

Pitzer College

Not So Marvelous Anymore:

Diluted Film Scoring Practices Create a Murky Soundscape in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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## Welcome to the MCU

The increasing technologization and digitization of Hollywood throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has muddled the soundscape of the modern box office. Nowadays, a few franchises dominate the box office each year and are successful in spite of their noisy acoustic environment. This muddling combined with Hollywood's re-adoption and dilution of film scoring conventions— established after the successful synchronization of sound and image almost 100 years ago— has led to new conventions of film scoring. The immersive power of a film once lay within its score. Today, visual effects and the sound effects that accompany them wield this power over audiences. Thus, errors and inconsistencies in film scores go largely unnoticed for one must look past and listen through the many visual effects and sound effects to uncover them. This is most evident in franchise blockbusters, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). While the narratives of the nearly two dozen films that comprise the MCU are intertwined, its film scores are not and constantly contradict each other.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of twenty-three films that have grossed nearly \$23 billion worldwide since its inception in 2008.<sup>1</sup> Compare that to the nearly \$10 billion box office take of the Star Wars franchise, which has been around since 1977. Yet what is incalculable is the impact the Marvel Cinematic Universe has had on global culture and the individual spectator. In the last eleven years Marvel movies have struck awe in their audiences with stunning visual effects, complex narratives, and impressive sound design. The MCU's directors conceived of the franchise in five "phases" with a continuous narrative running throughout each. As a result, the narratives are complex and intertwined. Marvel's visual effects (VFXs) only have improved over time along with VFX technologies themselves. Marvel's sound design is impressive because alien weaponry sounds how humans would expect it to. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Not counting merchandise

the individual MCU scores are inconsistent when considered as an opus because they contain a multitude of distinct musical themes for each character. One glaring reason is that Marvel Studios rarely hires the same composer for multiple films. Furthermore, the MCU's scores have grown lackluster and formulaic year after year due to the industry's widespread practice of scoring films with temp-music, which is music from other films that acts as a sonic placeholder.

The first question to be answered is why Marvel films have such a huge following when their scores are so forgettable. Sound theorists as early as the 1960s observed that "the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information..." as far back as the Renaissance, which is evident in the Marvel sonic environment (Schafer 101). In other words, perhaps moviegoers are too immersed in the diegesis through powerful visual effects onscreen and therefore less aware of the inconsistencies in the soundscape. In addition, editing practices and the medium of film itself place the visuals in a position of privilege over the soundtrack. The integration of sound and image only came about 30 years after the invention of a camera that could record moving images, which is to say 1926. This delay laid the foundation for the primacy of image. However, the emphasis on the visual did not impede what would become a monumental source of revenue, namely the soundtrack, for the Hollywood studios. Once sound and image were successfully integrated, the phenomenal monetary potential of the film score and resulting marketability of the soundtrack became clear. By the latter half of the Silent Film era, studios were reaping even more revenue from the sheet music they published of popular movie songs (Altman 294). Unfortunately, Hollywood moguls concerned themselves more with the mass merchandizing of movie music than the immersive power that flows from a well-written film score, a preference that continues to this day. In the New Hollywood era from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, films incorporated popular contemporary songs to attract younger people to

theaters because they comprised the majority of moviegoers at the time (Audissino 61, 62). Nowadays, film soundtracks are released on streaming platforms like Spotify and YouTube, are available for purchase on iTunes, and will stay on these platforms for years to come. Though each individual stream is worth much less than a few cents, these soundtracks receive millions of listens, views, and purchases, meaning that the money they earn the studio is not insignificant. Has the privileging of the visual over the aural in the blockbuster film rendered the immersive potential of the score obsolete? The experience of immersion is central to this study because it often eludes the viewer of Marvel films. Their sonic inconsistencies and hyperreal visuals are not conducive to the enveloping, transcendent state of enchantment, as J.R.R. Tolkien calls this imaginary realm: "a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside..." (73).

The next question to be addressed is why the Marvel scores do not detract from a viewer's process of identification with a character? Marvel Studios reportedly conceived of a multi-phased interwoven storyline that depended on the success of *Iron Man*, whose unexpected popularity rebooted the bankrupt superhero franchise (Hughes). Why did Marvel not hire a composer to orchestrate an equally interwoven opus? To answer these questions I will draw on the work of media and film sound theorists and will employ a musical analysis of MCU film scores. Worth noting is that two of these fields— music and media studies— though distinct, offer rich insight when film sound is employed as intermediary. Taken in concert these fields provide a unique perspective on the subject, thus enriching my investigation. Media theory provide the tools to analyze a film's effects on an audience, film sound theory the tools to analyze musical techniques that composers employ to elicit psychological effects in the audience. The field of film sound is an integral part of media studies as it opens paths of inquiry

into that forgotten sense of the cinema: auditory perception. By performing audio-visual analyses of films, theorists uncover how they subtly cue emotions in the viewer. Today it is the overt cues signaled by hyper-realistic VFX that inundate and distract the viewer from any inconsistency within the sonic environment and thus detract from the immersive potential of the soundtrack. Modern blockbuster films bathe audiences in high-definition, 3D, IMAX, computer generated images accompanied by Dolby Atmos surround sound. Though it is a part of the overall moviegoing experience, surround sound more benefits the sound effects (SFX) than the music of a film. In this study I examine how the enveloping, immersive power of a film that sutures a viewer to the diegesis is no longer the domain of the score but instead belongs in the realm of the special effect, be it visual or sonic. I employ media analyses of the history of sound technologies in Hollywood and their development to discover how they altered industrial practices that culminated in the digital age of filmmaking.

After an analysis of the trouble with the MCU, this paper investigates the path that led from the illustrious musical tradition of the Silent Film era and early synchronized sound films through the Golden Age of Hollywood to its antithesis in the New Hollywood, where composers become mere compilers. By the 1970s, frustrated conservatory-educated composers like John Williams revisit the classical compositional techniques that Golden Age film scores defined, thus creating the neoclassical arrangements of the Franchise era. In addition to exploring the music of these periods, I analyze how the industrial structure of Hollywood—the old studio system with its in-house composers versus the monopolistic, centralized studio system that Disney, which seldom rehires composers, exemplifies today—took shape and how that growth affected film music. The conceptual framework of my research is a discussion of the compositional principles established by Golden Age composers as outlined by theorist Claudia Gorbman. My analysis of

Hollywood as an industry and the coming of sound is based on the works of Douglas Gomery, James Lastra, and Rick Altman. Next, my analysis of the scoring practices of the Modern and the neoclassical Franchise eras are based upon the work of theorist Emilio Audissino. I contend that the refusal by Marvel Studios, a subsidiary of Disney, to rehire composers has made for an impoverished soundscape, as has the modern malpractice of temp-music, which Marvel's directors cannot seem to quit.

Temp-music is a placeholder derived from other sources, generally films or classical works, which directors use temporarily to accompany a scene until the film score is finished. Directors also use temp-music to convey to the composer the particular tone they have in mind for a scene. Notably the director spends month after month watching a scene accompanied by temp-music and becomes accustomed to it, and the film score can only be composed once the editing process has been completed. Taken together these two realities of filmmaking limit the freedom of a composer to write an entirely original sounding score. The technique of employing pre-existing music as a temporary placeholder has gone from a communicative tool for directors and composers as well as a device for film editing to a seemingly permanent practice.

This study culminates in a discussion of the Digital era, which many critics contend began in 1973 with the robot fantasy film *Westworld* the moment director Michael Crichton sought to use a machine "to show the point of view of a machine" (Crichton). In a day that predated the desktop computer he ultimately had to enlist the knowledge of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, which spent nine months manipulating a mainframe computer to process a few moving film images to create the two minutes of special effects Crichton had in mind. "We obtained a sort of blocky, animated effect that was remarkable in 1973— and a cliché [sic] seven years later" (Crichton). Nearly 50 years later the march of

technology has made Digital Audio Workstations and non-linear editing software commonplace, and compositing, color grading, 3D animating, and rendering programs everyday tools of the trade. I argue that the lasting effects of digitization are largely responsible for the Marvel soundscape's failures because they privilege the visual sense over the aural, resulting in sonic inconsistencies across the franchise.

## I. THEORY

### **The Soundscape**

*Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe!  
And the musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!*

— R. Murray Schafer, "The Soundscape"

The term "soundscape" emerged from the zeitgeist of the 1960s during which time Schafer, a sound studies theorist, was writing on the subject and laying the foundation for future theoretical works. It describes any "sonic environment" that humans might find themselves in, he posited. A city soundscape, for example, consists of the sounds made by cars in traffic, construction, people engaged in conversation, the humming of electrical wiring, water flowing through pipes, the rumbling of the subway, and other contributions to the acoustic environment. This urban cacophony directly contrasts the tranquil soundscape of a rural area, where the natural acoustic environment is composed of animal chatter, weather, and possibly even humans who find themselves there. Schafer's work questions the overall relationship between humans and soundscape and the potential consequences that a change in this relationship could produce. He makes a distinction between sound and noise, for all noises are sounds that we have learned to



ignore over time (Schafer 95). For example, the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the nineteenth century brought about new sounds produced by heavy machinery and concentrations of people inhabiting and moving through newly urbanized spaces. Nowadays, these sounds have been relegated to the realm of noise because humankind has become so used to encountering them in daily life. Schafer claims that the learned ability of humans to ignore certain sounds in the acoustic environment eventually may lead to a universal deafness (101). He believes that noise abatement— efforts to reduce noise pollution in urbanized spaces— is a negative solution because the uninteresting and damaging sounds will reveal themselves only when humans analyze their soundscape and determine which sounds should be preserved to proliferate. In addition, humans will understand exactly why certain sounds must be eradicated. He suggests the necessity for a new field— acoustic design— to study pre-existing sounds from all over the world and their effect on societies as well as to analyze the potential effects that new sounds might have on a sonic environment before they are released into the air (96). This last point comes very much into play as I examine the lost immersive power of the film score in the MCU.

For Schafer the soundscape is composed of three main features: keynote sounds, signals, and soundmarks. The term “keynote” comes from the field of music, which defines it as the note that establishes the key of a particular piece. However, Schafer decontextualizes the term and employs it to describe sounds that act as acoustic reference points from which all other sounds gain their unique meanings (100). He states that we unconsciously take note of these sounds because “they are overheard but not overlooked” (100). Take, for example, the keynote sounds of a forest: the rustling of leaves, the flowing water of a river, and birdsongs and animal calls. Though one may not pay direct attention to them, their absence would be noticeable because the sonic backdrop of the forest would be oddly silent. Next, Schafer discusses what he considers

foreground or signal sounds, which listeners notice consciously because they convey information. He notes that any sound can be consciously heard but often signal sounds differ because they “constitute acoustic warning devices: bells, whistles, horns, and sirens” that thus command one’s attention (101). In Schafer’s words, a soundmark is specific to a particular community because its features are recognized and appreciated by that group (101). For the purposes of this paper, the terms sonic environment and soundscape describe the acoustic environment of a film’s diegesis rather than that of the external world. Diegesis refers to the fictional reality of the film or in other words, its narrative world. Thus diegetic sound is the sound that occurs naturally within this world.<sup>2</sup>

Foley effects— sounds that directly correlate to images onscreen, such as footsteps or a clock ticking— equate to keynote sounds. Musical themes for characters or settings equate to signal sounds because of the narrative information they provide a viewer. Soundmarks equate to specific SFX and techniques of musical composition that— for the audience and the Hollywood industry itself— have become sonic signifiers due to repeated use. From the Warner Brothers stock sound archive, for example, comes the Wilhelm Scream, which has been heard in 441 films and television shows since debuting in 1951, according to IMDb (Most Popular).

Schafer brings Greek mythology to the discussion by contrasting “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” views of music. The former is serene, harmonious, external, and objective; the latter is emotional, irrational, internal, and subjective (Schafer 97, 98). This dichotomy is useful when characterizing the differing compositional styles of distinct Hollywood eras. Schafer notes that music from the late-nineteenth century to that of the twentieth century follows the Dionysian model, namely in its romanticism and expressionism (98). Because early Hollywood film scores

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<sup>2</sup> Diegesis is generally contrasted to another narrative form, mimesis, which centers on action. In other words, the showing, not telling, of a story. Plato contemplates narrative forms in the Republic; Aristotle explores them in Poetics.

drew upon the compositional techniques established by Wagnerian opera in the Romantic era, they were Dionysian in nature. In addition, their widespread popularity meant that most future scores in later eras would take a similar shape. An exception to the rule is the New Hollywood film score, whose employment of music for its aesthetic function is decidedly Apollonian in nature. It is objective and externally driven, rather than subjective and intertwined with the narrative as in the case of a leitmotif.

### **The Aura**

The concepts of film as both artwork and technology are vital to an inquiry into the MCU. In his piece *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin discusses what art loses when humans copy and redistribute it. In this essay Benjamin positions himself against the film camera as he believes that because of its reproductive role, it stripped both art and actors of their auras. He posits that the aura of a work of art gives it authenticity and uniqueness, as artwork holds cult value if it originates in service of magical or religious ritual. Reproducing a work strips it of that aura, rendering it inauthentic and robbing it equally of both cult and exhibition value. The mechanical reproduction of traditional painted, art diminished its cult value and eradicated its autonomy. Equally true for the world of cinema, art is valued for its ability to be exhibited in a museum or a theater and to attract a sizable audience.

He notes, however, the revolutionary potential inherent in mechanical reproduction. The field of art now was open to the influence of external sources such as the camera. As a result, this loosening of art from ritual as well as its loss of aura opened the pathway for a more revolutionary culture. Photography altered the artistic field by introducing new perspectives and

bringing what was once hidden or far away into view. Paintings were no longer the only acceptable medium in the art world, and similarly, sacred religious statues that were kept out of public view or were visible only from afar were photographed, their intricate details made visible. This reproduction removed them from shrouded mystery and disseminated them to the public that was once heavily controlled and restricted. Benjamin claims that “the difficulties which photography caused traditional aesthetics were mere child’s play as compared to those raised by the film” (5).

What paintings were to photographs, theatrical plays were to the film. Stage actors would deliver a continuous performance to an audience in person, whereas it is the camera that delivers the performance of an actor to a film audience. Film actors deliver many performances during the course of production that editors compile into a whole. As a result, film actors cannot alter a performance in real time to better suit their audiences like a stage actor. Benjamin claims that audience members are thus positioned as critics. The critical perspective of the film audience is further enabled by the camera recording a performance close-up, illuminating minute details once hidden in the performances of stage actors. Notably, while the perspective of an audience member viewing a play is determined by where they sit, the camera determines perspective for a film audience based on shot variety— it acts as their surrogate eye.

Benjamin states, “For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else” (6). He criticizes the film industry for the apparatus at its very heart— the camera. In its ability to reproduce immediately the sound and movement of actors, the camera kills the aura. People’s actions are what are recorded at a remove, not their selves, their bodies, or souls. Thus, the reproduction of actors strips their personhood and their aura from the film. As a result of the multitude of minute

performances and this loss of aura, film actors are less able to identify themselves with their role than the stage actor: “Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays” (6).

Following Benjamin, the success of Marvel films has less to do with musical scores and more to do with the reconstruction of the auras of its actors. According to Benjamin, studios react to the loss of these auras with “an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (7). His 1935 theory still holds true because actors today circulate on late night talk shows to promote their films, and their interviews score millions of views on YouTube. Marvel Studios books interviews for its actors to combat their loss of aura and commodify their personalities, in an effort to reach a larger audience and bring more people to the theater.

Benjamin’s work dovetails nicely with French theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord. In his “society of the spectacle” representation has replaced authenticity and people are drugged by the barrage of mass media, consumer culture, and images like those in movie theaters. In both film and other artistic media, the reaction of the masses toward art is altered by mechanical reproduction. Benjamin distinguishes between a reactionary attitude and a calmer, progressive attitude people may take toward a work of art. He states, “The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert” (8). According to Benjamin, the less dominant an artistic medium becomes, the more distinct the divide between criticism and enjoyment becomes for the masses. As a result, innovation is met with criticism while adherence to convention is met with praise.

The MCU and its twenty-three superhero films attest to Benjamin's notion that sticking to convention is rewarded with mass consumption and approval. Borrowing Debord's phrase, Marvel fans comprise "the society of the superhero," which supports Benjamin's argument that "the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide... individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce.... The moment these responses become manifest they control each other" (8). Thus, since individual reactions are predetermined by the response of the masses now positioned as critic, moviegoers can be considered a cult. Indeed, Marvel fans are a kind of cult because of their devout obsession with the MCU: they watch each and every new MCU film, write theories, compose alternate scripts, and engage in debates with other superfans. Benjamin's ideas suggest that the positive mass reception of Marvel films predetermines a positive, individual reaction. This cultish nature and the fact that blockbuster films are produced for mass reproduction and dissemination mean that MCU films are imbued with both cult and exhibition value, therefore blinding an individual from noticing the inconsistencies in the Marvel soundscape.

### **Leitmotifs, Subject Positions, and Identifications**

The score from *The Lord of the Rings* (LoTR) trilogy, composed by Oscar winner Howard Shore, is a marvelous example of how characters' musical themes are employed as part of a film's worldbuilding and storytelling.<sup>3</sup> In a scene from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, two Hobbits from The Shire, embark on their journey to destroy "The One Ring."<sup>4</sup> When Sam reaches the border between The Shire and the rest of Middle Earth after Frodo already has crossed it, Sam says, "If I take one more step, it'll be

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Shore composed the LoTR trilogy as well as The Hobbit trilogy, a total of 6 films directed by Peter Jackson.

<sup>4</sup> Also referred to as "Precious," the "Ring of Rings"

the farthest away from home I've ever been." Frodo crosses back into The Shire and says, "Come on Sam..." They then leave The Shire together, with Frodo placing his hand on Sam's shoulder. At Sam's mention of home, The Shire theme is heard playing in full:



Ex. 1: The Shire Theme<sup>5</sup>

When Frodo and Sam leave The Shire together, a fragment of The Fellowship theme sounds to indicate that the first elements the Fellowship— Sam and Frodo— have formed:



Ex. 2: The Fellowship Theme

Film sound theorist and composer Michel Chion, in his book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, coins the term “added value,” which is “...the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression... that this information or expression naturally comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the

<sup>5</sup> All transcriptions featured in this paper are my own work.

image itself" (5). He characterizes the added value that music gives an image by coining the terms "empathetic effects" and "anempathetic effects." Music that mirrors the emotional tone of a scene "...by taking on the scene's rhythm, tone and phrasing" results in empathetic effects (8). Music that contrasts with or is indifferent to the emotional tone of a scene "...by progressing in a steady, undaunted, and ineluctable manner..." results in anempathetic effects and "...has the effect not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it..." (8). During Sam and Frodo's departure from The Shire, the film score's added value is "empathetic" because it acts in harmony with the scene's emotional tone. Further, because this fellowship theme is so mellifluous, its recurrence repeatedly bathes the viewer in emotion every time it recurs. Additionally, the recurring theme whispers information to the viewer about the character's journey and future.<sup>6</sup> Sam's anxiety about leaving home is relieved by the heroic Fellowship theme, which in turn relieves the anxiety that was projected onto the viewer. The themes from the score of LotR remain constant across all three films in the franchise even as they weave and morph into one another and empathetically enhance the scenic action. While at times the merging and mixing are orchestrated differently, their musical content remains the same. Yet Chion's theories describe only the way that sound and music enhance a scene. What then is the narrative function of film music? The answer lies within the Wagnerian operas of the late-nineteenth century.

The musical examples from LoTR evince that blockbuster film scores borrow many compositional techniques from operatic tradition. The most prevalent compositional technique heard in film scores is the musical theme or leitmotif meaning "a theme of easily recognizable melodic, rhythmic or harmonic identity, first used in connection with a certain character or incident, and which returns time and again, always with a reminiscence of the original

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<sup>6</sup> Although, as with most film scores, its subtlety might be somewhat lost in subsequent viewings.



association” (McShan). However, Wagnerian scholar Hans von Wolzogen coined *Leitmotiv* after analyzing Richard Wagner’s operas and distinguished the *Reminiszenzmotiv* or reminiscence motif from the “Wagnerian Leitmotiv.” A reminiscence motif lacks the thematic and narrative information provided by a leitmotif and instead highlights the overall musical design of a composition more broadly (Whittall). More specifically, the reminiscence motif is “A theme, or other coherent musical idea, which returns more or less unaltered, as identification for the audience or to signify recollection of the past by a dramatic character” (Whittall). However,

The Wagnerian Leitmotiv [sic] serves a structural purpose... that is distinct from the use of reminiscent themes in the scores of earlier opera composers. Extended symphonic passages are built up on them and they are combined, contrasted and superimposed, one on another, in a manner to suggest the development sections of symphonies. (McShan)

The significance of this technique lies in the composer’s merging and mixing of recurring themes that occur when multiple characters, each with a leitmotif, are present on stage. Though the term was born during the late-nineteenth century, the practice existed long before, arguably dating to the music of the early church. Of significance is that the technique has two dramatic functions that can work separately or together: allusion and transformation. Allusion foreshadows future dramatic action, while transformation refers to the continuous evolution and modulation of the leitmotif. The function of transformation was commonplace in most classical music through the ages. However, allusion was Wagner’s own contribution to the technique for he combined multiple leitmotifs to cue his audiences to what was to come in the narrative (Gorlinski).

From the Golden Age of Hollywood to the present day, successful film scores have employed such Wagnerian operatic compositional techniques to give rise to emotions in their audiences. Although the leitmotif is associated with opera, I refer to the filmic leitmotif as motif,

character theme, or narrative cue interchangeably. For example, I transcribed and outlined *The Lord of the Rings*, for which Howard Shore heavily employed motifs. In her authoritative *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*, film sound theorist Anahid Kassabian analyzes the techniques composers use to cue a viewer's immersion into the filmic diegesis. Her definition of leitmotif comes from *The Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music*: “ ‘...a short theme or musical idea consistently associated with a character, a place or an object, a certain situation or a recurrent idea of the plot... these motifs are used, not as rigidly fixed melodies, but in a very flexible manner...’ ” (50). In the context of the film score, character themes aid a viewer's assimilation into the character's subject position:

Music has a particular relationship to processes of assimilation. As many have argued, music acts as a lubricant to identification processes, smoothing the transition into (often barely plausible) fictional worlds by washing perceivers in a ‘bath or gel effect’ (Gorbman 1987:5) ... music facilitates perceivers in assimilating into one of the available subject positions of the film. (Kassabian 113)

Since a recurring theme comes to represent a particular character or location, the music cues a viewer's identification with that character or location or emotional state. It is telling that Kassabian's definition of the filmic motif does not include Wagner's technique of allusion. However, when allusion is present in film scores it blends and combines motifs as multiple characters appear onscreen. Allusion unconsciously and repeatedly immerses the viewer further into the filmic world. Of note is the psychoanalytic theory of suture, which describes the relationship between the audience and the narrative discourse of a film. Camera angles and lighting and editing techniques convey images that “stitch” viewers to the fictional space both onscreen and off. This cinematic technique plays with the perspective of subject and object and

negotiates point of view. The camera becomes a surrogate eye appropriating the gaze of the audience and transforming it into a signifier, or subject, that produces meaning within the system of a film's structure (Hayward 378-385). While this technique describes how the visuals a camera produces immerse a viewer into the diegesis, there is no mention of sound.

Sonic suturing is largely fulfilled by Kassabian's assimilation. Her characterization of music as a lubricant is especially pertinent to the character theme, the effects of which are crucial in fostering the identification between filmgoer and film. This identification is shaped by the filmgoer's relationship to musics inside the film and out. Her theories of assimilating identifications and affiliating identifications are useful for any reading of a film score, as they allow theorists to explain the type of identification a motif fosters. A composed score, one consisting of new music written for a film largely based on classical Hollywood scoring traditions, fosters assimilating identifications. When an audience unconsciously accepts the offer of assimilating identification from the score, they can find themselves positioned anywhere in the filmic world with and as any character because the music is original and new to their ears, not resonant with their subjective experience. Furthermore, no pre-existing relationship between their own identity position and that of a character's has been established (Kassabian 2). A character's theme, for example, fosters a viewer's identification with that character and with the narrative. Its development further engages a viewer's integration into the character's subject position; in a sad scene, for example, the viewer most will likely hear a somber rendition of the character's theme, which fosters sympathy and empathy in the viewer.

As Kassabian argues, affiliating identifications occur when "...a soundtrack does not narrow possibilities toward a single position, as in the assimilating identifications... the processes it offers are looser, grouping together or affiliating characters or positions in a scenario

with which perceivers can identify.” (117). On the other hand, a compiled score, composed of songs that typically existed prior to a film’s release, fosters affiliating identifications because most audience members will have heard the songs before seeing the film thanks to Hollywood’s massive marketing machine and will “...bring external associations with the songs into their engagements with the film” (3). Since affiliating identifications do not force a viewer into a single subject position, “...not only are there many points of entry to identification, but mobility between and among the various positions in the scenario is encouraged and made easy” (123). In addition, Kassabian argues that music signifies according to both cultural musical codes and cinematic musical codes.<sup>7</sup> A cultural code gives meaning to music based on the culture in which the music was created. For example, a Wagnerian leitmotif would correspond to the cultural codes of nineteenth-century European opera.

Gorbman states that a cinematic code, however, signifies that “...music is codified by the filmic context itself and assumes meaning by virtue of its placement in the film. Beginning and end-title music, and musical themes, are major examples of this music-film interaction” (Gorbman 3). Without context or dramatic narrative, a leitmotif becomes simply an oft-repeated phrase of music signifying nothing. When Marvel hires composers who write music with these techniques in mind, the resulting scores are coherent both formally and melodically when analyzed apart from the other MCU movies. In fact, one such score recently received the highest praise Hollywood can bestow thanks to its innovative nature

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<sup>7</sup> Kassabian’s concepts follow and build upon Claudia Gorbman’s theories.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE MCU

### ***Black Panther Pounces on the Oscar***

Ludwig Göransson won an Oscar for his score to *Black Panther*. In the film, characters' themes are more rhythmic than melodic, drawing from African musical traditions and Hip-Hop.<sup>8</sup> In the countries of Africa, rhythm— and the tension felt between rhythms through the use of polyrhythms— is meaningful and therefore carries sonic signifiers for a listener.<sup>9</sup> In the United States rhythm remains highly central to African American musical traditions. Consider, for example, Hip-Hop beats that drive rap songs. They provide a style and tempo for a rapper to match and a tempo for the audience to feel and “groove” to. As such, rhythm signifies according to African American cultural codes for the American audience. Ludwig Göransson composed *Black Panther's* soundtrack with this antecedent in mind and mixed elements from traditional African music with those of Hip-Hop, juxtaposing these musics' cultural codes to reflect the contrasting identities and ideologies of the protagonist T'Challa (the Black Panther) and the antagonist Erik Killmonger.

Göransson was interviewed by Genius, an American digital media company, in his studio, where he discussed his *Black Panther* score and the characters' musical themes (The Making Of “Wakanda”). He explained that the film opens with a ceremonial outcall sung by Baaba Maal, a Grammy nominated Senegalese musician, which tells the story of an elephant that has just died. Here the elephant symbolizes a king and its death signifies that a new monarch

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<sup>8</sup> This Black Panther analysis has been paraphrased and reworked from my own past academic research for my final essay from Professor Ma's Film Sound class.

<sup>9</sup> I endorse Kassabian's concept of cultural codes but recognize that it is somewhat problematic from an ethnomusicological view. Instruments and musical techniques can have sonic significations that call a certain culture to mind, but one should not generalize a single instrument or musical technique to an entire continent. There a multitude of cultural codes in the 54 countries on the African continent. Ample scholarship exists on the relationship between African music and rhythm. See the work of Kofi Agawu on this topic and Tricia Rose's work on the relationship between Hip-Hop and rhythm.

must be chosen; the tale warns the listener that the process must not be rushed. T'Challa's theme features a traditional West African instrument called the talking drum, made of two drumheads connected by tuning strings that the player squeezes to change pitch and mimic human speech. Göransson recorded multiple players performing the same rhythm on multiple talking drums, one after another, and built intensity by adding more players over time. On top of this track he layered a talking drum solo performed by Senegalese percussionist Massamba Diop. Finally, he layered recordings of the players performing a rhythm that speaks "T'Challa," the name of the protagonist. The composer constructs and layers a bassline under the talking drums by programming a Roland TR-808 drum machine to perform the T'Challa rhythm on multiple alternating pitches. These rhythms form the base of T'Challa's theme and are used anytime he appears onscreen. Göransson layered a horn ensemble over T'Challa's rhythmic theme to convey his exalted position in Wakandan society just as horns sounding voluntaries in medieval times announced the arrival of a king.

Similar to T'Challa's motif, Killmonger's begins with a piano and string melody that Göransson says was inspired by Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and reflects Killmonger's intellect. This melody is followed by a Roland TR-808 performing a syncopated kick drum pattern that links to Trap Music and Hip-Hop. A traditional North African instrument of the Fulani people called the Fula flute then plays a melody that intensifies into Killmonger's primary theme: a trap beat played on a Roland TR-808 accompanied by a tune performed on Fula flute, double bass, and vocals (Ludwig). The instrumentation of both characters hints at their familial relationship prior to the film's reveal that they are in fact cousins. The two themes are similar because African elements are heard in the talking drum and Fula flute. The use of horns, piano, and strings is inspired by the Western musical canon, and both themes employ a Roland TR-808 to

signify their modernity. Though Göransson utilizes traditional African and modern African American rhythms and instruments, he does not fully escape the grasp of classical Hollywood scoring tradition with the medieval-style horns and the Bach-inspired melody.

T'Challa's theme sounds for the first time when he is returning home and sees Wakanda from the cockpit of his jet. The talking drums cue when he says, "This never gets old" upon seeing the Wakandan mountains (Black Panther - Wakanda). Finally, his theme fully sounds when his jet pushes through the forcefield that hides Wakanda from the rest of the world and shields it from invaders. The horns stop playing when the jet lands and he greets his relatives; the drums remain constant throughout. (Black Panther - Wakanda). This scene assimilates the audience into T'Challa's subject position: The elephant tale informs them that his father has died and that he is heir to the throne, the talking drum rhythm connects the audience to Africa and hints at Black Panther's name, and the horns associate him with royalty. His web of complex emotions related to his father's passing is unraveled through music, aiding the audience's entry into his subject position.

Killmonger's theme first sounds when he is in the African wing of a museum intending to steal an ancient Wakandan weapon made of vibranium, the fictional Marvel metal, immediately after he proves a museum expert wrong about the weapon's country of origin: "Nah... it's from Wakanda and it's made out of vibranium" (Museum Scene). The motif intensifies as the expert starts dying from the poison Killmonger slipped into her coffee. The build-up comes to a halt when Killmonger's associates kill innocent bystanders, cueing the TR-808 kick drum pattern. His theme climaxes when hacked security cameras show nothing out of the ordinary, signifying that Killmonger's heist is going according to plan. The entire theme repeats while he examines the valuable weapon and then successfully executes the rest of his heist. While looking at an

ancient African mask Killmonger warns his crew that Wakandans may show up, at which point the Western piano and string melody ends, causing the TR-808 kick pattern to resume anew. His motif, introduced this time with loud horns, sounds again upon his crew's successful escape from the museum (Museum Scene). In this scene, the music is empathetic to the overall action: The Fula flute's intensification occurs concurrently with the museum expert's poisoning. In accordance with Chion, the TR-808 kick drum pattern is anempathetic for it alludes to the dying heartbeats of the innocents Killmonger's crew has murdered, further intensifying the drama. The heartbeat-like sound therefore adds value to the scene, manipulating the audience by instilling anxiety in them. This scene assimilates the audience into Killmonger's subject position: The Bach-like piano and string melody signifies his intellect, the Fula flute's melody his African roots, and the trap beat his modernity and African American origins. The music aids the audience in stepping into his shoes during this scene, convincing them that Killmonger deserves to reclaim the weapon that was stolen from his ancestors.

While the *Black Panther* score itself is a master class in composition for film, it stands alone without a sequel and as such cannot be considered an opus. Nonetheless, it breaks with Black Panther's theme established with his debut in *Captain America: Civil War* (featured in Ex. 3) and thus is not free of the musical discontinuities and lack of coherence that ail the MCU. While most individual MCU films endow characters with a musical theme, *Black Panther's* score is innovative in its use of cultural codes outside of mainstream Hollywood that bathe viewers in the immersive world of Wakanda. Another inventive aspect is the hybridized nature of the score— part composed, part compiled. Göransson interweaves his original compositions and motifs with songs performed by Kendrick Lamar, a famous Hip-Hop artist, and others. However, this success would be diminished if a sequel were to ignore Göransson's culturally



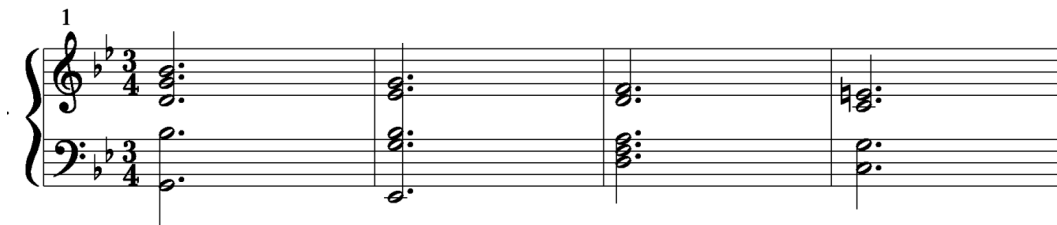
resonant motifs, which seems unlikely when the score for *Avengers: Infinity War* is considered. When both Wakanda and Black Panther first appear in that film, Göransson's theme for T'Challa returns, mimicking the opening scene of *Black Panther*, where it accompanies his return to Wakanda. T'Challa's disagreeing themes from *Civil War* and *Black Panther* touch on the multitude of motifs that accompany individual characters, which are analyzed in the next section.



Ex. 3: Black Panther's Theme from Civil War

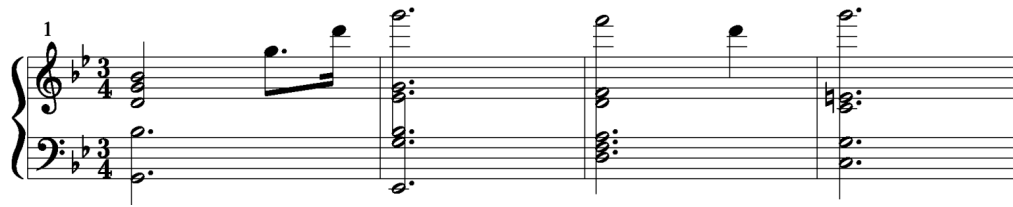
### (MC)Universe: Where Motifs Go to Die

The film scores of the MCU cannot seem to stick to a single motif for a character. This problem flouts an unwritten rule of compositional form. As of 2017 *Iron Man*, the character also known as Tony Stark, had no fewer than four distinct motifs. This multiplicity of character themes occurs principally because MCU movies and their sequels are not always produced and directed by the same teams. For example, the *Iron Man* character—the oldest in the franchise—appears in roughly a dozen movies, and myriad composers have worked on those scores. This constant churn results in the creation of new motifs that replace the old, which in turn confuses the viewer. My transcriptions of some, but not all of *Iron Man*'s many themes follow:



Ex. 4: Tony Stark & Stark Tower Motif

This theme, composed for *The Avengers* by Alan Silvestri, signifies both Stark and the tower where he spends most of his time inventing his suit.



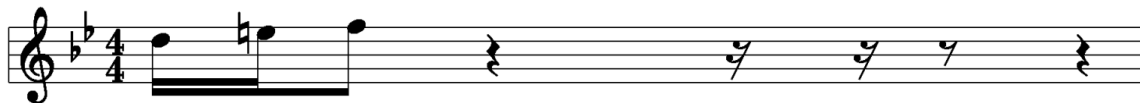
Ex. 5: Stark Hero Motif

This motif, too, is from *The Avengers* and is characterized by the same chord progression as that of Ex. 4. However, its use during heroic moments and its melody makes a distinction between Tony Stark the man and his alter ego, Iron Man. Much like the suit itself in relation to Stark's body, the melody signifying the hero is grafted upon the harmony signifying the man.



Ex. 6: Iron Man 3 Motif

Brian Tyler composed this motif for *Iron Man 3* which itself ignored the motifs that the first two films established. Iron Man's theme from the 2nd film was AC/DC's greatest hits because the film featured a mostly compiled score and a motif can be a genre or timbre.



Ex. 7: Iron Man's Motif from The Avengers

This theme is heard in *The Avengers* and is the first three notes of Iron Man's theme from his third film. However, it only appears when he is engaged in heroic actions like fighting aliens while flying. This is a callback to a prior theme; however, this section has displayed two of his

other themes from the same film that this appears in. As a result, the viewer is unaware that this theme is taken from *Iron Man 3* and its efficacy is lost.

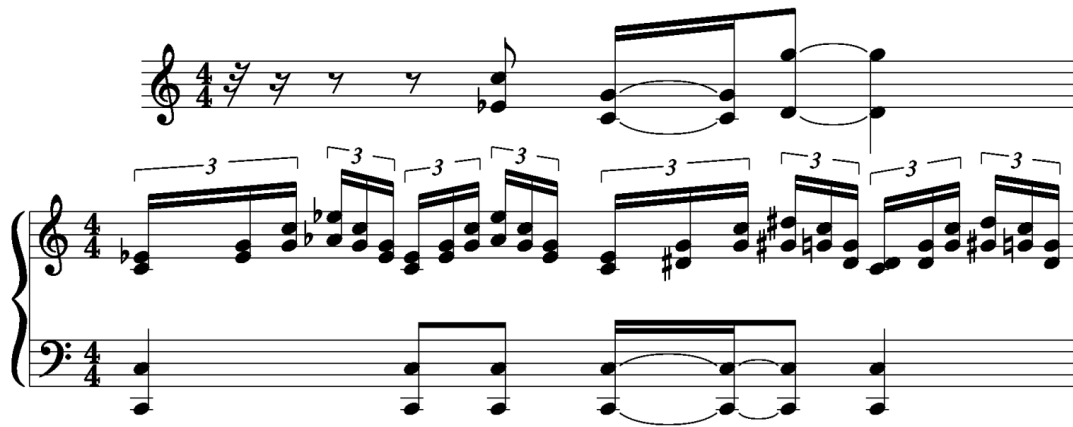


Ex. 8: Stark's Dirge

This melody, also scored by Silvestri, sounds after Stark has sacrificed himself for the greater good in *Avengers: Endgame*. While it is wistful and sad, it is performed by various instruments in different combinations for a total of six minutes. Since Iron Man clearly has so many themes, why did the composer forgo all of them and repeat the same couple of measures with slight variation? I argue that this scene would have been the perfect place to incorporate a few of Stark's themes to conclude his MCU tenure with a proper musical send-off.

This inconsistency in the character themes of the MCU are made most apparent when examining *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and the movies that come after it. This film introduced Spider-Man (also known as Peter Parker) to the MCU and featured an original motif composed for him.<sup>10</sup> But in Parker's standalone movie *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), composer Michael Giacchino created a new motif that bore no relation to those from *Civil War*. There Parker's theme lasts one measure and sounds when Stark signals to him that it is time for Parker to steal the shield of Captain America (also known as Steve Rogers) by grabbing it with his web:

<sup>10</sup> Spider-Man is not a new Marvel character but this film marks his first incorporation into the MCU.



Ex. 9: Spider-Man Motif from *Captain America: Civil War*

This brief narrative cue nicely complements the action onscreen, where Parker swings into action during a fight scene. Composer Henry Jackman recognized that he did not have much time to introduce the hero musically and so composed a one-measure character theme. It begins right as Spider-Man shoots a string of web at Captain America's shield, and a glimpse of him is seen traversing the air. The horn cue midway through the motif occurs when he lands in his signature crouch wearing the stolen shield. The tension built by 16<sup>th</sup> note triplets played by the string section is intensified by the introduction of the horns and left unrelieved when the orchestra stops playing abruptly. This movie features two of the main Avengers, Stark and Rogers, fighting against each other over discordant interpretations of the Avengers' ethical code. Parker is on Stark's team, and his appearance engenders opposing effects on the audience. For those who side with Rogers' interpretation, Parker's appearance signals that Stark has the upper hand because he recruited a powerful, young superhero. The motif aids the assimilation of these viewers into Rogers' subject position, as Kassabian might argue, because it reflects his anxiety about a rival who stole his prized possession. The result: an anempathetic effect. For those who side with Stark, the theme signals that he is winning—the timbre is triumphant and celebratory.

The motif aids the assimilation of these viewers into Parker's subject position: it is triumphant and heroic, occurring after he saves the day. The result: an empathetic effect.

Worthy of mention, the theme made a subtle appearance earlier in the film when Stark goes to Parker's house to ask for his help. After a discussion in Parker's room, Stark threatens to tell May, Parker's aunt, that he wants to take Parker to Germany on a mission of global magnitude. Parker declines to go because of homework. Before Stark can even begin to make his way to Aunt May, Parker shoots a web that attaches Stark's hand to the doorknob. Parker's motif sounds when he says, "Don't tell Aunt May." Here Jackman utilizes the theme to signal that Parker used his web-shooter device to stop Stark from revealing his superhero alter ego to his aunt. However, this theme would not be heard again after appearing in *Civil War*.

Parker's theme in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, his first standalone movie in the MCU, is longer than his motif in *Civil War* because composer Giacchino had more time to introduce the character musically throughout the film. The Vulture, the antagonist, causes a warehouse to collapse on Spider-Man after a lengthy battle. Viewers see Parker lying lifeless under a pile of rubble. At this point, they believe that Spider-Man is dead until they see the rubble rising as Parker struggles to push free. While this feat of strength occurs, his motif sounds:

Spiderman: Homecoming

Spiderman: Homecoming

Ex. 10: Spider-Man Motif from *Spider-Man: Homecoming*

The theme finally affirms that Parker truly is superhuman. Prior to this moment, in similar straits, he had failed and needed his mentor Stark's help. The super-strength he displays pushing through the rubble and the motif itself signal to the audience that Parker finally has mastered his abilities and is ready— although not willing— to accept the role of youngest Avenger. In addition, the confident and powerful nature of his theme signals to viewers that Parker will not fail this time. When referring to motifs, Kassabian states that “The *specific* musical event may or may not refer to other *specific* musical events either within or before the film, but in any case, will certainly refer to other musical events in order to convey meaning” (52). Unfortunately, the theme's new and foreign nature breaks the immersion of some in the audience and ultimately challenges their assimilation into Parker's subject position. Viewers who have seen *Civil War* unconsciously expect to hear the original character theme during this scene but instead are jarred by a new one. This example is but one of many in the Marvel Cinematic Universe where composers insist on reimagining characters' motifs and thereby rupturing the sonic suture.

### III. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS THAT LED US HERE

#### **The Scoring Practices of the Silent Era**

Thus far, this thesis has focused on modern day scoring practices within a major motion picture franchise, namely the MCU. An investigation of modern film soundtracks necessitates an analysis of past scoring practices to uncover how much the industrial structure of Hollywood affects the endeavor. A historical lens will reveal how the modern soundscape became so muddled. It all begins at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The silent films of early Hollywood were not in fact silent, and referring to them as such is historically inaccurate. These films had musical accompaniments; calling them silent

privileges the visual sense over the aural sense while disregarding the audiovisuality of the medium. Cinema professor Rick Altman details the history of the silent film score in his book *Silent Film Sound*. Though the films themselves were completely silent, theater owners hired keyboardists or small orchestral ensembles to provide live musical accompaniment beginning 1905 with the invention of nickelodeon theaters.<sup>11</sup> They featured short films interspersed with either vaudeville acts or illustrated songs (Altman 250).<sup>12</sup> Companies that produced the short nickelodeon films sometimes would hire a composer to write suggestions for musical accompaniment. Music publishing companies took advantage of the influx of keyboardists to the realm of the theater by writing and distributing collections of musical suggestions for film genres and scenic emotions (290). This commercialization and standardization of film music into collections foreshadows the modern-day scoring practice of temp-music, which relies on utilizing successful film scores as tools during the editing process, which can lead to the creation of generic sounding music. However, at the time publishing collections of musical suggestions for film accompaniment proved an unsuccessful endeavor because many in-house pianists could not sight-read music well. The rapid proliferation of films during this era also hindered the success of original custom composition. In-house pianists had to learn multiple scores per week to match the frequency with which new movies were released, which was an incredibly challenging task (257). Of course, the obvious solution would have been for theaters to hire more pianists. However, that route was more expensive than simply purchasing a newly minted piece of technology, the mechanical Photoplayer, which required only the hands of a single operator to perform multi-instrument accompaniments for any film. The Photoplayer could replicate the sound of a small orchestra, even though it was essentially a modified player piano.

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<sup>11</sup> Nickelodeons existed roughly until 1914 and were so named because they were a theater that charged a nickel for entry (History.com)

<sup>12</sup> Illustrated Songs were a musical performance accompanied by images projected from glass slides (UNC Library)

Although the nickel movie theaters were smaller than their counterparts, their country-wide success was due in large part to the widespread newspaper coverage they received in the same columns that discussed renowned vaudeville theaters (290). However, nickelodeons lost popularity with the advent of cinema palaces in New York City in 1914, which shifted the focus of the press from the nickel movie theater to the great big hall. "Broad national coverage of exhibition practices would not survive New York's mid-decade theater building spurt. Henceforth, Broadway theaters would be the national center of attention; in many publications they were the *only* theaters regularly reported on" (290). The Strand opened in New York City in 1914 providing a shining example for future theaters to model with its beautiful architecture, acclaimed musical selections, and whopping 3,500 seats (290, 291). For the first time, large orchestras could fit in front of the silver screen and provide the music once played by a single keyboardist. Worthy of note, the newly constructed movie palaces employed prestige as a marketing tactic. The Strand's musical selections, overseen by impresario Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothapfel, were considered posh at the time since they were composed by famous names in classical music. Later, this success inspired Rothapfel to replicate the sound at his Rialto, Rivoli, and Capitol theaters with music by Bizet, Mendelssohn, and Verdi, and conducted by esteemed musicians like Hugo Riesenfeld, protégé of Gustav Mahler (290, 291). This tactic was clearly successful because other cinema palaces followed suit.

The proliferation of these movie halls and large orchestral accompaniment altered film scoring practices. Blockbuster films of 1915 and 1916 featured original scores rather than famous compositions or musical suggestions from the film music compilations from the publishing companies (Altman 292). Unfortunately, the first film score that received critical acclaim and widespread popularity belongs to D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. It is vital to



note that the flagrant racism of the film is an unfortunate product of its time and propaganda for white supremacist ideology, which this paper in no way condones. However, the film was both commercially successful and formally influential— its popularity and financial success proved that original compositions for films were viable. Joseph Carl Breil's score was an original composition that also featured a compilation of the frequently used pieces of the era, such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, Grieg's *Pier Gynt Suite*, and Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* as well as his own original compositions (293). Altman writes that *The Perfect Song*, Breil's

love theme for northerner Elise Stoneman and southerner Ben Cameron... sold almost ten thousand copies in 1916 alone... [and] ...was even programmed as accompaniment music for other films.... By April 1915, twenty-two road companies were already traveling around the country playing *The Birth of a Nation's* score. (Altman 293, 294)

The music was so popular, D.W. Griffith had to assuage the fears held by patrons of small-scale theaters. They worried that they would have paid good money to see the film but only would have heard a small orchestra play the score live, which would have made the moviegoing experience inferior compared to that of New York City cinema palace patrons (294). Griffith's designation of an original score was uncommon and even groundbreaking at the time; it later became the industry standard. All of the films of the MCU have taken a cue from Griffith.

*The Birth of a Nation* proved that films could receive critical acclaim and prestigious status provided they were accompanied by a massive orchestra (Altman 294). As an added bonus, *The Perfect Song* demonstrated that an original composition could achieve widespread popularity and that sheet music for film scores could be a profitable medium. Once Hollywood producers and studios recognized these economic implications, they contracted composers to score their films. In this way the studios could ensure that a film's score elicited the desired

emotions in audience members rather than leaving emotional identification up to the interpretation of an in-house keyboardist. The musicians hired by theaters during the nickelodeon era generally accompanied a piece with music that they had previously learned either from a compilation of suggested film accompaniment or by listening to popular songs and transcribing them. The creation of a publishing industry nudged film music from its previous aural form to a written one and required musicians to read music (309). In a break with convention, certain films such as the blockbuster *Intolerance* succeeded because of their “expensive sets, an enormous orchestra, and prestigious score” rather than their cast or plot, turning the traditional model of movie revenue generation on its head (297).

*Silent Film Sound* makes the point that an expanding repertoire of film music and the eventual establishment of a music publishing industry occurred in two parts. The first began in 1914 with the opening of the Strand theater and ended with the massive influx of foreign films to the United States. The musical selections the Strand featured in its programs came from every corner of the Western canon to the point that Altman claims, “During this period, virtually every composition used as an overture found its way into the film accompaniment portion of the program. Very nearly the entire repertoire of Western music was searched for appropriate pieces...” (313). That repertoire, classical in character, hailed from continental Europe, from which a growing community of erudite émigrés like Schoenberg and Stravinsky settled in Hollywood. Further, the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw peoples from all over the world emigrate to the United States, bringing their cultural heritage with them. Therefore, Hollywood was international, and many new Americans worked in front of the camera and behind the scenes on major productions. The introduction of foreign films to American audiences inspired musical directors to select pieces that were just as foreign to American spectators as the films were;

although audiences may have heard these compositions, they were never employed to accompany a film before (315). These pieces were usually rigorous, demanded technical proficiency from orchestras, and came from the minds of European composers like Strauss, Debussy, Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, Handel, Bach, and Vivaldi (315, 317). This development in turn heightened the level of prestige associated with foreign films within the American entertainment sphere. Foreign films allowed composers to experiment with the pieces they chose for their scores because of their foreignness. Audiences had been accustomed to hearing certain orchestral pieces— Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, for example— within American film scores, but did not bring these same associations to screening a foreign film. If anything, scores that broke with the conventions established prior to 1921 enhanced an audience's recognition of a film as foreign. Altman claims that the drive to expand film music repertory was twofold:

On the one hand... exhibitors employed music as a form of product differentiation and as a means to increase the overall prestige of their enterprise... But other forces are at work here... from time to time columnists and conductors realized the awkward fact that portions of their repertory were no longer as effective as they once had been.

(Altman 318)

Silent film scores in the years leading up to the release of *The Birth of a Nation* exemplify what Kassabian calls compiled scores because they feature preexisting works in the mix. These pieces fostered affiliating identifications because viewers most likely had encountered them prior to watching the film, and the songs suggest their emotional associations with them. As described in this section, the compiled scores eventually lost efficacy due to overuse— audiences associated the canon with countless films— causing composers to draw from repertoires unfamiliar to American audiences. Following Kassabian, because the musical

accompaniment for *The Birth of a Nation* is the first megahit with a composed score, it marks the first time audiences truly were assimilated into the subject position of characters onscreen. *The Perfect Song* allowed viewers to feel as though they were Elise or Ben falling in love with each other rather than an individual in the audience listening to a song that signified a generalized romantic moment. All but two Marvel films feature composed scores, proving that the successful accompaniment to *The Birth of a Nation* had a long-lasting effect.

Experimentation and technological innovation during the Silent era eventually would marry sound and image and bring about synch-sound films and talkies. This union in turn would eliminate any need for in-house keyboardists or traveling orchestras because for the first time soundtracks were recorded live, then integrated into films with new technology.

### **The Coming of Synchronized Sound**

Advancements in technologies would atomize what might have been a subjective and temporal unity of the silent era through the composition of innovative scores rooted in operatic traditions. For the first time, composers and sound engineers had to thoroughly determine the exact relationships between music, dialogue, and diegesis. This consideration would lay the foundation for future compositional practices that further separated opera and film.

Though the Silent era did synchronize live music with silent images, a concrete integration of image and sound never occurred. Interestingly, attempts at synchronizing sound and image within a film itself were frequent throughout the Silent era. Film sound theorist Douglas Gomery delineates the technological advancements that allowed for synchronized sound films in his article "The Coming of Sound: Technological Change in the American Film Industry." He prefaces the history of advancement in sound technologies with the neoclassical

economic theory of technical change, which has three steps: invention, innovation, and diffusion (Gomery 5, 6). The introduction of sound to films was made possible specifically by advancements in telephone and radio technology invented by The American Telephone & Telegraph Corporation (AT&T) and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). “AT&T desired to make better phone equipment: RCA sought to improve its radio capabilities. As a secondary effect of such research, each perfected sound recording and reproduction equipment,” which fulfilled the theory of technological change’s first step of invention (Gomery 5). Warner Brothers Pictures (Warner Bros.) and Fox Film Corporation were the first Hollywood studios to adopt these new technologies and rapidly integrate them into their filmmaking process in creative ways, which fulfilled the second step of technological change: innovation. Lastly, the other major Hollywood studios adopted these same technologies after realizing their lucrative potential, which completes the last step in the theory of technological change: diffusion. The industrialization of sound technologies during this era mirrors the founding of what would become a money-making machine in the heyday of the silent film—the sheet music industry.

While these studios and their employees were the first to successfully integrate image and sound, they were certainly not the first people to try. In fact, entrepreneurs attempted to do so at the end of the nineteenth century. Gomery contends that Thomas Edison invented the Kinetophone in 1895, which “...did not try to synchronize sound and image...” but “...merely supplied a musical accompaniment to which a customer listened as he or she viewed a ‘peep show’ ” (6). According to *Sound Technology and the American Cinema* by film sound theorist James Lastra, the musical accompaniment sold alongside the short Kinetograms suggested songs the publishers considered appropriate to the images on film and diminished the potential for “transgressive accompaniment,” which Lastra characterizes as selections that do not “match

narrative and musical mood, tempo, or theme.” Publishers chose pieces “in such a way that they were subservient to and supported the image-narrative” (105, 106). Other inventors attempted to improve upon Edison’s Kinetophone. Léon Gaumont invented the Chronophone, a system that used cables to connect two phonographs to a projector and included a dial that managed the synchronization between phonograph and film. Gaumont premiered his invention by exhibiting a variety of vaudeville acts he had filmed in 1907. This amazed the Motion Picture Patents Company, which dominated American cinema at the time, so much so that it licensed the system for distribution in the United States. However, the force of its large repertoire and positive reception were not enough to justify the inferiority of the technology in the minds of investors: “Despite initially bright prospects, Chronophone failed to secure a niche in the marketplace because the system, relatively expensive to install, produced only coarse sounds, lacked the necessary amplification, and rarely remained synchronized for long periods of time” (Gomery 6). Though Gaumont attempted to improve on his device in 1913, people did not embrace the newer version since the many problems with the Chronophone’s first iteration remained fresh in their minds. Edison and Gaumont were not alone in their efforts. In fact many other inventors attempted to synchronize image and sound but faced three basic challenges: “...(1) the apparatus was expensive, (2) the amplification could not reach all persons in a large hall, and (3) synchronization could not be maintained for long periods of time” (7).

A massive failure eventually put an end to all attempts to unify phonographic sound and filmic projection altogether. In 1913 Thomas Edison debuted his new Kinetophone that could successfully merge sound and image on the Big Screen. The premiere on February 13 in New York City went swimmingly and astounded viewers. However, most of its future demonstrations were an utter failure because the sound would completely desynchronize from the image (7). The

synchronization troubles Edison and others encountered were largely due to their use of phonographic recordings, which can easily skip or warp. Inventor Lee De Forest understood this tendency and in 1923 invented the Phonofilm system, which encoded sounds as photographs onto film itself.<sup>13</sup> While this design was a milestone in the process of merging film with sound, De Forest was unable to generate much interest in his invention. Unfortunately, legal and financial travails, and the inventor's inability to capture a market impeded the success of Phonofilm. Where individual inventors failed, corporate behemoths AT&T and RCA succeeded due to seemingly endless resources and their integration of concepts and technologies invented during this time. Gomery claims that "In 1925... AT&T ranked with United States Steel as the largest private corporation in the world.... If absolute economic power formed the greatest advantage, patent monopoly certainly added another. AT&T spent enormous sums to create basic patents in order to maintain its monopoly position in the telephone field" (9). The consolidation of power by two major corporations and a few film studios foreshadowed the modern day corporate entertainment monopoly, with Disney at the forefront. The Walt Disney Company owns a plethora of both minor and major companies all in diverse realms of the entertainment sphere. In addition to Marvel Entertainment, the conglomerate owns ESPN, Pixar, Hulu, National Geographic, Star Wars, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, to name a few. But back in the 1920s, it was Warner Bros. that was consolidating sonic power.

While AT&T was inventing sound technologies, Warner Bros. was expanding by purchasing struggling Hollywood studios such as Vitagraph Corporation and its worldwide distribution network, studios, processing laboratory, and film library (10). This expansion was a major step in the arrival of sound in Hollywood. Warner Bros. founded the KFWB radio station

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<sup>13</sup> "A sound track [sic] was photographically recorded on the film by a beam of light modulated by the sound waves. The sound was reproduced during projection by directing a beam of light through the sound track [sic] onto a photocell, the response of which was electronically amplified" (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica).

that promoted their films and received the audio equipment they needed from Western Electric, AT&T's manufacturing subsidiary. Significantly, Warner Bros. was the first company on the West Coast to purchase Western Electric's new technologies, which created a beneficial and lasting relationship between AT&T and Warner Bros. The studio realized if "it could equip the newly acquired theaters with sound and present vaudeville acts as part of their programs, it could successfully challenge the Big Three" (Gomery 11). Warner Bros. and Western Electric came to an agreement that encouraged experimentation: "Western Electric would supply the engineers and sound equipment; Warner Bros, the camera operators, the editors, and the supervisory talent of Sam Warner" (11). The experiment proved so successful that Warner Bros. and Western Electric co-founded the Vitaphone Corporation in April of 1926 to continue developing sound films. Eventually, Vitaphone would successfully integrate sound and image and premiere its astounding accomplishment at the Warner Brothers Theater in New York in August of that year (11). The glowing reception that Vitaphone short films received inspired Warner Bros. to install synch-sound technology in hundreds of theaters. Warner's success inspired Fox to adopt sound technologies, while the five major Hollywood studios— namely Loew's (the parent company of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Universal, First National, Paramount, and Producers Distributing Corporation— decided to wait and see if sound films would be truly profitable in the long term (13). The major studios worried that if they all adopted different sound technologies, they would encounter serious problems. The sound equipment was not interchangeable and thus would limit widespread film distribution and harm profits. As a result, they agreed to adopt sound technologies with certain restrictions placed upon each of them. They negotiated The Big Five Agreement, in which they



agreed to adopt jointly only the system that their specially appointed committee would certify, after one year of study, was the 'best' for the industry. As further protection, they would employ no system unless it was made available to all producers, distributors, and exhibitors on 'reasonable' terms. (Gomery 14)

But according to Lastra, the introduction of recording technologies as well as the engineers who operated them onto Hollywood sets engendered two schools of thought about the function of sound in film. The discussion centered on two forms of realism: narrative and acoustic. Sound engineers argued that

phonographic reproduction may be termed perfect when the components of the reproduced sound reaching the ears of the actual listener have the same relative intensity and phase relation as the sound reaching the ears *of an imaginary listener* to the original performance would have. (Joseph P. Maxfield qtd. in Lastra 159)

However, this approach would require the adoption of expensive, complicated technologies by Hollywood and theaters. Lastra notes that much of the research into the new sound technologies was performed by engineers at telephone companies, which had large budgets devoted solely to innovations in sound (163). For this reason, engineers and their dedication to acoustic realism did not smoothly transition to Hollywood, where budgets were pulled in many directions. The researchers' invisible auditor model generated the awkward soundscapes of early synch-sound films.

Eventually, after approaching film sound recording from a host of angles for nearly a decade, engineers came to realize that what the audience cared most about was narrative. At the same time, directors and producers alike had tired of their obsession with acoustic perfection. On this topic Lastra quotes sound engineer Harold Lewis who switched to the narrative school:

Dramatic sound-recording must in the same way often depart from the standard of the commercially ideal recording... the Recording Engineer... must know how each scene fits into the pattern of the picture as a whole, what precedes it and what follows, so he can give it the best and most dramatically expressive aural treatment possible.

(qtd. in Lastra 174).

Experimenting with recording approaches produced a slightly off soundscape. This odd acoustic environment mirrors Marvel's sonic scape, which has been interrupted and fragmented regularly by the ever-innovating sounds of the digital realm.

The standardization of sound foretells the standardization of scoring principles and the formulaic nature of narrative in the big box office franchise film. As Frankfurt School scholar Theodor Adorno wrote on popular music, "Structural standardization aims at standard reactions..." (Adorno). The mass popularity and viability of the sound film, as evidenced by *The Big Five Agreement*, prefigures the establishment of musical and sonic conventions. In the same vein as Adorno, Benjamin argues that popular art forms that follow convention are met with praise, which in turn elicits a mass response that pre-determines an individual's reaction. Though the effects of synchronizing sound and image could not have been known during this time, they were long-lasting for they gave rise to myriad musical principles and scoring conventions in what would come to be known as the Golden Age of Hollywood.

### **The Classical Style of Hollywood Music**

The integration of sound into Hollywood recording stages and the medium of film itself, coupled with the popularity of film scores in their own right, would lead eventually to the era of Classical Hollywood film music and the dominance of the studio system. In her landmark

*Unheard Melodies* Claudia Gorbman claims that the coming of sound to Hollywood created certain principles for composing, mixing, and editing the classical narrative film.<sup>14</sup> She highlights the term “classical cinema” because it requires the understanding that cinema is an institution that produces filmic texts belonging to a certain canon. She claims that “classical film text” refers to Hollywood feature films produced during the 1930s and ‘40s. They reflect a combination of societal forces ultimately spurred by the multiple economies of the studio system, which was shaped by the dominant ideology of American culture as well as the instruments of pleasure with which Hollywood entertains the masses (70).

[T]here is something identifiable as classical Hollywood cinema, an implicit model that determines the duration of a film, the possibilities of its narrative structure, and its organization of spatiotemporal dimensions via *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing... and sound recording and mixing. (Gorbman 71)

By the late 1930s sound films were at their height and their scores followed the new cinematic principles of Classical Hollywood. She posits seven principles to characterize composition for

I. *Invisibility*: the technical apparatus of nondiegetic music must not be visible.

II. *“Inaudibility”*: Music is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate itself to dialogue, to visuals—i.e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative.

III. *Signifier of emotion*: Soundtrack music may set specific moods and emphasize particular emotions suggested in the narrative (cf. #IV), but first and foremost, it is a signifier of emotion itself.

IV. *Narrative cueing*:

—*referential/narrative*: music gives referential and narrative cues, e.g., indicating point of view, supplying formal demarcations, and establishing setting and characters.

—*connotative*: music “interprets” and “illustrates” narrative events.

V. *Continuity*: music provides formal and rhythmic continuity—between shots, in transitions between scenes, by filling “gaps.”

VI. *Unity*: via repetition and variation of musical material and instrumentation, music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity.

VII. A given film score may violate any of the principles above, providing the violation is at the service of the other principles.

### Ex. 11 Gorbman’s Seven Principles

<sup>14</sup> Specifically, Chapter 4 “Classical Hollywood Practice: The Model of Max Steiner.”

film in this period. The work of Max Steiner, who composed for RKO Pictures prior to his tenure as Warner Bros.' in-house composer, exemplifies all of these laws.

The first, invisibility, requires that "...the technical apparatus of nondiegetic music must not be visible" (73). This rule means that films should never reveal the recording devices employed in their production, for doing so would break a viewer's sense of immersion by revealing the artificiality of a musical accompaniment. Following Benjamin, the lack of the score's aura would be revealed simultaneously with the technological devices. Like the many compiled performances of a film actor, the musical score is composed of many recording sessions in which an orchestra performs music that underscores a particular scene. The aura of the musicians was removed by recording devices, an effect of the integration of sound and image. In contrast, the orchestras of the Silent era would travel across the country to perform film scores in person. Gorbman notes that Classical era films went to great lengths to hide their recording apparatus and convince audiences that a film's sounds came directly from the image. Music can be understood as diegetic when the sound apparatus is visible; a scene featuring an orchestra playing music transports a song from the score into the filmic world. However, she states that the music we hear is still pre-recorded and therefore complicates its naturalization as part of the filmic world (75). Suture theory informs us that the camera becomes the eye and so revealing its artificiality complicates the relationship of a viewer to the narrative illusion. Following Gorbman and Kassabian, de-mystifying the recording machinery temporarily de-sutures viewers, thereby removing them from identity positions into which they were slotted.

The second principle, inaudibility, holds that although a viewer can always hear a film's music, studios go to great lengths to hide it under layers of dialogue. Inaudibility refers to the

subordinate position music and sound take in relation to narrative. She quotes musicologist and composer Leonid Sabaneyev on this matter, who states

In general, music should understand that in the cinema it should nearly always remain in the background: it is, so to speak, a tonal figuration, the 'left hand' of the melody on the screen, and it is a bad business when this left hand begins to creep into the foreground and obscure the melody. (Gorbman 76)

Gorbman views story as the right-hand melody of a film that draws the attention of viewers while the music supports it with subtextual meaning. This subordination of music to filmic narratives resulted in particular scoring practices. Composers wrote pieces that were flexible and trimmable, built pauses with sustained notes, and wrote shorter musical phrases, all of which made editing a film easier. Max Steiner's famously influential scores feature a plethora of sequential progressions—musical phrases that are designed to build tension through their restatement a step or a third higher than the previous statement (77). Chase scenes utilize such progressions, as do battles and climaxes, such as the moment in *King Kong* when the great ape scales the Empire State Building with Ann Darrow trapped in his paw (*King Kong*). These sequences easily could be lengthened or shortened as dictated by the pacing of the film. Since the voice takes precedence over all sound, low instruments were scored against high voices while high instruments were scored against low ones. This practice complemented the cast members' voices rather than acting in opposition to them. Composers recognized that certain points lent themselves to stopping or starting a musical piece while others did not. Music creates momentum; its sudden appearance or disappearance can cause anxiety in an audience. As a result, music generally enters or exits on actions, like the closing of a door, or sound events such as a doorbell ringing. Lastly, music's mood must be appropriate to the tone of the scene (78). "A

musical idiom must be thoroughly familiar, its connotations virtually reflexive knowledge, for it to serve 'correctly,' invisibly, in a classical filmic discourse" (79). Michel Chion describes this rule and the potential consequences of breaking it with his terms empathetic and anempathetic. Notably, composers of this era adhered to this rule and composed music with empathetic effects, for they believed that anempathetic effects would contrast with the tone of a scene and produce comedic results. As described in the theoretical section, Chion argues that anempathetic effects and their tonal contrast can in fact intensify emotion and heighten the tone of a scene, rather than altering it in a comedic manner.

Emotion, the third principle, is relatively straightforward and closely related to musical tone. Music in classical films signifies emotions. Sabaneyev explains that filmic images, narrative dialogue, and sound effects are objective elements of film. As expressed in the Dionysian view, music provides "a necessary emotional, irrational, romantic, or intuitive dimension to it" (79). The emotional tone of the music that accompanies a scene tells the viewer how to feel about the events of that particular scene. For example, the melancholy organ piece featured in Ex. 8 is heard after Tony Stark dies by sacrificing himself to defeat a universal enemy, Thanos. Viewers are thus informed that this is a sad moment—the first superhero of the MCU has passed away—and that their emotional response should mirror the elegiac and wistful tone they are hearing.

Narrative cueing, Gorbman's fourth principle, parses the function of film music: "(1) it refers the spectator to demarcations and levels of narration; (2) it illustrates, emphasizes, underlines, and points, via what we shall call connotative cueing" (82). She explains that opening and closing music act as narrative cues in opposite ways. Opening music signals genre and establishes overall emotional tone, which is similar to an overture in that it features a few

musical themes that the audience will hear throughout the film. The distinctness of those themes primes the viewer's emotional response for the action to follow. In contrast, closing music begins during the final scene and continues into the credits. The recapitulation of musical themes informs the audience that the film is coming to an end. Narrative cueing is instrumental thinking, a means to an end. The operatic leitmotif is this end for it is a more complete form of a narrative cue, deeply woven into an opera to complete the totality its aesthetic through many sonically distinct motifs. In her description of narrative cues, Gorbman refers to the time, place, and stock characterization film music provides as to explain how it can signal certain settings, cultures, and character types. For instance, certain orchestration and scoring practices signify Native Americans, which is inherently problematic because the compositions themselves were written by outsiders perpetuating Western cultural stereotypes through music. For example, "Max Steiner gives virtually the same rhythmic, open fifths theme to the Seminoles in Key Largo as he does to Apaches and Cheyennes out west" (83). This practice was so common that it even showed up in Disney films and cartoons of the era and persists to this day. A narrative cue, then, is what the reminiscence motif was to the leitmotif— rather than in-depth narrative information, it conveys more generalized associations.

Next, Gorbman defines what she calls connotative cueing, where music makes meaning through "...moods and connotations which, in conjunction with the images and other sounds, aid in interpreting narrative events and indicating moral/class/ethnic values of characters" (84). Film scores of the Classical era of Hollywood generally overemphasize the connotative values of music, a tendency that reinforces the narrative subtext found within dialogue, setting, color, and cinematographic editing techniques (84). Here again music heavily influences the tone of a film with conventional orchestration practices that result in meaning, which was "codified and

institutionalized well before the coming of sound” through the prevalence of suggested compilations produced by music publishing companies (85). Another subsection of narrative cueing is illustration, defined the synchronization of sound with what is depicted onscreen. It is for this reason that swelling strings and brass signify flying to this day. Think of Superman taking to the heavens or Harry Potter on his Nimbus 3000. The following description is just as applicable to 21<sup>st</sup> century Marvel films as it was to one of Max Steiner’s scores in 1938: “A Steiner score accompanying an eventful sequence can sound like a hodgepodge of mixed thematic material, rapidly changing dynamics and orchestral texture, and rapid modulations, in its tendency to provide hyper-explicit, moment-by-moment musical illustration” (87). The composed scores of the MCU, like Steiner’s, follow the tradition of Classical Hollywood.

The fifth musical principle is formal and rhythmic continuity and describes film music’s ability to fill gaps in action or dialogue all the while evading the spotlight. However, some composers would argue that this principle proves that Hollywood films are afraid of silence, which can be a great tool for increasing tension in a scene. The use of film music as a glue between moments makes it perfect for transitions, where music begins in one scene and continues into the next. This practice draws viewers’ attention away from rougher cuts (Gorbman 89). Unity, the sixth principle, requires that music is employed to reinforce a film’s formal and narrative cohesion. Gorbman once again quotes Sabaneyev, who explains an unwritten rule of film music composition. A composer is free to start a new, unrelated, music cue in a new key if no music has sounded for fifteen seconds. If fewer than fifteen seconds have elapsed, the composer must write the musical cue in the same or a closely related key (90). In addition to observing this custom, Max Steiner among others solidified the use of character themes as a major unifying force in film scores. Steiner composed scores based on his musical themes. He



would begin by composing the principle character's motif along with that of the principle idea and develop the score from there. Composers write their scores in this manner to this day.

Gorbman states:

The thematic score provides a built-in unity of statement and variation, as well as a semiotic subsystem. The repetition, interaction, and variation of musical themes throughout a film contributes [sic] much to the clarity of its dramaturgy and to the clarity of its formal structures. (Gorbman 91)

The seventh and final principle states that any of the previous six principles may be violated in service of another. I will refer to this principle as "violation." While these compositional laws are at the forefront of the modern box office and the MCU, they were notably absent from the soundscape of New Hollywood, which experimented with the cinematic form as a whole.

### **Post-Classical Modern Scoring Style**

During the New Hollywood, when composers were more compilers than creators. In direct contrast to earlier eras, film music was valued for its aesthetic function rather than its narrative function and incorporated popular contemporary songs into the score. Conservatory educated composers were frustrated by this practice and embraced the compositional techniques defined by the Golden Age of Hollywood. This re-adoption in turn would lead to their prominence during the Franchise era to come.

Film sound theorist Emilio Audissino analyzes what he calls "The Classical Hollywood Music Style," "The Modern Hollywood Music Style," and "Williams' Neoclassicism," the last of which was popularized by John Williams and draws upon the two previous styles.<sup>15</sup> Audissino

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<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will alternate between "music style" and "scoring style. Additionally, I will refer to "Williams' Neoclassicism" as "The Neoclassical Music Style."

asserts that classical Hollywood music style ended in 1958, when changes took place in the contractual arrangements between musicians and studios that ultimately led to the demise of the studio orchestra (25, 57). As the new decade swept in European films came to dominate the international market. Because these films flouted the rules established by Classical Hollywood they were considered modern art cinema. This cinematic form emphasized aesthetic value over narrative; the style employed music, cinematography, and lighting in service of establishing the overall tone and mood of a scene rather than to further develop the narrative. Modern cinema and its auteurs did not follow the Hollywood cookie cutter formula of a linear story trajectory that resolved the narrative by following the logic of cause and effect. Instead, European art films employed a non-linear aesthetic that visually represents a character's internal emotions and utilizes musical genres to support that mood (58).

Audissino quotes film sound theorist Russell Lack, who claims, "Music in the modern cinema freely moves between the diegetic source that is revealed in the image and the non-diegetic music whose source is never revealed and vice versa" (58). During this era composers alternated between placing music within the soundtrack, which was only audible to the audience, and the diegesis, where both viewers in the theater and characters onscreen could hear it. If not executed correctly, this alternation risked breaking Gorbman's principles of invisibility, inaudibility, and potentially violating them should the toggling break these principles without serving another. When the music onscreen draws attention to the technological apparatus performing the soundtrack, these principles are violated. Take, for example, a classical composition that might accompany a scene. Initially the viewer does not consider whether a live or a recorded orchestra is performing the piece. It is then revealed that a character happened to be listening to music on a record player, which the viewer unconsciously notes. If the character

were to turn off the record player but the classical piece was still audible, the viewer might come to question who had been performing the piece—the orchestra that performed the film score or the orchestra on the character's record player? This complication and the questions that arise from it work against the immersive experience into the diegesis and ultimately break it.

However, when properly executed, the alternation between soundtrack and diegesis does follow Gorbman's fifth principle by acting as a transition between scenes. In this case, the violation of her other principles are in fact in service of principle five, meaning that principle seven, violation, is respected (58).

What Audissino calls the spatial perceptive function is common to the classical style but a rare scoring practice in modern film music. This function guides the viewer's attention to something particular within an image. Combined with the modern penchant for aesthetics, the motif is almost wholly abandoned during this period (59). During this era, Hollywood was heavily influenced by European films and adopted the new attitude toward music they displayed. For example, European films shied away from the narrative cue and instead favored the closed musical number technique: "Instead of a continuous stream of music based on interwoven leitmotifs, the score was structured through a series of isolated set pieces closed in themselves" (Audissino 59). This technique was common in French and Italian operas rather than the Wagnerian opera from which Hollywood composers had borrowed scoring practices. While classical Hollywood film scores primarily drew from the repertoire of Western classical music, scores of the Modern era incorporated multiple genres—Jazz, Rock, Pop—and was even "open to any other languages that were either trendy or experimental, including dialects of twentieth-century art music such as atonality, modalism, and dodecaphonism" (Audissino 61). However, while the integration of popular music by modern film composers was an aesthetic choice, it was

also a shrewd marketing tactic. It filled theaters with young audiences, who in the counter-cultural 1960s otherwise might have stayed away (Audissino 61, 62). This tactic frustrated composers who felt as though the original purpose of music in film had been lost to its commercial one. Audissino quotes Henry Mancini, a renowned film composer and representative of this new style: “The minute you put a song over the titles or in any part of the picture, you’re unconsciously trying to play on the viewer’s pocketbook... Often these songs don’t really make the action progress or make any kind of comment” (Audissino 68). Nonetheless, this overt drive toward commercialism came at the price of marginalizing a rich history of scoring practices. Arguably, they would remain dormant until twelve themes written for a swashbuckling sci-fi movie would revive them and return them to the forefront of Hollywood cinema.

### **Neoclassicism: John Williams’ Revival of the Classical Film Music Style**

*Star Wars* and its widespread popularity, combined with a memorable score written by the conservatory trained John Williams, is widely credited with bringing neoclassicism to the forefront of composition, a style that outlasted the Franchise era but was by no means universal.

Though *Star Wars* is one of the most successful film franchises of all time, it had a shaky start. George Lucas conceptualized the film as a combination of science fiction and mythology, technology with magic, and the future with the past (Audissino 69). It was modeled after the B-movie adventure films produced by minor production companies known as “poverty-row studios”. As a result, Lucas’s concept was rejected by multiple production companies until 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox took a chance on it. By 1970 science fiction had lost its appeal, and Lucas’s concept sounded like an “expensive B-movie for kids” (70). The music of science fiction had drawn upon the music of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Modernism, such as atonal music, to sound futuristic. However,

Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* had broken this mold. Kubrick rejected the score composed by Alex North and instead opted for a collection of famous orchestral works ranging from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism to 1960s Modernism: "Kubrick chose to create a special 'asynchronism' with the visuals. Music had to serve as an intellectual stimulus by pointing to extra-filmic references and creating an intertextual dimension, which would actively involve the viewer in deciphering this enigmatic film" (70). Lucas decided that *Star Wars* would feature a score similar to *2001* and initially planned to employ pre-existing leitmotifs from famous orchestral works for each of the film's characters (71). The director is quoted widely as saying that he wanted a classical score and a grand soundtrack to match the old-fashioned feel of his movie. Lucas's desire to have a compiled score is what motivated John Williams to hybridize modern and classical Hollywood scoring practices. To reiterate, scores compiled from pre-existing music were common during the modern era of cinema because they appealed to younger audiences. However, Lucas's desire to employ classical orchestral pieces as character themes broke with the zeitgeist of the time and reflected his appreciation for the compositional techniques developed during the Classical Hollywood era. Williams, after meeting with Lucas in April of 1975, noted the concept's roots in the swashbuckling genre and agreed that the film would be best paired with an old-fashioned score (71). Williams recognized this admiration but convinced Lucas not to pursue a compilation but rather an original score. He believed that "...this technique doesn't... take a piece of melodic material, develop it and relate it to a character all the way through the film... For formal reasons, I felt that the film wanted thematic unity" (Williams qtd. in Audissino 71).

While the images onscreen are of alien planets and races, a score based in the scoring practices of the classical style would give viewers a sense of emotional familiarity with the

music and therefore the movie as a whole. Williams explained this by saying “It was not music that might describe *terra incognita* but the opposite of that, music that would put us in touch with very familiar and remembered emotions, which for me as a musician translated into the use of a nineteenth-century operatic idiom, if you like... These sorts of influences would put us in touch with remembered theatrical experiences...” (qtd. in Audissino 72). The score for the first *Star Wars* followed several of Gorbman’s classical scoring principles. For example, Williams utilized invisibility and inaudibility for most of the film, except during the cantina scene, where the smuggler pilot Han Solo is introduced and kills Greedo, a bounty hunter who antagonized him. It takes place in a bar and is accompanied by an upbeat tune reminiscent of 1930s jazz. The music shifts from its nondiegetic status to diegetic when an alien jazz band is featured onscreen, which calls attention to the soundtrack and naturalizes it. This breaking of invisibility and inaudibility is in favor of Gorbman’s fourth principle, narrative cueing, for it aids viewers in recognizing that Han Solo is in a bar that features live music. The seventh principle— that any of the preceding six may be broken in service of another— is obeyed. In the spirit of Max Steiner, Williams wrote twelve motifs upon which he based his symphonic score (72). These themes align with principles four and six, namely narrative cueing and unity. Not only do Williams’ narrative cues give viewers a point of identification onscreen, they also provide connotative information by underscoring dialogue with additional subtext. His themes followed the principle of unity through their multiple varied statements brought about by changes in orchestration. Their variety communicates the tone of a scene to the viewer in accordance with principle three, emotion (see Ex. 11 above). Principle four, formal and rhythmic continuity, is displayed between the transition from the opening credits to the first scene, which begins with a shot of a planet above which a starship battle breaks out. The last few notes of the overture from the opening crawl are sustained

while a woodwind plays a mysterious melody. Then, while the camera pans down from space to an alien planet and its moon, the symphony restates a theme heard during the opening credits introduced by timpani and low brass before an intense musical sequence marks the beginning of the starship battle. Here, the film score has successfully linked the two scenes.

Film historians generally credit the success and popularity of *Star Wars* and its score with bringing about a renaissance of the classical Hollywood scoring style. This observation makes it sound as though all Hollywood films produced afterward followed suit, which is not the case:

To state that *Star Wars* restored the [C]lassical Hollywood music style altogether is not correct, as it is not true to say that since *Star Wars* the symphony orchestra has become the dominant musical means in Hollywood cinema... In the following years, new idioms emerged as highly successful in Hollywood... disco music, New Age impressionism, ethnic influences (world music), minimalism, and the like. (Audissino 83)

Audissino notes that many composers incorporated synthesized electronic music in their scores. Notably, *Star Wars* did not revive the classical era of Hollywood music but instead incorporated its techniques and principles into an altogether new style of film scoring: Neoclassicism. “After years of mostly market-oriented music, his narrative oriented scores brought back to the general attention the importance and power of music as a device of cinematic art, and the fundamental help that it can give to film narration” (85). This would inspire others to rediscover classical Hollywood scoring styles. Though Williams’s neoclassicism did not become the dominant practice of all Hollywood film scores, it would dominate the scores of franchise films—blockbuster films with multiple sequels featuring the same cast of characters. Williams’s score demonstrated the might of the classical symphonic score to compete with the popularity and commercial success of modern movie scores as gauged by soundtrack sales (Audissino 82). Of

note, nearly all of the MCU films have a neoclassical-style score, with a few exceptions. Though *Star Wars* was initially conceived of as a single film, its popularity led to the production of eight more main movies, in addition to stand-alone films and television shows. John Williams would score all eight of the films following *Star Wars*, never abandoning his original motifs. Though he composed new themes for the newer characters introduced in later films, he managed to re-use the twelve original character themes throughout the franchise. Thus, Williams's *Star Wars* works stand as the polar opposite of the MCU's twenty-three scores and their constant motific contradiction. But if the MCU films adhere to Classical scoring principles, why are their scores so contradictory? The answer is twofold.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF MODERN ISSUES

##### **The Unfortunate Permanence of Temp-Music**

The success of the neoclassical film scores that accompanied blockbuster franchises led to their use as temporary soundtracks for new films, which directors envisioned as musical placeholders to inform composers of the sound they wished to recreate. Specifically, temp-music is music from another film temporarily used as a new film scene's score until the composer can score that scene with something original. Unfortunately, the prevalent use of temp-music has become another practice in Hollywood in general, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular, which culminates in scores I find bland and forgettable. George Lucas used temp-music for its illustrative purposes but remained open to John Williams' original ideas for the score: "...Lucas, through his own temp-track, showed Williams that his preference was for the late-romantic dialect, that of classical Hollywood" (Audissino 71, 72). Yet today directors and producers will tell their composer to imitate the temp-music. Danny Elfman, a revered film



composer who scored *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, spoke about the challenges that temp-music engenders in an interview with other MCU composers: “For me, temp-music is the bane of my existence. It’s my job to make the director forget everything he’s heard in the temp... if they’re addicted to it, it’s just gonna’ make my job harder...” (The Marvel Symphonic Universe). He also stated that decades ago, directors began to believe that music should be unnoticeable in films. Yet nowadays, the use of temp-music is so prevalent that most film scores sound similar enough to each other to border on copyright infringement.

Although temp-music is not customarily copyright claimed, Warner Bros. did publicly apologize in 2007 for Tyler Bates’ score for *300*, the action movie set during the Persian Wars, because much of the music was nearly identical to Elliot Goldenthal’s score for *Titus*:

Warner Bros. Pictures acknowledges and regrets that a number of music cues for the score of *300* were, without our knowledge or participation, derived from music composed by Academy Award-winning composer Elliot Goldenthal for the motion picture *Titus*.

Warner Bros. Pictures has great respect for Elliot, our longtime collaborator, and is pleased to have amicably resolved this matter. (The Marvel Symphonic Universe)

Based on my research, this statement marks the only time a major studio has apologized for the use of temp-music. In the same interview, Elfman explains that decades ago directors would refer to prior film music when talking to a composer. Non-linear editing allowed directors to insert temp-music into a movie and gave them the ability to point to the temp-music and say, “make it like that.” Additionally, Elfman claims that directors tend to spend a year or more with a temp-music film score. Thus, when the temp-music is removed the video editing and cuts are no longer correct. This practice allows composers little room for creativity, which results in scores so similar to each other score that they approach copyright infringement. YouTuber *Every*

*Frame and Painting*, who made one of the earliest and most influential video essays on the MCU's generic scores, stated that the prevalent use of temp-music removes all risk from scoring: "Risk is missing from Marvel music; the kind of risk that creates an emotional connection with the audience so that they carry the music with them. People do not remember safe choices. Only bold, original music can do this" (The Marvel Symphonic Universe). And scores written by multiple composers lack the cohesion endowed by the technique of the motif. As a result they miss the bar of bold originality, which makes the music not only forgettable to the moviegoer.

Though scores based upon temp-music tend to follow Gorbman's principles, their efficacy is diluted. They are a mere imitation of neoclassical form, which itself borrowed some, but not all, of Classical Hollywood's scoring practices. In other words, soundtracks composed with temp-music are twice removed from the original, and thus essentially neo-neoclassical. They are at a remove from the original in space and time, a similar distance to Benjamin's idea of mechanical reproduction. A reproduction is only a likeness, not the genuine article. The operatic form is the original; the Classical Hollywood score borrowed from opera but adapted its techniques to the screen while creating its own conventions; the Neoclassical era score absorbed some of those techniques; the temp-music score draws upon the miniscule crumbs of its forebears three generations removed. Here we have Benjamin's withering of the aura through mechanical reproduction (3). Temp-music ensures that a franchise like the MCU becomes a cult because the scores that it produces adhere to conventions that guarantee the praise of the masses. That in turn predetermines the favorable critical reception of the film by the individual. This kind of self-perpetuating system is Debord's society of the spectacle. Here we are squarely in the realm where music has lost its immersive power. Add to this impoverishment the Disney factory's high rate of director/composer turnover and the result is a franchise like the MCU

without congruent musical themes for its superheroes. How then would a franchise reclaim its immersive potential? The answer lies within the digital sphere.

### **Ones and Zeros**

The advent of the Digital era brought with its computer-generated images and visual effects a necessity for sound effects that add enough value to make them sound like they emanate from the real, not filmic, world. The mickey-mousing technique of an orchestra making explicit an action on screen recedes in popularity now (Gorbman 88). Much like director Michael Crichton with *Westworld*, Walt Disney was searching for a creative way to synchronize sound with each character's actions as well as the greater storyline of a short.<sup>16</sup> The result was *Steamboat Willy* (1928). He took as elaborate a step as Crichton did with the NASA mainframe by hiring seventeen musicians to perform the chuffing, whistling, and horn blowing of the steamboat in Carl Stalling's score.

Unfortunately, SFXs in the Digital era would clutter the carefully composed filmic soundscape and exacerbate the displacement of the immersive power that a temp-music score catalyzed. Today VFX and their accompanying SFX clearly hold this might, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of 3D projection and surround sound technologies. In fact, by 2015 the RealD brand of 3D projection technology had been installed in "more than 26,500 auditoriums by approximately 1,200 exhibitors in 72 countries around the world" (Jurassic World). This ubiquity of 3D technology mirrors the standardization of sound technologies inaugurated by The Big Five Agreement of 1926. Before we delve further into modern digital technologies, we must

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<sup>16</sup> Although Gorbman defines and gives examples of "mickey-mousing," Walt Disney coined the term in honor of his hero in *Steamboat Willy*.

understand how they affect viewers. To do that, we must go back in time to determine exactly how film music of old affected listeners.

According to Gorbman, one of the primary goals of film music is to "...render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject: less critical, less 'awake,' " since a less critical and less awake viewer is more susceptible to the immersive power of cinema (5). Gorbman's viewer then willingly suspends disbelief in the Aristotelian manner of a theatergoer who spectates tragedy to experience catharsis in the final act, surrendering fact to fiction and abandoning the logic of reality to that of the diegesis (Shields). Furthermore, Gorbman points out that music can hide the technological nature of film: "Music may act as a 'suturing' device, aiding the process of turning enunciation into fiction, lessening awareness of the technological nature of film discourse" (5). The less critical and less awake a viewer is, the easier it is for a film to immerse an audience as it is less likely to notice the technical aspects of film making: the cinematography, the post-production editing, and the film and sound apparati present in a movie theater. Last, Gorbman argues that music weakens the audience's defenses to the fantastical narratives depicted onscreen and increases its susceptibility to narrative suggestion. In every example, Gorbman highlights the power of the score to move the viewer. But in the Digital era, the score has lost much of this ability because of obfuscation. Still, even without such musical influence, why is it that Marvel scores manage not to impede the viewer's identification with and assimilation into a character's subject position? Is it because stunning VFXs wield the kind of power Gorbman describes? Indeed, MCU's musical inconsistencies are prevalent enough to denude the score of power, making heart-stopping VFXs that much the mightier by contrast.

Clearly, realistic VFX require a large portion of the budget and multiple teams to realize them. Studio priorities favor the visual over the aural because VFX generate ticket sales. The

days of the in-house composer, like Max Steiner, and franchise composer, like John Williams, are gone. Rather than contract a sole composer for multiple films— an expensive endeavor— Marvel takes a less costly path by contracting a new composer for nearly every release.

Much like the people who experienced the changing soundscape of the industrial age, the modern filmgoer has learned to ignore certain sounds and regard them as noise. The consequence of the relentless introduction of new SFX to accompany bigger, better VFX has been the murky soundscape of the modern franchise. In accordance with Schafer, filmic keynote sounds (Foley and SFX) have taken the place of signal sounds (character motifs), altering the sonic environment established by Classical Hollywood films and their respective music. To uncover the narrative information provided by keynote sounds (now character motifs) in an MCU score, a viewer must listen past the noise of signal sounds (now Foley and SFX) such as explosions, alien weaponry, and military vehicles. We are in another pivotal moment in the universe of the soundscape brought about by the Big Bang of streaming platforms.

Embracing digitization, The Walt Disney Company in 2019 launched its own streaming platform Disney+, on which all the films of the MCU are available. Disney will inaugurate the fourth phase of the multi-phasal Marvel Universe by releasing TV shows directly onto the platform. Following Benjamin, the mass response to popular art forms predetermines that of the individual. Thus, if in the future MCU films and TV shows are released exclusively on Disney+, an individual's reaction would be just that— individual and unfettered by popular opinion. Yet from this freedom arise new considerations. Most people do not have home theaters, meaning that they would watch the media of Marvel on televisions, laptops, and even phones. What, then, are the consequences of viewing franchise films outside of the hyper-immersive theater of today? I argue that Marvel films and their un-marvelous scores will not stand the test of time in the same

way *Star Wars* has. The new, at-home viewing experience, which during the current global pandemic is the only viewing experience, will bring awareness to both the cluttered nature of the Marvel soundscape and the inconsistencies among its scores.

### **A Marvelous Conclusion**

The gradual technologization of film as a medium coupled with its standardization as an art form led to both a dehumanized and conventional product. Silent films reproduced a body but not a voice, separating the actor from a part, but not the whole, of their aura. Rudimentary recording technologies that could not synchronize sound and image meant that the actor and the orchestra retained their voice and thereby the authenticity of their aura in part. However, once technologies merged sound and image, actor and musician both lost the totality of their aura. The union established musical conventions of film scoring that are still audible in the MCU, albeit in a different manner. The New Hollywood and its break with the principles of Classical Hollywood composition spurred some composers to disavow the new, aesthetic function of music in this era. As a result, these musicians re-adopted the musical conventions of old that the New Hollywood forewent. In turn, Classical Hollywood scoring traditions came to dominate the box office once again during the Franchise era, as exemplified by *Star Wars*. While these scores would employ temp-music, they were not compositionally limited to it. Ironically, what was temporary became permanent. The success of this approach eventually would lead to an era of scores entirely restricted to the sound of temp-music. The inauthentic soundscape of the MCU clearly falls victim to this practice, reproducing a mechanical reproduction of Classical film scoring. In a fate similar to that of an actor's aura, the authenticity in film music was killed off by mechanical reproduction.

If we accept the camera as the viewer's surrogate eye, then the speaker in a movie theater must be the surrogate ear. Speakers play the soundtrack, which is a compilation of many recordings by many microphones. It is the movie theater speaker, then, not the multitude of microphones, which is the organ of sonic apprehension and discrimination. Still, while the theater does create an immersive environment for the audience, it is the surrogate eye that it privileges. The murky soundscape of the MCU owes its existence to the sea of special effects that add value to the many noisy video effects onscreen, and at times a viewer must listen through them to hear the score. Therefore, even in this computer-generated world sound is subordinate to image. Movies, after all, are made to be seen first and heard second. Certain theoretical catchphrases work well to get at what the incongruities in Marvel's scores do to the audience: Guy Debord's spectacle as pacifying influence on the masses of society, Gorbman's bath or gel effect of music washing over the moviegoer, the Lacanian suture that binds viewer to filmic world, Aristotle's willing suspension of disbelief in the theatergoer.

Given that precedence of pictures in the theater and Hollywood's tendency toward the extravagant, it is logical that special effects, not melodies or character themes, are what stick with the MCU spectator after the lights come on. Who can hum Iron Man's theme? No one. Who can hum the Imperial March from *Star Wars*? Two generations of superfans. The SFX of the Digital era obscure the soundscape, alter the hierarchy of sound in theaters, and position SFX above music. While musical motifs still foreshadow events, the viewer must aurally wade through an obscured sonic environment to ascertain the narrative cues.

Once they were a new phenomenon striking awe in audiences with their grandeur, but now Hollywood film scores consistently imitate each other, one as lackluster as the next, drowning the movie-going public in sameness. Musical inconsistencies are most recognizable in

standalone superhero movies with sequels because the same motifs are rarely used across multiple films. It is for this reason MCU music still holds sway when evaluated in a discrete film but loses power when considered as an opus. Regrettably, Marvel Studios hired writers who conceived of a ten-year, multi-phasal narrative yet neglected to hire composers to do the same with the film scores. If the studio had done so, viewers would have assimilated into characters' subject positions far more smoothly and more consistently across all of the films. This is not to say that beautiful and groundbreaking movie music no longer exists— think of the innovative and memorable score for *Black Panther* or the thoroughly operatic opus for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy— but instead to point out their rarity and marginalized status. The Classical principles of scoring still exist in the scores of the modern day, although they are vestiges of neoclassical interpretations from the Franchise era. We have landed squarely in the era of temp-music, a mere facsimile of an era whose scores feature remnants of Classical Hollywood. What a pity that the elegantly interwoven narrative of almost two dozen movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe does not enjoy what it rightly deserves— an equally beautiful tapestry of musics, an opus even. Such composition would move viewers emotionally, interpolating them into characters' subject positions. Sadly, the current industrial structure of Hollywood and the Disney stranglehold with its churning director/composer teams likely will continue to impede the creation of a fully realized sonic universe.

We the audience are to blame as well. Perhaps our ignoring the acoustic environment Marvel presents us already has led to what Schafer called universal deafness. Certainly, our appetite for ever louder VFX likely will not abate. We have become housebound during a global pandemic, tethered to our screens and numerous streaming services, including Disney's own, to watch all those films originally released in theaters in addition to those that went straight to



digital platforms. This particular change in distribution is altering the MCU sonic environment yet again, to a living room, a bedroom, even a car. This personalization of moviegoing in turn will limit the immersive power wielded by VFX, for smaller screen viewers no longer will experience 3D images and surround sound. And the displacement of the Marvel Universe films from theater to home could well see their popularity decrease because an individual's response no longer would be predetermined by the masses'. Perhaps, when this day comes, the spectator will awaken to how Marvel has hidden the mediocrity and inconsistency of its music, and clamor for something more akin to a majestic symphonic universe.

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