angry music might easily be imagined to turn a comic fight scene into the portrayal of a serious conflict.

So what does this mean for the effects of music on narrative? We can at least conclude that there seems to be room for this kind of musical effect in film. As the above examples should illustrate, music seems to be capable of definite impact on the very construction or understanding of film narrative. But how does music really change or contribute to narrative understanding? Is it restricted to the mere enhancement or downplaying of existing effects? Can music bring totally new meaning to a narrative? To what degree can music accomplish all this? These and other questions remain to be addressed, and will form the central topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: NARRATIONAL FILM MUSIC

In order to really get at how music affects narrative, we will use Levinson’s theory of narrative significance as a jumping off point for constructing our own framework of musical interaction. Our theory will ultimately diverge from the details, but not the spirit, of Levinson’s work. Our approach will be guided by our analysis of narration in film, its role in the process of narrative presentation, and the major functions of nondiegetic film music, discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

As argued in Chapter 1, narration is only one mode of narrative presentation in film, and room was left open for what we called basic presentation. Recall that on the one hand, we want to be able to talk about films as having narratives, but on the other do not want to be saddled with uncomfortable conclusions about ubiquitous narrators. We saw previously that a narrow interpretation of the logical structure surrounding narratives, narration, and narrators leads to trouble, and this has motivated theorists like Gaut to look for a way out by breaking the constraints relating narrators to narration. But we are taking a different tack by allowing for multiple modes of narrative conveyance, each with its own characteristics.

In Chapter 2 we introduced some terminological distinctions for talking about film music, and explored a short list of some major musical functions. Importantly, we saw that music acting as narrative is not a promising route for theorizing. Alternatively, music does seem to have the capability of acting on narrative. This latter possibility will be the primary concern of the present chapter.
Narrative Significance

This brings us to Levinson’s theory of narrative agency. As mentioned before, I think Levinson’s motivations are in the right place; however, as we will soon see, there are also some apparent issues that need addressing. Before we examine these problems, let us first try to build as convincing a picture as possible for Levinson.

Levinson begins:

In this essay I address certain issues about paradigmatic film music, that is, the music that is often heard in the course of a fiction film but that does not originate in or issue from the fictional world revealed on screen. What most interests me is the question, which confronts every filmgoer at some level, and to which he or she must, explicitly or implicitly, accord an answer, of who or what is responsible for such music. That is to say, to what agency is film music assigned by a comprehending viewer, and what is this music understood to be doing? (“Film Music” 143)

These questions frame Levinson’s overall inquiry, but in order to get there, he first narrows down the range of possible answers. “For instance, the source of nondiegetic film music might in one sense be said to be the composer who composes it, or the producer who commissions it, or the sound editor who integrates it into the finished film” (“Film Music” 144). But Levinson rightly concludes that these kinds of answers do not really get us where we need to go. In other words, they don’t explain our main concern about how, “in relation to the fictional world projected, the music is situated or positioned in comprehending the film” (Levinson, “Film Music” 144).

In any case, Levinson then turns to a discussion of general narration in film:

I am going to assume, following Seymour Chatman, that if there is narration in a fiction film, if a comprehensible story is being conveyed to us, then there is an agency or intelligence we are entitled, and in fact need, to imagine is responsible for this, i.e. doing the narrating. (Levinson, “Film Music” 146-7)
It is important to note that this sense of “narration” is different from our own, seemingly consisting simply in “a comprehensible story […] being conveyed to us,” and this is a crucial difference to mark. Levinson goes on to dissent from Chatman on a few particular points which will not be relevant to our purposes, but then importantly explicates the idea of an implied filmmaker:

The implied filmmaker is the agent who appears to have invented, arranged, and integrated the various narrative agents and aspects of narration involved in the film, as well as everything else required to constitute the film as a complete object of appreciation. [It], in short, is the image we construct of the film’s maker – beliefs, aims, attitude, values, and personality – on the basis of the film viewed. (Levinson, “Film Music” 150)

The implied filmmaker as a concept, then, is generally used to explain differences between a filmmaker’s actual views or attitudes, and the ones that are espoused during a film.

With these postulates established and distinguished, Levinson turns to a brief discussion of some worries formulated by Wilson, and then concludes the section with an important final point:

One might still seek to avoid this conclusion by adopting the following stance: it is, indeed, as if we are being shown such and such, from a given perspective, by an agent, […] but we need not assume that there is such an agent. Here, though, we arrive at a distinction virtually without a difference. (Levinson, “Film Music” 154)

I think this is really just another way of responding to reductionistic accounts like Bordwell’s. Basically, there seems to be little sense in admitting that things seem as if they are a certain way (especially in cases where we readily talk as if they are a certain way), while maintaining that there is no place for thinking this way. Bordwell wants to reduce the kind of stance Levinson takes to a bare mechanical approach, leaving no room
to talk about these abstract agents. He thinks views like Levinson’s contain unnecessary elements that are better left aside. But it is one thing to assert the technical correctness of a reducing theory, and other thing entirely to claim the inadequacy or wrongness of the reduced theory. While Bordwell might be able to explain film narration without narrating agents, he has yet to make a strong case as to why we shouldn’t be explaining narration with these agents.\footnote{Bordwell does say that postulating ubiquitous narrators is engaging in “an anthropomorphic fiction,” and that it is “[f]ar better, I think, to give the narrational process the power to signal under certain circumstances that the spectator should construct a narrator” (62). However, this is simply not a strong reason in the eyes of many. The themes of theoretical parsimony that run through Bordwell’s response should be better formulated and argued if we are to accept this as a conclusive reason.}

Turning then to music, Levinson claims there is broad agreement by film theorists, “that nondiegetic music standardly serves to advance a film’s narrative” (“Film Music” 155).\footnote{This is effectively another way of stating our previous conclusion that music has some impact on narratives.} But the details surrounding this conclusion do tend to vary, and Levinson wants to provide his own fundamental distinction between music with and without what he calls “narrative significance.” In gross outline, the theory is that, “there is a rough coincidence between film music to which we intuitively accord narrative significance and film music for which we implicitly hold an internal cinematic narrator accountable” (Levinson, “Film Music” 155-6). All other music is attributable, for Levinson, to the implied filmmaker (“Film Music” 156). The main question then, is what to make of “narrative significance.”

To answer this question Levinson embarks on a search for some “criterion of narrativity” for nondiegetic music. As one possibility, he considers:

\[(C1) \text{does the music seem to issue from, be in service of, the agency one imagines to be bringing one the sights and sounds of the film’s world? If so, then it can be}\]
reckoned part of the narration proper, and assignable to the cinematic narrator. (Levinson, “Film Music” 157)

But, ultimately, Levinson rejects this kind of criteria because it is itself so close to what is being decided. Namely, “if we are unsure whether a given cue is functioning narratively, we are likely to be almost equally unsure whether it feels as if it derives from the film’s narrative agent” (Levinson, “Film Music” 157). He instead endeavors to find a more distinct criterion for deciding narrative significance.

In this pursuit, Levinson appeals to Walton’s theory of “making-believe,” invoking a notion of “making-fictional” or “generating fictional truths” as the hallmark feature of narrative significance (“Film Music” 157-8). In answer to the question of what it actually means to be “fictionally true,” Levinson offers, “[s]imply that there is a prescription to imagine it, a prescription encoded in the particulars of the artifact that serves as a prop for making-believe, and whose force derives from underlying conventions of construing works of the sort in question” (“Film Music” 158).

We are then provided with several examples illustrating Levinson’s ideas. Chief among them, and perhaps most persuasive, is Spielberg’s Jaws. In reference to the shark’s theme composed by John Williams, Levinson says, “[t]he motto has an unarguable informational mission, namely, the signaling of the presence of the shark […] [it] is the only reliable signifier of the shark, and so has an ineliminable fact-conveying function” (“Film Music” 160). In other words, “it is the presence of that motto on the soundtrack at a given point that makes it fictional that the shark, though as yet unseen, is in the vicinity of what is shown” (Levinson, “Film Music” 160). The shark motto in Jaws is thus acting to provide information to the viewer on the whereabouts of the shark.
Levinson construes this information as “fact-conveying,” in keeping with his framework of narrative significance, but we will reexamine this point ourselves shortly.

Ultimately then, after having sufficiently motivated his points with examples, Levinson links up his extensive list of musical functions with his notion of narrative significance. But because the use of music is complex and cues can sometimes act in a dual capacity, we are to recognize that “[t]here is not […] a perfect correspondence between the division of functions as either narrative or nonnarrative and the categorization of cues as either narrative or additive” (Levinson, “Film Music” 182). That is, narrative functions tend to fulfill narrative roles, with the establishment of fictional truths, while nonnarrative functions of music tend to be additive, “[altering] the artistic content or effect of the complete film, but [not] by nuancing narration” (Levinson, “Film Music” 174). Roughly then, we can count as belonging in the narrative category:

- The indicating or revealing of something about a character’s psychological condition […]
- the signifying of some fact or state of affairs in the film world […]
- foreshadowing of a dramatic development […]
- the projecting of a story-appropriate mood […]
- [or] the suggesting to the viewer of how he or she is to regard or feel about some aspect of the story. (Levinson, “Film Music” 156)

All other functions can generally be regarded as nonnarrative.

So, to briefly summarize Levinson’s position, all films have narrators and implied filmmakers. Sometimes these narrators are made definite by the film, but in cases where they are not, we are to postulate an implicit narrator. We are to do this because the narrator is to be taken as the agential source of any nondiegetic music with narrative significance, while all other instances of nondiegetic music are attributable to the implied filmmaker. Narrative significance is to be had by the establishment of some fictional fact or truth related to the narrative.
Objections to Levinson

I do think Levinson’s work is on the right track, though as mentioned earlier, there are a few major points I want to take issue with. First, although Levinson does try to provide some support for his assimilation of Chatman’s theory on ubiquitous narrators, this point has been heavily contentious for many years, and I do not think that the strong stance Chatman originally wanted to take is very defensible. Chatman’s position is sometimes referred to as the *a priori* argument for narrators (Gaut 235). This is because we purportedly know simply based on the logic of the concept that narration requires a narrator, and since all narratives involve narration, all narratives must therefore involve a narrator. The *a priori* position has been argued against and rejected by several theorists, but it is important to note that the second part of the above conjunction (a crucial part of Chatman’s original claim) is what provides the main motivation against this position.

To take a representative example, Gaut responds to the *a priori* argument by further distinguishing the supposed necessity of the agent implicated in narration:

> If there is narration, we must acknowledge a teller of the story. But it does not follow that this is a narrator […] If there is a story, there must be a teller of it; but the teller who figures in this necessity claim is the actual author […] So the *a priori* argument if successful proves the necessity of an actual author, not of a narrator. (Gaut 236)

It seems more or less correct to say that an author is required for a story. It certainly makes intuitive sense if we just think about stories. We can imagine coming across some unidentified bits of manuscript and reading the story to ourselves. In this scenario, we know the manuscript didn’t just fall out of the sky, and we have a sense that someone must be responsible for it. Gaut would say that this someone is the “teller of the story,”

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24 Wilson and Bordwell have similar arguments to the same conclusion.
but I think this phrasing is a bit misleading. What Gaut really means here, as he subsequently says, is that there must be an author of the story, i.e. some agent responsible for creating the story we have in our hands. This author, though, need not also be a narrator.

However, Gaut’s argument is still predicated on narration being the only mode of presentation for a narrative, and that is the main reason I am not happy with it. It would be better to say that “if there is presentation of a story, we must acknowledge a teller (or presenter) of the story.” In this way, it is correct to say that the mere presentation of a story does not entail there being a narrator; however, standing by the conclusions drawn in Chapter 1, narration itself does require a narrator. Again, we arrived at this conclusion by breaking up the logical entailment between narratives and narration, rather than more standardly between narration and narrators. In saying this, then, we are avoiding the main worry about Chatman’s a priori formulation since narrators on our view will not be required for all narratives.

Secondly, regarding implied filmmakers, although I do not take issue with Levinson’s description of the concept, I want to suggest that it only be employed “as needed.” The ubiquity of this concept is necessary for Levinson because he holds that the narrator of a fiction must himself be part of the fictional world, whereas the implied filmmaker occupies a space outside that world. “A film’s narrator presents the events of the film’s world from within it, whereas the implied author of a film, if he or she can be said to present anything other than the film itself, presents the world of the film at one doxastic remove, from a position external to it” (Levinson, “Film Music” 150).
But why should we require, as Levinson does, that narrators be part of their fictional worlds? Chatman, for example, thought narrators occupied their own space, separate from characters in the story world (120). It seems to me that both of these positions are wrong. On one hand, it seems plausible for an actual author to be able to narrate his own story, and on the other, it seems to be possible for a character in a fiction to also be the narrator of the story. So why draw all these “doxastic” lines? On our view, narration is again simply an epistemic stance taken toward presented content, and it is not necessary that narrators strictly belong to one of either the fiction or reality.

So rather than requiring the concept of an implied filmmaker to occupy the role of real world presenter in addition to narrators as fictional world presenters, I think it makes more sense to allow the possibility of talking about implied filmmakers where it is beneficial for us to do so. In other words, I do not want to hold that conceptualizing an implied filmmaker is generally necessary to the understanding of film, but one may be useful in understanding a particular film. After all, we might encounter cases where there really are “discrepancies between what the cinematic narrator presents and what the film as a whole implies” (Chatman 130-1).

Alternatively, we may want to talk about the collective contributions of many people in the construction of a film under one unified heading. In these situations, we can make good use of the implied filmmaker, but are otherwise not saddled with him.

The final, and perhaps biggest, issue has to do with Levinson’s characterization of fictional truths, and his reliance on Walton for the concept of “making-believe.”

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25 For instance, regarding Max Ophuls’ Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948), Wilson notes of the implied filmmaker concept, “the distinctness of the perspective that it gives upon Lisa and her life from the perspective that she herself holds” (Narration in Light 135). This kind of perspective may or may not be ascribable to Ophuls himself in reality, and thus the concept of implied filmmaker becomes useful.
Walton’s general theory has some worrisome aspects. For example, he knowingly declines to countenance non-fictional representation, and thus all representation for Walton is fictional. As Carroll considers it, “[f]or many, including me, this seems exceedingly problematic” (“Make-Believe” 95). Also:

Walton’s postulation of imagining seeing with respect to depictive representation points to what I believe to be a troublesome tendency [...] I do not wish to deny that consumers of novels, pictures, films and the like are active, but I am not convinced that they are involved in all the role-playing Walton adduces. (Carroll, “Make-Believe” 98)

Even these issues with the ‘making-believe’ framework aside, Levinson’s particular application of it to cinematic narrative leaves us with some pressing worries.

For one, if we are to take seriously the idea that fiction film operates primarily through the establishment of fictional truths, then we had better have some reasonably clear idea of what grounds the existence of the truths established. For Walton, these grounding devices are “props,” and in the case of film, the very images seen on the screen (Walton 13). However, the apprehension of images on the screen is heavily interpretive, and now we should begin to feel a familiar worry. That is, if there is anything that can be said to be depicted by the images on the screen, it would seem to be that which is standardly considered explicit in the film. Perhaps, though it is a more contentious claim, props can also implicitly elicit making-believe, but in any case, we should by now be

26 The trouble here is in what grounds such making-believe. For Walton, making-believe relies on props, but how is it possible to have an implicit prop? Rather, it would seem that any implicitly elicited making-believe would need to be grounded in explicit props that are interpreted in some implicit way. For example, by seeing a human being “explicitly” on screen we might be directly prompted to make-believe that she is a certain individual, but we might also “implicitly” make-believe that she has blood flowing through her veins. However, if this is the case, then our implicit making-believe seems to be largely underdetermined, as we might just as easily “implicitly” make-believe that she is a robot masquerading as a human, or that she is really an apparition being perceived as solid flesh and blood. It might be tempting to respond further that we are saved from these latter conclusions by so called “default assumptions” that we make based on background information about the real world. In other words, unless prompted otherwise,
familiar with the various issues surrounding purported explicit/implicit distinction regarding film content. This puts pressure on the very idea of a prop guiding our imagining. Recall our previous example from *The Book of Eli*, but rather than asking whether it is explicit or implicit that Eli is blind, let us ask whether it is fictionally true or not that he is blind. Either way, the answer seemingly depends upon how closely one attends to the film, and whether one has already experienced the revelation at the end in some prior viewing. But if this is the case, then ‘fictional truth’ is not only unlike “garden-variety truth,” as Carroll puts it, but is actually quite radically different from ‘truth’ at all (“Make-Believe” 94). Even if we drop the idiomatic use of ‘truth’ and simply say as Carroll interprets Walton, “a prescription or mandate in a certain context to imagine,” it is difficult to answer whether or not there is really any ‘prescription’ to imagine Eli as blind or not (at least until the end of the film) (“Make-Believe” 94).  

This pressure is, to be sure, not a definitive death blow to Walton’s or Levinson’s framework, but it makes room for concern over whether or not music ever acts in such a way so as to “make-believedly” cause something to be fictionally true. If we insist on using this framework, and are interested in being cautious of the problems surrounding the explicit (and by extension that which is fictionally true) then we really ought to start with those elements of a film which are most inarguably concrete and definite as candidates for establishing fictional truth. I have in mind here things like “in *Jaws*, it is fictionally true that there is a shark,” or “in *The Book of Eli*, it is fictionally true that Eli is we assume by default a flesh and blood character since that is our general experience in the real world. But if this is the case, then what exactly is the grounding for our original “implicit” making-believe? Is it the background knowledge we bring with us to the theatre, or the visual representation on screen, or some combination of the two? And is such making-believe even still “implicit”? Again, a good part of the trouble here seems to lie in the explicit/implicit distinction and the making-believe framework itself.  

27 There are, of course, many other examples that illustrate the same kind of difficulty.
a human being,” but even these relatively safe examples may be disputable given additional contextual information. What is to stop us from thinking that Eli is really some kind of super hero (possibly from the planet Krypton)? It is certainly less in keeping with the rest of what is presented in the film, but it’s still plausible. Is there simply no prescription to imagine such a thing? Or perhaps some kind of prescription against imagining it? And if we already have the above kinds of problems for the most basic and concrete assertions about fictional truth, then what are we to make of music, which is often much more nuanced and subtle? Suffice it to say that Walton’s framework of fictional truth does not seem to well accommodate the project at hand.

Narrational Significance

All this is not to deny, of course, that music has an effect on narrative. It is just that this effect does not, I think, cash out in Levinson’s terms of creating fictional truths or having narrative significance. One thing to notice in the Jaws case is that, unlike the image of a shark which we immediately recognize as a shark, the shark motto is necessarily built up through association with the visuals. Before long in the film, we have learned to associate the shark motto with the shark. Alternatively, the image of the shark is understandable to us more or less immediately. Though, of course, we will need to have previously built up some schemata for the recognition of sharks, this process is very different from the kind of temporary association employed in the establishment of leitmotif and other themes or mottos.\(^28\) This makes sense, since music cannot inherently

\(^28\) It is important to note that although some themes or mottos, such as Jaws’ shark motto, or the Star Wars theme, become iconic and recognizable far past the screening of the film, there are innumerable many other uses of leitmotif and theme that do not stick with us long past the film viewing. It would be a mistake to take these iconic cases to imply that the function of leitmotif is anything more than a temporary association. The cognitive link made between a musical phrase and a particular filmic element is usually nowhere close to as strong as the kinds of relations involved with schemata-based recognition. Of course, through
depict or represent something concrete like a shark, it must instead rely on other means, visuals in this case, to establish the meaning that comes to be associated with the music. In other words, the shark motto is somehow dependent upon the other shark elements in the film.

Similarly, foreshadowing, expository, and emotive music can all display this kind of dependence on filmic content. At the end of *Star Wars - The Phantom Menace*, the foreshadowing of the emperor’s identity relies on the visual perception of senator Palpatine in combination with the ominous musical cue. When Hoshi’s psychological state is ambiguous in *Rashomon* after finding the abandoned hat, the expository suspicious tones are clearly in reference to him. Finally, when the sad music at the end of *The Return of the King* prompts in us a profound sorrow, it is taken to be in response to the death of Frodo and Sam. Though the musical functions listed here can come in a very general form, without reference to specific characters, events, or locations, they often rely on associations with these filmic elements to convey their meaning.

Recalling from Chapter 2 our full list of musical categories, we can now draw a basic distinction between music which only fulfills a psychological function, and music which can also seem to semantically reference film content. The former category includes mood and direct response music (and background music if it really is a proper category), while the latter includes leitmotif, foreshadowing, expository, and emotive

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29 The term “parasitic” might also come to mind, and if it weren’t for the negative connotations associated with this particular term, it would probably be equally applicable.
music. This semantic element is the distinguishing factor for the shark motto in *Jaws*,
and for the other kinds of music we have been discussing.

But what exactly is being distinguished by this semantic dependence? We are
arguing that nondiegetic film music cannot add wholly new or novel information or
content (or fictional truths or facts), but that it can sometimes change, modify, inflect,
amplify, de-emphasize, or highlight information or content already present. The kinds of
film music that achieve this result do so through their semantic dependence upon other,
mainly visual, filmic elements, and have what I will call (with a definite nod to Levinson)
narrational significance. Rather than being somehow instrumental in the establishment
of narrative facts or truths, this sort of film music is instrumental in how narrative content
(which again can only exist as diegetic visuals or sounds) is presented or interpreted.
Thus, it is our main thesis that through its amplification, modification, clarification,
inflection, etc, this type of film music is significant to the very process of narration, and
is, hence, narrationally significant.

But when we say this music affects *how* narrative content is interpreted, what do
we really mean? Recall from Chapter 1 that a film narrative is constructed by viewers,
based on presented story content and style. This means that narratives are fundamentally
based on the interpretations of viewers. We also identified in Chapter 1 two modes of
presentation for film narratives: basic presentation and narration. The main
distinguishing feature of narration is its existence at a level above and beyond presented
story content. It consists of meta-information (loosely construed) that directly affects
*how* given story content is perceived, often through evaluation, perspective indication, or
clarification. So it is this meta-information that the process of narration employs to affect how viewers interpret content when they are constructing a film narrative.

But, though paradigm cases often include propositions, e.g. voiceover narration, this meta-information importantly needs not only be propositional. It may also be simply affective or suggestive, and this is where music comes in. Nondiegetic film music can be used to provide suggestive meta-information affecting our interpretation of (how we interpret) presented story events, thus contributing to the narration of that story. In this way, it is suggestive of narration, and provides viewers with narrational cues. But while music can clarify, amplify, or modify story content in a way that is similar to propositional narration, it is still incapable of adding (in Levinson’s sense) narrative content. Again, this is not to say that musical functions will not affect narrative content, or change the narrative that is ultimately constructed, but influencing the interpretation of content on screen is not the same as providing new content.

The following analogy may be beneficial at this point. In a chair in the center of a small room, we find a narrator reading “The Three Little Pigs” to his closely gathered audience. The narrator deepens his voice when the wolf speaks, shows appropriate emotion when the houses get blown down, and is generally animated and engaging in his storytelling. In this scenario, the story content is roughly the lexical material comprising “The Three Little Pigs,” and the narrator is engaging in the process of narration to present the story to his audience. The tonal qualities of his voice, the inflections he applies to the words, and the various details that characterize his particular presentation clearly do not belong to the story itself. Rather, they are qualities that characterize his particular

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30 It is my view that other filmic process, such as camera work or editing, can also contribute to narrational meta-information, primarily in a non-propositional way, but those points must be argued elsewhere.
narration of the story, or the way in which the story was told. They describe and enrich the process of story transmission itself and correspond to a specific mode of presentation. In that sense, they are narrationally significant, and it is in this way that I wish to characterize the kinds of film music we are interested in here. Much as vocal inflections on the part of our narrator can modify, intensify, or shape the presentation and interpretation of the verbal story content, nondiegetic film music can operate on the narrative content presented in a film. Vocal inflections themselves can only exist as dependent upon the words being inflected, and in the same way, nondiegetic film music only modifies or inflects content already present in the film.

We might further imagine a contrasting case where our reader simply reads the story, without any embellishment or narrationally significant qualities at all. In this case, we would have what amounts to the literary equivalent of basic presentation. On our view, the reader would technically not even need to be considered a narrator, since, strictly speaking, he is not narrating. This sort of case would be analogous to a film which lacks any and all narration. Since we are sometimes a bit loose in our talk about narration, it is important to reiterate our earlier point that narration is fundamentally linked to a particular epistemic stance on the part of the audience. That is to say, narration consists, as demonstrated in the above examples, in the providing of additional meta-information over and above the basic story, and the audience’s adoption of a stance recognizing this very information.

But how is an audience supposed to recognize the availability of this so called meta-information? In our initial example above, the physical presence of the narrator is

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31 Though in everyday usage, these terms tend to get thrown around rather haphazardly.
enough to prompt this stance, and in the second example, though there is a physically present reader, there is no meta-information to be recognized. In a film with narrationally significant music, however, there is no real analogue to the physically present narrator telling the story. This has led some to the conclusion that the film music itself somehow embodies this entity. Let us be clear that narrationally significant nondiegetic music is not narration. In other words, it is not the case that nondiegetic music itself is narrating the film. Winters, for one, rightly complains about the characterization of music as actively narrating:

[F]or music to narrate the events of the diegesis – surely either we would have to posit the existence of a narrator figure one step further removed that (occasionally) interpolates this extra layer of musical narration between it and the events recounted, or music itself would have to be regarded as the creator of all the narrative we experience, and only occasionally allow its voice to be heard. For me, both these possibilities seem bizarre, bordering on the nonsensical. (43)

Rather, narrationally significant instances of nondiegetic music provide what we identified in Chapter 1 as narrational cues. In much the same way that films cue questions and answers about diegetic action through their use of shot sequences, framing, etc, instances of film music can cue the recognition of narration.

So, on our view, narration is a particular mode of conveying a film narrative, characterized by the inclusion of meta-information which goes above and beyond what is required for the basic presentation of a story. Frequently, some of this meta-information is provided by narrationally significant nondiegetic music. Importantly, the music itself cannot be said to narrate the film, but rather contributes to and acts to cue the recognition of narration. Thus, narrationally significant music not only modifies or inflects the

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32 See Carroll in The Philosophy of Motion Pictures for a more comprehensive explanation of the question and answer model of film viewing.
content of the film, but can also provide grounds for viewers to recognize this additional information or inflection as a quality of the process of narration.

The Indefinite Narrator

Now, remember from Chapter 1 that one common feature of narration is the sense of some particular viewpoint or perspective in the telling, and this perspective is usually attributed to the narrator, i.e. the entity (not necessarily anthropomorphic) doing the narrating. So what happens, it may be asked, when this so called narrationally significant music is acting to cue narration, even though we have no other indication of who or what might be called the narrator? Particularly, what is to be said for cases like *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) where no definite narrator is implicated, but the musical theme is consistently satirical through the film, and seems to provide some recognizable narrational perspective on the diegetic action? Also, what about instances like *Star Wars*, where we seem to have some narrationally significant musical cues (such as foreshadowing), but they are not very definitive or consistent?

As we have already argued in Chapter 1, the concept of narration seems to logically require a narrator of some kind. Importantly, the concept does not require an “explicit” or even a consistent narrator, but at the time, we declined to further explore the possibility of an “implicit” narrator. Here is where that concept becomes useful. In a case like *Dr. Strangelove*, where we have a good sense of narrational perspective, but no definitely defined narrator, can we simply appeal to an implicit, or more preferably, indefinite narrator? Since there seems to be narration, as indicated largely by the film’s narrationally significant music, but no definite sense of narrator identity, it is reasonable to fulfill the logical requirement of the theory by allowing for an indefinite narrator.
In other cases, where we have only some indication of narration, but it is less consistent or less clear to begin with, the situation becomes more difficult. Remember that narration is cued by various methods, one of which we are arguing can be nondiegetic music. But as we previously argued when developing our gradient model of film presentation, narrational cues certainly vary in strength and clarity, and in many cases we may be uncertain about how to interpret them.

Our framework by no means makes the work of deciding these cases totally clear cut and worry free. Basically, the question comes down to how much indication of narration is required for adopting a stance recognizing it? Some would likely say that any indication ought to be enough, since failing to recognizing narration might mean that we miss out on some important aspects of the film. Others will likely point out the danger of misinterpreting elements which are not actually significant if we are willing to postulate narration at the drop of a hat. In other words, some arbitrary line must be drawn, and it will inevitably vary from person to person. For those uncomfortable with the idea of indefinite narrators, the bar will likely be set fairly high, while the more abstract-minded will likely maintain a more open requirement. I do not want to make any claims regarding which of these approaches is best, other than to say that a middle ground is probably most reasonable. The important thing to remember, however, is that once narration is granted, some kind of narrator ought to follow.

Now, there may remain some resistance to the very concept of an indefinite narrator. Most of this resistance will likely come in two main ways. On the one hand, we are tempted to say something like, “there is obviously no narrator in *Jaws* because we have no idea of who he or she might be.” In other words, the lack of concrete evidence
for the existence of such an entity is cited as reason for its denial. But clearly this kind of
response is either an appeal to ignorance, or begs the question. The very concept we are
dealing with here is by definition not definitely evidenced in the film. Therefore, a lack
of the kinds of cues used to signal a definite narrator counts in no way against the
concept.

The other main kind of objection is basically an appeal to theoretical parsimony.
Indefinite narrators should be rejected, so it goes, because they are unnecessary for an
explanation of film viewing experience, and we ought to pare down our explanations to
their necessary elements only. We have already seen that Bordwell prefers this sort of
reductionistic line.

Some theorists counter this angle by trying to show that narrators are in fact
necessary to our understanding of the cinematic process, but these attempts have met with
mixed success.\(^3^3\) I will make a slightly different response. Bordwellians maintain that
we can understand the mechanisms of film without reference to narrators, and that they
are thusly unnecessary. However, the point we are making about indefinite narrators has
little to do with simply understanding the mechanisms of film. We are not postulating
these narrators merely for their explanatory power, or for their theoretical elegance, but
because the concept of narration seems to demand it. In one sense, they are unnecessary
to our \textit{understanding} of the concept, but this does not mean they are unnecessary to the
concept. This claim may initially seem contradictory, but let me give an example.

Suppose we are considering the playing of a guitar. The act of playing the guitar
is obviously a concept that requires some kind of agential presence, i.e. some subject to

\(^{3^3}\) See Chatman or Currie for representative attempts.
engage in the action of playing. However, I might understand the mechanics of how the strings are plucked, how the notes are changed, and how the sound is produced, all framed without any reference to an agent. I merely see that vibrating strings at different lengths produce different resonances in the guitar body and sound is produced. In other words, I can abstract the agential subject out of the process of playing, and can come to understand the process itself in this way. But this does not mean that the action of playing a guitar is now somehow subject-less. The very concept of playing as an action still demands an agent. Guitars do not play themselves, and it is in this way that narrators should be considered necessary.

After all, the very idea of an indefinite narrating agent is highly abstract, and it should perhaps not be surprising that such an entity proves in one sense to be unnecessary to our discernment of film processes. He is the shapeless, nameless source of the narration, and as such, need not figure any further into understanding the film. But despite this, the concept of narration still demands a narrator. The simple recognition of some persona or perspective is enough to satisfy our logical requirements and to account for the sense of agency that commonly accompanies narrated scenes.

But, it may also be familiarly objected, isn’t it possible then for almost every film to require a narrator? Again, only when we have sufficient indication of narration should we postulate a narrator. Though “sufficient indication” is still somewhat vague, it will have to do, as said before, with the providing of strong enough meta-information and narrational cues, which, as we have been arguing, may include narrationally significant uses of nondiegetic music. Though this does seem to leave the door open for widespread narrators, there is one principally important factor to recognize here. Recall from
Chapter 1 that film narration is not an all or nothing concept, and films may include a greater or lesser number of narrated scenes. All the concept requires is that there be a narrator for narrated scenes, not for the entire film.

Even when we do happen to have a definitely identified character narrator, we still recognize that not all scenes in a film need be narrated, and the same applies for the indefinite narrator. However, whereas the identity of a definite narrator is often taken to be persistent and can be very important to our understanding of a film, an indefinite narrator is simply the theoretical consequence of the concepts we are employing and its identity remains inconsequential. Thus, in the end, we only have “widespread” narrators in a trivial sense. If we mean to say that every scene involving narration must include some kind of narrator (even if that narrator amounts to little more than an unnamed abstract perspective), then the answer is yes. However, if we mean to say that most every film is narrated or accompanied by a narrator, then the answer is no.

On this view, it turns out that recognizing the role of music and the proper place for narrators is quite complex and somewhat subjective. But is this really much of a surprise? Films are notoriously complex artworks, and as is the case for art in general, boundaries and conventions are constantly being pushed and challenged. Why should we expect there to be a simple clear, “on or off” answer to the question of film narrators or the role of film music?

So, to briefly recap, we saw that Levinson’s criterion of narrativity, based upon Walton’s framework and the establishment of fictional truths is after the right kind of question, but goes about it the wrong way. We then introduced the concept of narrational significance, which picks out music that is instrumental in how narrative content is
perceived, rather than crucial in the establishment of narrative truth as Levinson claims. This new notion of narrational significance is based on the idea of recognized narrational meta-information and is exhibited by some nondiegetic film music’s semantic dependence on diegetic aspects depicted on screen. We then saw how certain functional categories of music (leitmotif, foreshadowing, expository, and emotive music) tend to exhibit narrational significance. It is this intimate connection to the diegetic, affecting how the narrative is presented, that makes these examples of music narrationally significant. Finally, we explored the notion of an indefinite narrator, showed roughly when such an abstract entity should be employed, and briefly responded to potential worries about the concept.
CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES

We will now focus primarily on some examples in order to highlight and further motivate the concepts we have been discussing. Our choosing here is especially complicated by the need to find instances that well exhibit all the many complexities embedded in our theory. Consequently, we will walk through a range of cases, chosen to best illustrate film narration, basic presentation, and the interplay of film music across those modes of presentation.

To begin with, let us look at some films which show clear narration, and begin to explore musical roles from there. In film, most of the clearest cases of narration are those cases which involve definite fictional narrators. That is, not only are we directly aware of someone who is supposed to be narrating the story, but that person is also visually portrayed as a character in the narrative. Films such as *Neverwas* (2005), *Memento* (2000), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Titanic*, *Rashomon*, and *Citizen Kane* all make use of definite fictional narrators. Importantly, the narration can be of a past or present story. In *Citizen Kane*, we know that Mr. Kane is presently dead, and the narrated stories about him are obviously past tense. However, in *Memento*, our sense of past and present is highly disrupted by the reverse chronological order of the narration. We seem to see events unfold just as the main character, anterograde amnesiac Leonard Shelby, must experience them. Thus, to us and to Leonard, the narration always seems to be present tense. So the portrayal of past tense events in contrast with present events really just amounts to another potential narrational cue, as we previously noted of *Titanic*.

It is important to recognize that these obvious examples of narration are in some ways very unlike cases of literary narration. That is, we can hardly imagine the
implicated narrator verbally “telling” us the images themselves. Nor, it would seem, are we somehow seeing the events through his or her eyes. It is crucial to remember that our concept of filmic narration has essentially to do with the style of presentation, i.e. one that includes relevant meta-information over and above basic presentation. In this way, the filmic concept of narration is somewhat asymmetric with its literary analogue. In film, the existence of a definite fictional narrator is just one way to cue additional perspectival information, and we should not get too hung up on exacting details about how this information is purportedly transferred from narrator to viewer.\(^{34}\)

**Clear Narration**

In *Titanic*, we are made aware that the story being presented is Rose’s story. This is done through initial establishing shots of the older Rose beginning to tell her story which then transition to historical shots detailing the story itself. This structure is reinforced when the film occasionally jumps back to the present, portraying the older Rose briefly at pauses in the narrated story. In this example, the temporal distance and establishing shots of the older Rose are the primary narrational cues for our considering the presented story as narrated. The music of the film, in particular, does not significantly add to this sense. The majority of the score could plausibly be categorized as mood music, operating to set the general tone of the scenes, but not strongly providing cues with narrational significance.

In *Rashomon*, on the other hand, we not only have clear indication of narration, through similar means to *Titanic*, but we also have instances of music with narrational significance. The scene in which Hoshi finds the hat in the forest contains expository

\(^{34}\) George Wilson’s “*Le Grand Imagier* Steps Out” for one follows up on these sorts of questions.
music, operating in conjunction with the visuals, to modify and enhance Hoshi’s portrayed emotional state. In this particular instance, we already have strong perspectival information to motivate our recognition of narration, but if that were lacking, the music use in the film would help strengthen the case. That is, in many scenes, we experience foreshadowing, expository, and emotive music which seems to amplify, modify, or clarify the diegetic action. This narrationally significant music acts as a further cue for us to recognize narration as a mode of presentation in *Rashomon*.

As far as narrator identity is concerned in this film, we have ready diegetic access to the characters that are portrayed as each telling their own versions of events. However, the entire story is being relayed *post facto* by Hoshi to his companions seeking shelter from the rain. So ultimately, if we are to identify one main narrator for the diegetic action, it would most likely be Hoshi. This conclusion is strengthened by the consistent use of nondiegetic music throughout all the different perspectives being relayed. If, on the other hand, the music had noticeably changed style or character between the different portrayed versions of events, then we would have some evidence supporting the recognition of multiple narrators and narrational perspectives.

At this point, I want to consider a television example which takes advantage of an opportunity unavailable to most feature-length films. The serial nature of television shows can provide us with a unique perspective on the principles we are working with here. That is, since television series’ often establish a distinctive style in their presentation, they have the ability to step outside of that style standard in order to make some larger external point, inject humor, experiment with different cinematic techniques,
or conveniently for us, provide a particularly clear example of music as it is related to narrational perspective.

Specifically, in Season 5 Episode 12 of *The X-Files*, “Bad Blood,” we find agents Scully and Mulder investigating a supposed vampire. The peculiar thing about this episode, however, is not the mythical subject matter, but the manner in which the story events are presented. The beginning of the episode reveals Scully and Mulder to be disagreeing about the events that have transpired in the previous few days of investigation. In an attempt to “get their story straight” for the official report, the two retell their own individual reconstructions of events, and the majority of the episode consists in our first getting Scully’s story, and then Mulder’s version.

From a strictly structural perspective, there are several inconsistencies in the stories, suggesting that both cannot be true, but of much more interest to us is the distinctive nature or character of each telling. Various narrationally significant details, including much of the musical score, differ between the two accounts, not only giving the sense of a particular perspective, but, for those familiar with the agent’s respective personalities, a confirmation of whose individual perspective it is. There are many Mulder-esque tendencies, for example, in the presentation of his side of the story. These qualities include an obvious preoccupation with supernatural phenomena and heroics, the importance of which is often exhibited by the music score. This stands in contrast to Scully’s more subdued, calm, and rational approach, whose character is also reflected in the music accompanying her account.

This structure, consisting of a combination of multiple narrational perspectives, contrasts sharply with the usual “objective” style of presentation that most other episodes
in the series employ. Partly because of this, the “Bad Blood” episode provides us with an exceptionally clear example of the operation of music in conjunction with narration. Even though this example is not a film *per se*, it highlights the same kinds of operations that frequently take place in feature-length cinema. We can in this case clearly see how music (and other cinematic techniques for that matter) can be used narrationally to affect the interpretation of narrative content from two very similar story chains.

As we now begin to move away from more obvious cases of narration, one particularly interesting example is Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998). In this film, we find an interesting mix of war story and social commentary, punctuated frequently by movingly beautiful shots of nature. One of the most significant aspects of the film is Private Witt’s voice-over component which accompanies many of the present-day and flashback scenes. The peculiar thing about this component, however, is that it is only debatably construed as narration. Because Pvt. Witt’s monologue seems to be more of a general commentary on global themes, it oftentimes seems unrelated to what is going on visually. In one sense, the voice-over component is providing meta-information, but this information is often not strongly aimed at the narrative action. Further, after Pvt. Witt is killed toward the end of the film, the voice-over commentary changes to that of Sgt. Welsh. This inconsistency and vagueness of purpose in the voice-over does little on its own to motivate the recognition of narration.

That being said, many scenes do have a distinctive character, i.e. one that seems to suggest a particular evaluative perspective on much of the action. This is often indicated with the poignant intercutting of environmental “nature shots” with the diegetic action. But there is also an important musical contribution to the film’s powerful sense of
sadness in the face of death and destruction. We often hear contemplative or melancholy themes, accompanying the voice-over segments, which seem to bear directly on what is being said. There are also numerous uses of expository and emotive music to help shape our sense of the soldier’s portrayed feelings when they encounter the horrors of war. All of this, in conjunction with the voice-over, is arguably enough to motivate the recognition of narration in much of *The Thin Red Line*.

In this case, however, the identity of the narrator may reasonably remain indefinite. On one hand, it may seem natural to assume that Pvt. Witt is the narrator, based on his extensive voice-over commentary throughout the majority of the film, but this conclusion is not a necessary one. There is arguably some change in tone once Witt is killed and Sgt. Welsh takes up the voice-over, a shift from contemplative wonder to wry despair, and this may seem to provide some evidence for a change in narrational perspective, but overall the film maintains a relatively consistent musical character, and the possibility remains that perhaps neither Witt nor Welsh are narrators. In this latter case, narrator identity is simply indefinite.

**Posited Narration**

We will now move to what will likely be our most contentious examples. These are the supposedly objectionable cases where we seem to have no definite indication of narrator, but have reason for postulating narration based primarily upon musical cues. That is, in the previous cases, we have demonstrated music’s capacity to add or strengthen narrational cues where some cues were already present, but now we examine cases where music is really the only, or at least primary, indicator of narration.
In Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1957), we encounter a number of provocative uses of nondiegetic music. Of particular interest to us are the instances where we have narrationally significant foreshadowing music. At one point, we come across two of the main characters, Antonius and Jons, approaching a small settlement. As they stop, we hear a foreboding musical phrase, and the cue seems to be suggesting some future wrongdoing or evil surrounding the settlement, though we remain unaware of when or how this evil might come about. As a further case, later on in the film, we see Antonius conversing with Death over their game of chess. Death asks Antonius specifically about the knight’s plans to take his companions, Mia and Jof, through the old forest. At this moment, we receive another dark, foreboding musical cue, and in this case, it is immediately apparent that evil and misfortune wait in the forest. These uses of foreshadowing are narrationally significant because they importantly rely upon the visual action at the time in order to get their meaning across. There is a distinctive agential sense to the scenes, one in which the music seems to be actively participating in the presentation of the story to viewers.

As a further example in *The Seventh Seal*, Jof is at one point puttering around his camp alone in the early morning, when he catches sight of a robed woman in the distant clearing. At this time, the music provides a clerical or angelic theme, clearly suggesting that this woman is of religious significance. Jof verbally confirms our conclusion minutes later when he describes his encounter as a vision of the Virgin Mary. This is another case where the music is clearly working in conjunction with the visuals and has narrational significance. In other words, the music is pointedly acting to affect and change our interpretation of the portrayed scene. Without it, we would be as likely as not
to think of the woman as just some female stranger in the clearing, taking her to be a simple peasant or civilian, or judging by Jof’s initial surprise, an old friend he hasn’t seen for a long while, perhaps even someone he thought was dead. Importantly, the woman’s identity is firmly established a little while after we see her, when Jof refers to her directly as the Virgin Mary, but without the benefit of the prior music, we as the audience would likely be left in confusion up until that point.

I want to argue that, based on the narrationally significant uses of nondiegetic music throughout this film, we are licensed to recognize narration as the main mode of presentation for many of the film’s scenes. In other words, though the film may lack most other “conventional” narrational cues, the nondiegetic music itself is a sufficient indicator to recognize film narration. There is enough meta-information being employed here in the presentation of many scenes to motivate such a conclusion, and in this case, that information happens to be primarily provided by the film music. In *The Seventh Seal*, however, there is never a clearly established narrator. In this case, unlike *The Thin Red Line*, there is really no predilection to consider any of the film’s characters as narrator. We have then a solidly indefinite narrator as entailed by our theory and the concept of narration.

David Fincher’s 1995 film *Seven* (sometimes *Se7en*), provides another interesting case to examine. This film boasts a single sentence uttered as voiceover, and it occurs in the final few seconds of the film. In this case, I would argue, this cue is acting retroactively as a sort of confirmation of narration. Throughout the rest of the film, we encounter consistently dark and tense musical themes, which are often used to foreshadow or to clarify. For instance, when the two detectives are examining the first
few crime scenes, whenever a significant clue or piece of evidence is encountered, we get an emphasizing musical tone. This effect is especially pronounced because scored music in the film is used relatively sparingly. Similarly, later on in the film, after Det. Somerset tells Det. Mills that this investigation won’t have a happy ending, we get a brief sequence of Mills telling his wife that he loves her. This intimate scene is accompanied by dark, foreboding music with shrill accents, effectively foreshadowing the evil doings that await the couple.

This film provides a strong case where the music seems to be actively affecting our perceptions of the presented material. However, interestingly, during almost the entirety of the film, there are no conventional cues for narration or for a definite narrator. In this case, many of the scenes in question do give a distinctive sense of perspective, but it is primarily the music that motivates this sense. For the especially attentive viewer, it might be noted that the perspective indicated is much more aligned with Det. Somerset’s views and opinions than it is with Det. Mills’. This is significant, because when we finally hear Somerset’s voiceover at the conclusion of the film, it is reasonable to take this as a confirmation of that perspective. This is a particularly interesting case because we have narrationally significant music, but the actual identity of our implicated narrator is again debatable. A good case can be made for Det. Somerset as narrator, but it would be equally reasonable to conclude that most instances of narration in the film have only an indefinite narrator.

Another example that might be perceived as particularly contentious is Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). To many, this Indiana Jones film may not seem to be a very likely candidate for film narration. At the very least, we have absolutely no use of voiceover
and no indication of narrator identity. Basically, many of the conventional cues we look for to indicate narration are lacking, and if we do postulate narration in this film, we will certainly have a wholly indefinite narrator. However, there is a case to be made for the contributions of the film’s music to this analysis.

First, there are obvious uses of leitmotif, one of which has come to be known as the iconic Indiana Jones theme. Although the employment of this musical function is not as prominent as the shark theme in *Jaws*, it still often acts to indicate particularly heroic or dramatic actions performed by the adventuring archaeologist, such as Indy swinging from his whip or escaping seemingly inevitable death. Similarly, when Indy believes his friend Marion dead, he sits sadly by himself with only a bottle and a nefarious monkey for comfort, while the music pointedly turns to a sad variation on what has been established as the Marion theme. Traveling leitmotif is also used to indicate that Indy is en route to various locations, accompanying a map-like background image while a plane flies from city to city. In these sequences, there is little aside from the music to indicate that Indy is aboard the flight in question, and often these sequences happen without much diegetic lead up to the trip. Additionally, there is interesting use of emotive music during the fight scene where Marion is apparently killed. What might normally be taken as an intense and suspenseful confrontation with local Nazi-employed thugs rather comes across with a distinctive comic flair thanks to the amusing and almost carnival-like music that accompanies the scene.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is how little basic mood or background music is used. It is a film with very ‘active’ music, much of which I am claiming is narrationally significant. It is important to remember,
especially for these seemingly more contentious cases, that the cued “film narration” here is not simply synonymous with “a story being told” or with any kind of strictly verbal component. Further, the narrationally significant uses of music we are considering should not necessarily be thought of as intentional narrational prompts inserted by the filmmaker strictly for the purpose of cuing narration. Narrational significance is often only a latent aspect of music that is primarily engaging in foreshadowing, emotional clarification, or other relevant functions. So again, the narration we are dealing with here is a mode of filmic presentation which exhibits a distinctive character, style, or quality, brought on by the providing of meta-information in addition to the diegetic story. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, much of that character, I am arguing, is realized through its uses of music.

We should at this point consider briefly the application of our theory to Levinson’s flagship example, *Jaws*. Recall that Levinson’s primary focus was on the shark theme leitmotif, and for him, this use of music was enough to be classified as having “narrative significance,” due to its supposed contribution to the narrative content itself. On our theory, remember that music cannot add fictional truths or new narrative content, but the shark theme does seem to have narrational significance. It suggests to us, quite strongly, the presence of the shark in a given scene. Additionally, there are other instances in the film where music is foreshadowing or operating emotively, such as when the crew of the Orca first catches full sight of the shark, and the accompanying music suggests both fear and wonder. Again, as in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we have no definite identification of a narrator, so he must remain indefinite.
Before moving on to other examples, it is important reiterate a point about these so called indefinite narrators. Notice that the identity of the narrator is not always an important factor in understanding a film. In some instances, as in *The X-Files* example, our sense of who the narrator is proves to be essential to our understanding of the narrative, but oftentimes the narrator can remain a nameless face, or even a faceless suggestion, with no significant impact on our understanding. The operative factor that should be focused on here, and the one that nondiegetic music can be significant to, is the process of narration itself, not the narrator. We should not, on the whole, be overly preoccupied with narrator identity.

Basic Presentation

Now, with several examples of music and film narration out of the way, we will briefly turn to music’s operation without narration. In one sense, the examples already discussed above would suffice to highlight this operation, since they all include at least some basic presentation in addition to their narrated sections. However, I want to take advantage of this section to not only highlight basic presentation with music, but also to cover a couple examples that wholly, or at least mostly, consist of basic presentation.

First, the cult classic *Highlander* (1986) provides a good example of background music. The soundtrack for much of the film consists of songs from the British rock band Queen. Though many of the songs match the general mood of the scenes they accompany, none can really be said to have narrational significance. Most of the music in the film is either operating simply as background or as mood music. Perhaps one exception is the scene during which “Who Wants to Live Forever” plays, arguably providing additional clarification to Connor MacLeod’s mental states concerning his
dying wife Heather. However, this particular instance is complicated first by the lyrical nature of the music, and also by the consistency with which the rest of the soundtrack remains relatively passive and non-narrational.\textsuperscript{35}

The second example I want to highlight is Kenneth Branagh’s \textit{Hamlet} (1996). This film is accompanied almost entirely by background music. Most frequently, it is found unobtrusively backing the numerous soliloquies that take place when characters find themselves alone; soliloquies which would otherwise be delivered in somewhat awkward silence. Occasionally, the accompanying music provides mood support, perhaps most notably toward the middle of the film when Hamlet reaches a turning point, deciding on vengeance for his father as his course of action. In a particularly interesting bit of cinematography, the camera frames Hamlet close up as he begins considering his situation aloud, while the music builds in prominence as the camera slowly and steadily backs away, mimicking the expanding consequences of Hamlet’s decision and evoking a sense of epic importance.

Although the use of music in \textit{Hamlet} sometimes borders on being narrationally significant, by and large, the film is basically presented. I want to highlight as a final point in this example that on our theory, basic presentation is not some mark of shame on a film. As is evidenced especially by this last case, films with primarily or wholly basic presentation are just as often award winning and well received as their more narrational counterparts. The presence of narration or the lack thereof is not an inherent mark of quality in film.

\textsuperscript{35} As we noted earlier in Chapter 2, lyrical score music complicates matters, but this example would perhaps be a reasonable place to start a more detailed exploration of its effects.
Conclusions

We have herein attempted to build up a new way of understanding film music and the role it occupies in relation to film narration. We started out in Chapter 1 by getting clear on what things like story, style, content, narrative, narration, and narrator all mean when applied to film. In order to get around the problem of ubiquitous narrators that has occupied the attention of many previous theorists, we broke up some the logical entailments surrounding these concepts. We thereby ended up with a new picture of film narrative, importantly distinguishing narration as one of two separate modes of film presentation.

We then developed, in Chapter 2, a clear and structured way to categorize and talk about film music, and looked at a couple possibilities for how it might function in relation to narrative. Initially, we identified seven rough categories in our musical taxonomy and saw that music use in film is often ambiguous between certain categories. We then considered two possible relations film music might bear to narrative. We first considered the music itself being narrative, but saw that this road did not look promising, and turned instead to how film music could act on or affect a narrative.

Following up on this lead, in Chapter 3 we first explored a theory provided by Levinson, which attempted to model a solution based on narrative significance. Finding this solution to be lacking, we embarked on our own attempt to describe the role of music, letting the spirit of Levinson’s theory be our guide. This led to the introduction of narrational significance, a concept fundamentally different from Levinson’s, allowing us to identify film music which seems to carry a special significance to the very presentation of a filmic narrative.
Finally, in Chapter 4, we applied the theory to several focused examples, and saw how our concepts played out in practice. We examined first cases of narration that were clear regardless of music use. We then moved on to consider cases where the use of narrationally significant music was the primary indicator of narration. These were the most theoretically interesting and contentious examples, since they represented cases which go against some theorist’s intuitions. Lastly, we looked briefly at some films containing little or no narration, in order to highlight the importance of basic presentation in film.

One interesting aspect of this theory is that it bears positively on the longstanding debate over ubiquitous narrators. As we have seen, there is a stark divide between the two camps on this issue, and little progress has been made in reaching common ground. One advantage of the present theory is that it provides a middle ground that both sides should be relatively happy with. That is, we have framed our concepts in such a way so as to deny the worrisome strong logical entailment of narrators for every film, but have allowed the concept of an indefinite narrator to be possible in many films.

Also, our theory has the advantage of not only categorizing the types of music commonly found in films, but also explaining how film music accomplishes its functions. As we have noted, much work has gone into dividing up the different types of film music, but less has been done to satisfactorily explain where these various types fit into the overall logic of cinematic presentation. Our inquiry stems from very basic questions that most normal film viewers ask themselves at some point or another. What is this extra background music really doing? Films often portray very true-to-life situations, but real life does not include a soundtrack, so why do so many films contain one?
In answering this question, we have tried to do more than just say that this music is a stylistic choice. It is more than just a convention in modern film. We have tried to go deeper than simply saying that it has various functions, such as setting the mood, or providing background filler. Our goal has been to capture, in terms of cinematic processes, what music really does; to explain at a very fundamental level how music operates within the structure of a fiction film. In that regard, I think we have succeeded.

There may still remain some objectionable assumptions or conclusions grounding our theory, but beyond that, we have aimed to provide a consistent and coherent account of film music. Much of the difficulty associated with theorizing in this area is related to ambiguity in the everyday concepts being used, and often the best one can do is to settle on clear interpretations and go from there. The theory argued for here is designed to follow from the basic concepts we have laid out, but of course, there will likely be some who are unhappy with our formulation of the basic concepts themselves. In response to these sorts of objections, I maintain that however we ultimately choose to name and hash out the foundational concepts, this framework picks out important aspects of film music that should not be overlooked. Though they may go by different names or appear to be different in form, the principles we have identified herein are real and significant in their own right.

One final thing bears mentioning. Movies are a very immersive form of entertainment, and they have to be in order to motivate viewers to bracket out all the various distractions of everyday life and sit attentively for periods which are often upwards of two hours in length. The bids for our attention are becoming increasingly demanding all the time, especially in our well connected digital age. As such, during the
course of a film it can be difficult to attend to the sorts of processes we have been identifying. It is exceedingly easy to fall back under the spell constantly being woven by so many films. This means that even though we have endeavored to illustrate and make clear by example the narrative concepts and musical functions espoused by our theory, they can in practice remain elusive without concerted effort to recognize and distinguish them.

In fact, paying such close attention to these elements often sharply dampens the immersive effects of the film. The very recognition of the cinematic processes at work often mitigates their power over us. So it should not be surprising that, in order to maintain an appealing experience, we may tend to (consciously or unconsciously) overlook any focused reflection on the functions and systems that fundamentally contribute to that experience. It is tempting to remain, in this sense, a naïve viewer, but we have herein resisted that temptation and endeavored to bring these elusive details to light. Any confirmation or disconfirmation of the conclusions argued for here will necessarily involve a similar vigilance, and this should be kept in mind for any future discussion.
REFERENCES


