Chapter 1

What does film music do?

What does film music do? Since many in the audience do not even hear it, what good is it? I’d like to begin to answer these questions by looking at film music in action, by analyzing how music operates in a sequence I hope will be familiar to most readers: the torture sequence from Quentin Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs (1992), which features the song “Stuck in the Middle With You.”

Film music, whether it is a pop song, an improvised accompaniment, or an originally composed cue, can do a variety of things. It can establish setting, specifying a particular time and place; it can fashion a mood and create atmosphere; it can call attention to elements onscreen or offscreen, thus clarifying matters of plot and narrative progression; it can reinforce or foreshadow narrative developments and contribute to the way we respond to them; it can elucidate characters’ motivations and help us to know what they are thinking; it can contribute to the creation of emotions, sometimes only dimly realized in the images, both for characters to emote and for audiences to feel. Film music can unify a series of images that might seem disconnected on their own and impart a rhythm to their unfolding. While it is doing all of this, film music encourages our absorption into the film by distracting us from its technological basis—its constitution as a series of two-dimensional, larger-than-life, sometimes black-and-white, and sometimes silent, images. Of course, film music doesn’t
do all of these things all of the time. But music is so useful to film because it can do so much simultaneously.

**A multipurpose music cue**

Take the song “Stuck in the Middle With You,” heard blasting from an onscreen radio accompanying the torture of a uniformed cop at the mercy of a psychotic criminal, Mr. Blonde. A bubblegum hit of the 1970s recorded by Stealers Wheel and aimed at the teen and preteen market, the song by conventional measures is no more memorable any other catchy tune of that era. But in *Reservoir Dogs* it demonstrates how music can be a controlling force in determining how we respond to a film.

One of film music’s primary functions is to create mood, an important component in how an audience responds. A torture sequence would seemingly create considerable tension in an audience forced to watch it. What is so interesting about “Stuck in the Middle With You” is its power both to alter that expected mood and to distance us from the violence. The very elements that make the song sound innocuous—its chirpy melody, conventional rhythms, banal lyrics, and predictable and uncomplicated harmonies—belie the grisly nature of the sequence, dissipating the tension inherent in the situation and replacing it with an uncomfortable irony. The music is, in fact, so powerful in creating mood that when Mr. Blonde momentarily walks outside the warehouse where the torture is taking place and the song drops out, the mood is dramatically altered. Tarantino is certainly not the first nor the last director to pair brutal images with frothy music for ironic effect: Stanley Kubrick pioneered the practice in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), where “Singin’ in the Rain” accompanied a graphic murder. In fact, it has become so commonplace to accompany violence with lighthearted music that the *New York Times* titled its 1994 commentary on the practice “It’s Got a Nice Beat, You Can Torture to It.” The pairing of brutality with bubbly music in *Reservoir Dogs* remains amazingly effective, nonetheless.
Songs, when the audience recognizes them, can be a particularly effective way of generating a specific atmosphere. Remember that we’ve been told what we need to know about the song by Mr. Blonde—“Ever listen to K-Billy’s Super Sounds of the 70s?”—and the deejay who introduces it as a “Dylanesque pop bubblegum favorite.” Few of us might remember the 1970s, but if we do, a certain set of associations are activated: the vapidness of the “me” generation, its superficiality, its apathy. For audience members who can recall these associations, the banality of the song is heightened and the irony produced by the unsettling mixture of the trite and the terrifying is intensified. The song begins:

Well, I don’t know why I came here tonight,
I got the feeling that something ain’t right

The first stanza then moves in the next lines to the near-rhyme “chair” and “stairs,” placing these everyday objects in the context of such anxiety-causing verbs as “scare” and “fall.” The rhyme scheme breaks down even further as the stanza ends with the memorable lines:

Clowns to the left of me,
Jokers to the right, here I am,
Stuck in the middle with you.

The lyrics—and they are heard here by both the audience and the characters—add yet another dimension. Present in the sequence is Mr. Orange, a wounded undercover police officer posing as a member of the criminal gang, incapacitated by a life-threatening wound but still alive and armed. Although present, Mr. Orange is not the focal point of the narrative, and we see him only in the background of a few shots. It is interesting how the lyrics of the song beckon us to pay attention to him. Indeed, “something ain’t right” as Mr. Orange finds himself “stuck in the middle.” Now the song no longer seems merely an ironic juxtaposition to the images. The lyrics have enriched our understanding of the narrative by
directing our attention to a complicating factor in the scene, Mr. Orange’s moral dilemma: does he blow his cover and save the cop, or sacrifice the cop for the sake of the sting operation and the apprehension of the entire gang? Tarantino has pointed out that the audience is “stuck” too: “You are stuck there, and the cinema isn’t going to help you out. Every minute for that cop is a minute for you.”

“Stuck in the Middle With You” guides our response by creating mood; its lyrics direct our attention to Mr. Orange while they simultaneously provide a wry commentary on our own position as spectators. But this song has much more to tell us. Film music can also provide insight into character psychology. Remember that it is Mr. Blonde himself who turns on the radio for chirpy accompaniment to his grisly torture and then begins to dance. I would argue that music renders Mr. Blonde’s psychotic sadism more viscerally and thus more effectively than the dialogue. Mr. Blonde describes torturing a cop as “amusing,” but it is the music that drives home his psychopathology.

Further, film music shapes our very perception. Visual representation can be vague and unspecific. Are Mr. Blonde’s facial expressions, for instance, really encoding sadism, or is it perhaps insanity or maybe it’s just a blank stare? Film has developed an arsenal of weapons for controlling narrative connotation including acting, dialogue cues, expressive configurations of mise-en-scène and cinematography, and specific editing patterns. Music, however, remains among the most reliable of them. It is the music, its ebullience and joyfulness, in conjunction with the grisly torture, that helps us to interpret the facial expression of Mr. Blonde as sadistic.

Film music can also create and resonate emotion between the screen and the audience. When we recognize an emotion attributed to characters or events, we become more invested in them. In a sense, the film feels more immediate, more real.
Music is one of the most powerful emotional prompts in film, encouraging us to empathize with onscreen characters. What is so interesting about this particular sequence is how music complicates emotional empathy. The song undercuts the emotions that would conventionally connect us to the tortured cop and instead promotes an emotional connection to a psychopath.

What’s more, the infectious joy of the song with its visceral rhythms and catchy melody has made the sequence, well, enjoyable. Says Tarantino: “[Y]ou hear that guitar strain, you get into it, you’re tapping your toe and you’re enjoying Michael Madsen [Mr. Blonde] doing his dance and then, *voom*, it’s too late, you’re a co-conspirator.” It’s all guilty fun until the sequence becomes so violent that it isn’t so enjoyable anymore. Music promotes our pleasure in the violence. To say that our emotions are conflicted is an understatement. Music plays a part, perhaps the primary part, in creating this conflict and then making us feel guilty for it, contributing substantially to the much vaunted “cool” psychodynamic of the film.

The role of the music supervisor

The score for *Reservoir Dogs* is different from a traditional film score where a composer creates original music. For *Reservoir Dogs*, musical selections were culled from a variety of preexisting sources, an approach known as a compilation score. It is generally the job of the music supervisor to make these selections and clear copyright for them. Usually the music supervisor works to realize the vision of the director, but some directors have taken control of the process, choosing the musical selections themselves. Tarantino is a case in point, but there are many others including Woody Allen, Wong Kar-wai, and Pedro Almodóvar. Wong Kar-wai has described the choice of music as among the first and most determining decisions.
he makes in preproduction. For *Chungking Express* (1994), he did not yet have a script when he described the project to his cinematographer by playing The Mamas and the Papas’ “California Dreamin’,” a song that plays a key role in the film. Tarantino’s compilation scores are noted for their eclecticism and informed by a vast knowledge of music and film music. *Kill Bill I* and *II* (2003, 2004), for instance, contains Nancy Sinatra’s cover of Sonny and Cher’s “Bang Bang,” songs by Isaac Hayes, Tomoyasu Hotei, Charlie Feathers, Al Hirt, Quincy Jones, Meiko Kaji, and cues from Ennio Morricone’s score for *Death Rides a Horse* (1968), Bernard Herrmann’s for *Twisted Nerve* (1968), and Quincy Jones’s for the television series *Ironsides*. Interestingly, the job of music supervisor has opened up an economic space for women in film music. Although Elizabeth Firestone and Ann Ronell found some work in the studio era, Shirley Walker scored a number of blockbusters in the 1990s and 2000s, and Rachel Portman is thriving, female composers have found access to Hollywood film scoring limited. Women, however, now dominate the ranks of music supervisors in Hollywood.

“Stuck in the Middle With You” also helps to unify the sequence. By using a piece of music to structure the sequence, Tarantino gives it a logic and coherence that it might not have had otherwise. Certainly the music is instrumental in setting up the boundaries of the sequence. But the song’s rhythms also dictate the editing, foregrounding the music. The song gives the sequence its lyricism, if that’s the right word for such a sequence, its infectious energy that draws us into it, absorbing us into filmic spectacle.

**Film music’s many functions**

Film music shapes meaning on a number of levels. Audiences will respond to film music with varying degrees of awareness, but at least some of the operation of film music takes place on a less than...
fully conscious plane. I discuss this particular aspect of film music in much greater detail in chapter 3, but here I would point out that when film music operates under the radar of consciousness, it has intensified power to affect us. Film music can cause us to engage with meanings and pull us toward responses without our knowing it, such as getting us to enjoy a scene of torture.

There is one facet of “Stuck in the Middle With You” that the majority of the audience may not have apprehended on a fully conscious level. While most of the audience will be aware of the presence of the song, and many will register that this is a song from the 1970s and pay attention to its lyrics, and some may be cognizant of the irony and emotional turmoil produced by the song, few will realize that the volume of music has been manipulated. “Stuck in the Middle With You” could not possibly conform to the way it is seen to be generated on screen. Mr. Blonde turns on the radio at which point the song is introduced. Initially, it sounds as if “Stuck in the Middle With You” is coming over the airwaves in monophonic sound, preceded by crackling transmission noises consistent with the dated radio and its limited sound capacity. However, on the cut to the close-up of the anguished cop, quickly followed by the long shot of Mr. Blonde beginning to dance, the volume on the song has been turned up, way up, and the quality of the sound improves from the thin, monophonic sound of the radio to a fully stereophonic rendition. The music has been manipulated to intensify its joyfulness, and that we are not conscious of this manipulation increases our enjoyment. The manipulation of volume makes it easier to deal with Mr. Blonde and thus sets us up for the complicated responses we have to the sequence.

“Stuck in the Middle With You” has performed a variety of functions here. It has created mood, helped to establish atmosphere, aided in characterization, helped to shape the narrative, fashioned a complicated emotional response for the audience, especially in terms of the representation of violence,
unified the sequence, given it its rhythm, and absorbed the audience into the spectacle of the film. And it has forced us to identify with a sadistic criminal.

These observations about the function of music in narrative film are not unique to Reservoir Dogs. I’ve chosen this example because it demonstrates so many of the key properties of film music. This is not to say that film music is a kind of universal language. Music in Hollywood film operates quite differently from the way it does in Hindi cinema, which uses music differently than Bengali cinema does, which uses music again differently from the way it is used in Brazilian cinema. Specific national and cultural traditions have created distinct practices of film music throughout the world, and those specific histories have evolved across time, as we shall see. Even so, music has an expressive power that crosses many borders, and film traditions throughout the world have harnessed music’s expressive power to shape perception of the film and to reverberate emotion between the spectator and the screen.
Chapter 2

How does film music work?

Film music lies at the intersection of film and music, an obvious enough observation, but probing this intersection fully is crucial to understanding how film music operates. Film music inherits part of its ability to make meaning from its constitution as a musical practice and another part from its constitution as a cinematic practice. Although it is often recorded or performed, marketed, and heard purely as music, film music is nevertheless defined by its function within a cinematic field of reference. Thus, music in film is always something of a hybrid. In this chapter I introduce some of the basic ways in which film music can be meaningful, first in terms of its constitution as music, and second in terms of its function as a component of filmic narrative.

Film music as a musical practice

This book is not intended as a specialized study of music, and it requires no musical training on the part of its readers. But film music is, after all, music, and like any meaning system, it depends upon certain forms and structures, and the patterns of meaning contained in them, to make it intelligible. Just as we learn to read a film, that is, to connect specific meanings to the various techniques at the filmmaker’s disposal (such as an editing dissolve, which tells us that time has passed), so, too, we can learn to read music, that is, to identify the basic building blocks of music (such
as tonality, melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, timbre, instrumentation, and form) at the disposal of the composer, and connect specific meanings to them. If this process seems more intimidating for music than for film, it may be that our more extended acquaintance with visual media has made reading images seem easier. But remember that we had to learn to read films, too.

Although music is universal (all human cultures that have left records appear to have produced it), music is by no means a universal language shared among all people across time. Throughout human history, music has been constituted in a myriad of ways. The music of the Western world, as it coalesced around a set of principles in the Early Modern Period, is but one of them. It provides a useful entry point into understanding film music, however, for a variety of reasons. Western music exerted a powerful influence globally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the very moment when film music was developing; thus it played a large part in the history of musical accompaniment around the world. And it is the musical system with which most English-speaking readers will be familiar. As I present this material, however, I will try to include examples from non-Western musics, which I hope will function as a contrapuntal voice as well as a reminder that Western music is only one kind of music among many worldwide.

The basic building blocks of Western music hinge upon tonality, a structure for organizing musical sounds into music. Tonality may be defined as a musical system revolving around a single tone or note, which functions as a center of gravity: it is a focal point around which the rest of the notes are organized and which serves as the place where a piece of music begins and ends. Other systems of music employ tonality. Classical Indian music and many kinds of Middle Eastern music, for example, depend upon a single tone droned throughout an entire piece to provide a stable tonal base. Western music works in a different way, producing
tension and release as the music moves alternatively away from and toward a tonal center. Tonality can be subdivided in a number of ways, but one important division is the one between major and minor tonalities, two organizing modes that can carry specific associations and can impart very distinct inflections. While there is nothing inherently happy or sad about music composed in a major or minor mode, associations of happiness and brightness are often attached to the major mode while associations of melancholy and ominousness are attached to the minor.

A distinguishing characteristic of tonal music, since about the middle of the eighteenth century, is the privileging of melody, a series of notes played in a memorable and recognizable order. Melody provides an access point into music, a hook on which to hang listeners’ attention. Western music is not alone in utilizing melody. Classical Indian music, for instance, is built on melodies that have coalesced over centuries into a body of recognizable and commonly shared rāgas, each with a unique melodic pattern and a fixed association such as tranquility, heroism, power, or pathos. Thus film composers in India, both in the traditional background score and in film songs, can easily access powerful musical structures for creating mood and atmosphere through the use of rāgas.

Film composers around the globe have engaged melody. A. R. Rahman, the Indian composer of the songs and score for Slumdog Millionaire (2008), credits melody with “a very important role in my sensibility in music.” Melody, however, has been a hallmark of Hollywood scoring. John Barry explains, “I love working with melody. I think if you can capture something in the simplest possible way, which is what melody is, then you’re halfway there.” Claims Randy Newman: “I believe in melody. Maybe there are places where you don’t want it, but I don’t know where they’d be.” Melody has often taken the form of a leitmotif, an identifiable and recurring musical pattern. A leitmotif can consist of any kind of musical material—a distinctive rhythm, for instance—but
Hollywood composers have tended to construct leitmotifs through melody, either as short as a motif of a few notes or as extended as a theme. Leitmotifs can be developed and varied throughout the score (or repeated verbatim), reinforcing associations and becoming more and more powerful as a film progresses. The final reiteration of a leitmotif—especially when it coincides with the end of a film—can have an enormous emotional impact. Still, not all Hollywood composers privilege melody—just try humming the shower sequence from Bernard Herrmann’s score for *Psycho* (1960)—but melody is nonetheless a powerful tool for shaping a score.

*Harmony* has to do with the coordination of notes playing simultaneously. In Western tonal music, harmony privileges certain combinations of notes, or chords, over others, creating stress points built upon dissonance and resolutions that dissipate dissonance. The farther harmony moves from the tonal center, the more associations of disorder and instability will be activated; the closer to the tonal center, the more associations of order and stability. Harmony is often less immediately recognizable than melody, but its effects are powerful and discernible even by those without the language to describe them. Interestingly, harmony is not a requirement of music, and many musical practices throughout history and around the globe are not harmonic in the way that Western tonal music is. Musical systems that depend upon improvisation, such as Indian and Middle Eastern, lack a focus on harmony in the Western sense, and early music from many places around the globe, including the West, do not depend upon it. And the set of seven tones or notes that comprise Western music’s harmonic system represents only one such organizational structure. The pentatonic scale, used in many Asian and Native American musics, uses five tones. Western music harnesses the ability of tonal harmony to powerfully and predictably create and dissipate tension.

*Rhythm* refers to the organization of music through time; its basic unit is the beat, a discernible pulse that marks out the
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Passage of time. Western music is characterized by a high degree of regularity in terms of rhythm, and deviations from established patterns can be very potent. Many music systems throughout the world depend upon rhythms, although they may operate differently than in Western music. In Indian music, musical rhythms have coalesced into established patterns far more complicated than Western rhythms. In Western music, a rhythm can be established in as few as three or four beats. One traditional Indian rhythmic pattern comprises 108 separate beats before it repeats. Middle Eastern song practice, on the other hand, often does not depend upon regular rhythms but on flexible rhythms that can adjust to the lyrics. In Western tonal music, rhythm is much more predictable, operating as a sonic grid against which the composer writes.

**Timbre** refers to the quality of sound that distinguishes one instrument or voice from another. To hear timbre in action, we might think of the difference in Western music between art music and popular music traditions. Art music aims to produce a fairly standard timbre within a vocal range or class of instruments (which can make it difficult to distinguish one operatic soprano from another). Popular music, however, aims in the opposite direction, to distinguish one voice from another, one way of playing an instrument from another. Establishing a unique timbre is one way of doing so, and most listeners can probably tell the difference between Mariah Carey and P!nk. Timbre is a powerful worldwide musical property. It is of great importance to Japanese music, for instance, where singers and instrumentalists are trained to create a multiplicity of different timbres with the same instrument or voice. Traditional *Gidayu-bushi* singers can even customize the timbre of their voices to establish gender and age. In certain African musical traditions, the timbre of a voice is individuated by extramusical properties that many other vocal traditions attempt to minimize, such as the sound of breathing. Instrumentation can be thought of as the art of selecting different timbres, choosing one instrument or voice over another to create
specific effects, using violins instead of horns, for example, or a bass voice over a tenor voice.

Listening for all of these musical properties while you watch a film may seem like a very tall order—and I haven’t even included all of the musical tools at the disposal of the composer (tempo, dynamics, and musical form are obvious omissions). One of the best and easiest ways to hear these properties is through musical conventions that harness musical affects to specific meanings through the power of association. Musical conventions become ingrained in a culture and function as a kind of musical collective unconscious, affecting listeners whether or not they are consciously aware of such conventions. Think of musical conventions as a cultural shorthand that does not have to be consciously recognized by listeners to produce predictable responses. For obvious reasons, film composers depend upon musical conventions to guide and control audience response, but composers can also deliberately contradict these conventions for dramatic effect. Musical conventions do not function universally. They change across history and are culturally determined so that what works at one point in time and in one place on the globe may not in another. In Hollywood, the brass instruments have conventionally connoted heroism, but in Hindi film, brasses often signify villainy. Still, musical conventions can produce predictable audience reactions and are frequently exploited to direct an audience’s emotional and psychological trajectory through a film by composers working both within Western music and outside of it.

For example, in Disney’s animated feature *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Alan Menken and Howard Ashman created the song “Beauty and the Beast,” which functions as a love theme for Belle and the Beast. The song is based on well-established conventions for romantic passion: a major key, stable harmonies, a prominent use of violins (commonly thought of as the most expressive instrument in the orchestra and thus linked to passion), and a
memorable melody with upward leaps in the melodic pattern. These conventions are so powerful that they connote romance whether or not an audience consciously recognizes their use. Of course in this instance lyrics emphasize these musical conventions: “Tale as old as time, song as old as rhyme.” But even without the lyrics, the song has tapped into musical conventions for romance that are among the most identifiable (and some might add shopworn) strategies in Hollywood film scoring.

Musical conventions can help to create a variety of different moods and emotions. One of the most famous music cues is the one Bernard Herrmann composed for the shower sequence in *Psycho*. Herrmann exploited a number of musical conventions for invoking terror: the absence of melody, unpredictable rhythms, strident and dissonant harmonies, violins at the very top and basses at the very bottom of their ranges played with techniques that inhibit lyricism. Interestingly, Herrmann’s shower cue has become such an iconic musical creation of terror that its distinctive shrieking violins have now become a convention for terror itself, evoked in countless horror films, parodies of horror films, television shows, and perhaps the real horror, television commercials.

Contemporary film composers in Hollywood have begun to tap into conventions of world music to guide and shape audience response. For Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), Mychael Danna created a “Main Title” sequence based on a traditional Indian *baraat*, the wedding processional for the groom. Although there was a great deal of improvisation in the recording of this cue, it is based on a traditional Indian rāga with associations of joy and harmony. As with “Beauty and the Beast,” it is not necessary for audiences to be consciously aware of the convention, in this case the identity of the Rāga Kalyan, for the music to transmit joy. Of course, Indian audiences who recognize the cultural reference will have a deeper experience of the music than audiences who do not, and thus Danna’s choice becomes a particularly compelling
one, from a multicultural perspective, for a film about India aimed at a global audience.

A film composer can even violate established musical conventions to create intriguing and disturbing effects. Ennio Morricone in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) used minor keys for many of the fast-paced and thrilling action sequences, and major keys for many of the somber and melancholic sequences. Herrmann’s cue for *Psycho* is a veritable blueprint for musical terror. At the same time that he invoked conventions for horror, however, Herrmann ignored the most typical convention for creating suspense—tremolo, or rapidly vibrating strings—and deliberately undercut another convention by using violins not for romance but for murder. In fact, the *Psycho* score is composed exclusively for strings, instruments more conventionally associated with romance.

**Film music as a cinematic practice**

Our experience of film music is shaped by its constitution as music. But film music does not operate in a vacuum; it functions as part of a larger system of meaning. Film itself is a narrative form. Although there are certainly films that are nonnarrative in their construction, film developed into an art form to tell stories. Music is part of this process, a key part of this process.

Music’s function in film preoccupied the earliest critics and scholars of film music. In the 1930s, the first wave of film music criticism began to be published, positing that sound was subordinate to the image. Film music, those writers argued, related to the image either through parallelism—reinforcing the image’s content—or through counterpoint—contradicting the image’s content. This model was influenced, no doubt, by the famous “Statement on Sound Film,” signed by Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Gregori Alexandrov in 1928, which categorized film sound according to whether it
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paralleled or counterpointed the image. Within a decade, the influential critic Theodor Adorno and composer Hanns Eisler in their groundbreaking *Composing for the Films* pointed out, “A photographed kiss cannot actually be synchronized with an eight-bar phrase.” Adorno and Eisler argued that visual imagery and music are very different forms of expression, and they do not operate, in any sense, in ways that could accurately be described as parallel or contrapuntal.

Further, positing that music either parallels or counterpoints what is already “there” assumes that the image is autonomous and encodes meaning unproblematically. Even today some film music criticism continues to employ terminology that assumes the image is the bearer of meaning and that music functions to modify that meaning in some way, heightening, reinforcing, or undercutting what is “in” the image. Because visual images are representational, that is, because on the surface at least, they make direct reference to what they represent, it is easy to assume that visual images have immediate, obvious, and stable meaning. This is not always (or perhaps ever) the case. Visual images can be amorphous and ambiguous, and even the surface of an image can be open to multiple interpretations. It is problematic to assume that meaning is unproblematically “there” in the image.

There are a number of other problems with the parallel/counterpoint model as well. How can we account for film music that neither parallels nor counterpoints the image? I would find it difficult to describe “Stuck in the Middle With You” in *Reservoir Dogs* as either paralleling or counterpointing the images. The use of that song is much more complex than either of those two options can account for (see chap. 1). How can we explain those moments when the music is foregrounded and the images respond to the music, as when Mr. Blonde starts dancing to “Stuck in the Middle With You,” and the editing and camerawork are driven by song’s structure?
Film is a narrative medium, an art form that delivers stories. The soundtrack and the visual track always operate within this larger field of reference. Contemporary film music scholars have shaped a different model for film music’s operation in which music is seen as an interdependent and complementary element of a film’s narrative system. Music shares power to create meaning with a number of elements that come together to tell a story, among them mise-en-scène, cinematography, acting, editing, dialogue, and sound. When we hear tremolo strings, it is not a simple case of music reinforcing the suspense that is already “there” in the image. Instead, tremolo strings are a component of the process by which suspense is generated. The basic elements of film work together in narrative film in a “combinatoire of expression,” Claudia Gorbman’s evocative phrase.

Music can be a crucial element in this process. When we hear “Stuck in the Middle With You” in Reservoir Dogs, the song is not reinforcing an emotional exhilaration produced by the images. Rather it is the key component in the process by which the audience experiences a visceral thrill, a process that includes the editing, which foregrounds the music, the dialogue that sets it up, and the characterization of Mr. Blonde as psychotic. Would the torture of the cop at the hands of a psychotic killer, however, be emotionally exhilarating, on any level, were it not for the music?

Let’s delve a bit more deeply into film music’s function in relation to narrative. Roland Barthes’s insights about the function of photographic captions offer fruitful insight here. Captions control and limit the perception of photographs, a process Barthes called ancrage (anchoring). Film music works in the same way, reinforcing one meaning out of many possible meanings, anchoring the image to specificity. It is as if the music “throws a net around the floating visual signifier” in Gorbman’s words. And that is what Noel Carroll means when he describes film music’s function as “modifying.” Just as adjectives and adverbs pin down the meaning of the nouns and verbs they are attached to, film
music pins down the image track. Film music polices the ways in which the audience perceives narrative and does so in a complex relationship with other elements of a film’s narrative system.

Film music always works in a network of mutual implication. In the same way that music can anchor the image in specificity, the image can impart explicitness to the music by giving it referentiality, grounding the general expressiveness of the music in a specificity it might not otherwise have had. And music’s function in film is always bounded by the limits of credibility itself. Imagine hearing the cue from the shower sequence of Psycho as Belle and the Beast dance around the ballroom in Beauty and the Beast. Or the song “Beauty and the Beast” as accompaniment to the grisly shower murder in Psycho. The farther music drifts away from mutual dependency with the rest of the elements in a narrative system, the more potential there is for disruption—and for just not making sense.

Film music anchors the image in another way as well: it positions the audience to receive the narrative in the way intended by the filmmakers.

Music resonates emotion between the audience and the screen. Narrative films have developed a number of practices to assist expressive acting in portraying emotion such as the close-up, diffuse lighting and focus, aesthetically pleasing mise-en-scène, and dialogue delivered with heightened vocal intensity. Music is the most reliable of them, harnessing the power of musical conventions to provide an audible definition of the emotion represented in the film. Elmer Bernstein puts it this way: “Music can tell the story in purely emotional terms and the film by itself cannot.”

Film music does more than define emotion however—it generates it. Samuel Chell compares music in classical Hollywood film to a television laugh track, which not only tells the audience that the
show is funny but prompts the audience to laugh at it. The pop song heard under a love scene both delineates the emotion that the onscreen characters feel and prompts the audience to identify with and share that emotion. By resonating emotion between the audience and the screen, film music engages audiences in processes of identification, which bind them into the film.

The first time we hear the song “Beauty and the Beast,” it precedes any declaration of love on the part of the couple. Belle and the Beast find themselves “alone” together in the ballroom of the Beast’s enchanted castle. Previously Belle has spurned the Beast’s attentions, but he has just saved her life, and their icy relationship has thawed. The enchanted dinnerware and household items are doing everything they can to encourage an attachment. But no word of love is spoken. Are they or are they not falling in love? A number of cinematic elements are at work here to encourage the audience to believe that they are. First, there’s the “acting” (the look on Belle’s face, the exchange of looks between the Beast and the servants) and the spectacular animation focusing on them as a couple (“camerawork,” editing, and supposedly the first use of computer-generated imagery in the Disney canon). Then there are extratextual factors that come into play: the well-known fairy tale on which the film is based and the audience’s knowledge of other Disney animated films that end with the uniting of the couple. But the music is the crucial part of the process. The rhapsodic music exploiting conventions for passion such as violins and an upward trajectory in the melodic line, in combination with a major key, stable harmonics, and the lyrics, which voice the age-old story of romance, anchors the image to a particular meaning—that they are falling in love—while simultaneously encouraging us to participate in the couple’s emotional register.

Music functions as part of an interdependent and complicated process of narrative construction in film by controlling connotation and positioning the audience to respond. This model, however, leaves some questions unanswered. Film music
How does film music work?

How does film music work? Does it always have a narrative function? Does film music ever function nonnarratively? According to Jerrold Levinson, it does indeed. While most film music can be defined by its function in relation to narrative, some film music cannot. Levinson’s litmus test: if the music were deleted, would the narrative content be altered in any way? If the answer is yes, then music is functioning as an element in the narrative process.

Not all film music functions in this way according to Levinson. Some does not contribute to the construction of the narrative but functions instead as an “additive,” music that adds to the film but not to the narrative. An example would be music that lends coherence or unity to a film, such as music that bridges a sequence to smooth over gaps in time. Music here functions not as an element in the construction of the narrative but as an element in the construction of the film. For Levinson, music can even function both narratively and nonnarratively at the same time. While contemporary theorists agree that film music is part of a complex narrative process in film, they continue to debate a number of issues including whether all of film music’s functions are narrative.

To sum up: film music is capable of powerful effects, and those effects are the product of a unique amalgamation between two art forms. Again, film music lies at the intersection of music and film, and to understand fully how it operates we must consider both its constitution as a musical practice and its function within a cinematic practice. Music fulfills a number of important functions as an element in a film’s narrative system. And it depends upon the properties of music to do so.
Chapter 3
Why does film music work?

Why does film music have such power over us? What are the sources of its pleasures? And why should music have come to accompany film at all? To answer such intriguing questions, we are going to need *theory*, a body of thought devoted to analyzing the deep and complex issues that underlie the framework of a discipline. Theory delves beneath the surface to get at what is neither obvious nor easily answered. Theory is always open to debate: it can be controversial and contradictory, obfuscating and illuminating, sometimes all at once. But without theory we risk becoming locked into unexamined patterns of thinking, and we cannot come to terms with those fundamental questions posed above.

A lively theoretical discourse has grown up around the sources of film’s powers and pleasures, and the ways in which they are tied to the presence of music in film. Incorporating the insights of structural linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, cultural studies, and cognitive theory, theorists of film music have investigated why music is such a potent force in film (indeed why music is a force in films at all) and what we get out of listening to it. In this chapter I’ll introduce some important theories of film music and the theorists who have espoused them. Of course, theory has already informed this book, and if you have gotten this far, you have already been introduced to some theoretically informed
observations in chapter 1 and some core theoretical issues in chapter 2. But this chapter puts theory on the front burner, so to speak, because to answer complex questions, we need theory. As I hope to show, theory is not only an indispensable component in examining the fundamental questions of film music, it also constitutes a fascinating aspect of the discipline in its own right.

But before we move into film theory, a brief detour into film history would be helpful. Why did music come to accompany moving images at all? Film exerted a gravitational pull toward music from the very beginning, both in the countries where film originated and in the countries where it arrived (see chap. 4). The standard explanation for the amalgamation of image and music is functional: music compensated for the lack of sound in silent film, and it covered the noise produced both by the projector and by audiences unschooled in cinema etiquette. Music was readily available in the early homes of cinema, the cafes, vaudeville theaters, music halls, carnivals, and traveling exhibitions where musicians would play for the moving images on the program as they would for live performances. But noisy projectors and audiences were soon quieted, motion pictures moved into their own screening spaces, and it wasn’t long before synchronized sound became the norm. Yet musical accompaniment persisted in film long after its initial utility had faded. As chapter 3 has shown, music serves many functions in film. But understanding how film music works is not the same thing as understanding why it works. We need to understand what sustained music as a practice throughout film history. What made it indispensable?

It is interesting how early scholars turned toward theory to answer this question. In 1936 Kurt London posited that it was music’s ability to provide unity through regular, predictable, and audible rhythms that made it indispensable to film, a medium comprised of individual shots, irregular in length, structure, and content. In the mid-twentieth century, Jean Mitry similarly identified music’s ultimate utility to film as its power to unify, a function
of its construction as an art form constituted by time. Mitry identified music's "fundamental rhythmic structure" as that which imparts to film "what it lacks: the notion of temporality." Through rhythm, music's ordered articulation of time is transferred to film itself. Music thus provides continuity for a medium that is, by its nature, marked by discontinuity.

The contemporary theorist Michel Chion argues that film needs music because it makes images pliable. Music allows film "to wander at will through time and space," inducing the audience to accept the cinematic manipulation of time and space through editing. But if Chion echoes earlier theories for the presence of music in film, he also opens up new avenues to explore. For Chion, music serves a unifying function not because it is constituted through time but because it is independent of the constraints of time. Thus music provides a "unifying sound bath" that, by overflowing the limits of the individual shots, can connect separate images in a film to each other, "homogenizing" them. Before Chion, Claudia Gorbman posited that with the onset of sound cinema, the sound track reconstructed time into a "relentless linearity" with music being "the one sound element capable of freeing up that temporal representation." This explains why music is called upon to attend film's most fractious moments in terms of time—flashbacks, montages, and slow-motion sequences—that threaten the unity of the film.

The powers of film music

Theory has also addressed more primal questions regarding the sources of film music's powers and pleasures. An investigation of these sources has led theorists in two directions: outward toward culture where film music is produced, and inward toward consciousness where film music is perceived.

The idea that music is a product of culture owes much of its existence to the Frankfurt School, a body of critical thought
generated in and around Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1920s. Marxist critics associated with the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor Adorno and other German intellectuals such as Bertold Brecht and Ernst Bloch, examined the forces of economics, politics, and culture that shaped the production of art under capitalism. Attacking cherished notions of art’s autonomous function, the unique creativity of the artist, and the ability of the individual to resist cultural contexts, the Frankfurt School asserted that art is part of a complex and vast apparatus that largely reinforces the dominant ideological values of capitalism.

Music, like any art form, is a social discourse, structured by a set of social relations between artist and perceiver. For Adorno, music has a unique position among the arts. Because it seems more direct and less mediated by culture, music actually has the most power to serve a political function under capitalism: to pacify dangerous, anarchic impulses by lulling listeners into an acceptance of the status quo, distracting them from the alienating effects of life under capitalism.

Adorno, in collaboration with composer Hanns Eisler, extended this argument to film music in their groundbreaking text, *Composing for the Films*. Music binds the spectator into the film and masks the film’s material constitution as a technological product. Film music for Adorno and Eisler is “a cement, which holds together elements that otherwise would oppose each other unrelated—the mechanical product and the spectators.” Film music’s adhesion stems from its exceptional ability to create and resonate emotion between the screen and the spectator. In so doing, film music distracts spectators from film’s materiality. Thus film music fulfills a potent ideological function: to promote an audience’s absorption into the film and thus position that audience to accept, uncritically, the cultural values circulating through a film. It is not without significance that Adorno and Eisler refer to film music as a drug. That art serves a political function was a radical notion in postwar America. Adorno’s
authorship of *Composing for the Films* was suppressed in English-language editions, and Eisler, who had found work composing film scores in Hollywood, was summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee and forced to leave the United States. That art is inextricably tied to politics seems painfully obvious in Eisler's case.

Other theorists following in the wake of the Frankfurt School have explored music's subversive power. Jacques Attali, for example, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, argues that music is never innocent. He agrees with Adorno that it is a tool of social coercion, reflecting and sustaining the structure of the political order. However, Attali also believes in the subversive power of music and in the possibility of radical social change through noise, the liberation of music's suppressed anarchic power.

The ideological analysis of film music has been taken up by many film scholars. In Claudia Gorbman's pioneering text, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Gorbman opens up Adorno and Eisler's insights by comparing film music to easy-listening music. The similarities are illuminating. Both operate as part of a larger field of reference, whether the shopping mall, the dentist's office, or narrative film; both are regulated by a larger context, which determines its presence or absence, the interruption of a mall's background music to make announcements, or the decreased volume of the film score under dialogue; neither draws attention to itself nor demands the listener's full attention; and both drive away unpleasantness, whether it be the drilling in the dentist's office or the technological basis of cinema. Music encourages us to consume the products of culture and makes consumption easy, whether the product is material, such as the goods on display at the mall, or immaterial, such as film images. Ultimately, Gorbman theorizes, film music lulls "the spectator into becoming an untroublesome (less critical, less wary) viewing subject." Film music makes us more likely to brush away doubts about what the film might be promoting, to suspend our disbelief.
in the two-dimensional, larger-than-life images posing as reality, and ultimately to accept, uncritically, a series of images and the cultural values they encode.

Similarly intrigued by music’s ideological function in film, Caryl Flinn, in *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, theorizes that one of the most potent discourses attached to music is a “utopian” discourse: music’s ability to offer “an impression of perfection and integrity in an otherwise imperfect and unintegrated world.” Music offers listeners a “fullness of experience...an ability to return...to better, allegedly more ‘perfect’ times and memories.” Film scores transport listeners from the technological and fragmented experience of a postindustrial capitalism and its mechanically reproduced art forms to an idealized past of wholeness. According to this argument, film music always carries with it traces of plentitude, wrapping film content in a kind of nostalgia and making us desire what the film offers. In the process we become less critical of a film’s values and value judgments.

Theory can seem exceedingly abstract, but its application can have profound consequences for our understanding of film. The manner in which cultural ideology manifests itself through music is neither direct, because much of its operation takes place on less than a conscious plane, nor is it immediately obvious; it is complex, sometimes contradictory, and elusive. The results of that process, however, are clearly audible to any listener. When in a 1940s or 1950s Hollywood film you hear a bluesy saxophone in accompaniment to a woman on screen, what do you assume about her sexuality? What difference would it make to hear a lush romantic cue featuring a sweet violin instead? Hollywood composers depended upon a set of musical conventions to represent female sexuality. These clichéd conventions (saxophones and bluesy performance practices for women whose sexuality operated outside social norms, violins in upward trajectories for virtuous girlfriends, wives, and especially mothers) encoded a
set of responses and value judgments consistent with dominant cultural values about female sexuality. Take a listen to the score for *Bladerunner* (1982) and its iconic use of the saxophone to judge for yourself how far film music has come—or not—with regard to the treatment of female characters.

The ideological function of film music has been an especially rich site of investigation for contemporary film music scholars who have examined how concepts such as history, gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity are encoded in a film's score. Some recent examples of the diverse body of scholarship emerging in this area—and this is a very short list limited to book-length monographs—would have to include Krin Gabbard’s analyses of the ways that jazz encodes cultural ideologies about race and sexuality; Anahid Kassabian’s study of the impact of song choice in the representation of gender in contemporary Hollywood film; Caryl Flinn’s study of music and the relationship between history, culture, and ideology in New German film; and my own study of the ideological function of song in the westerns of John Ford.

**The pleasures of film music**

Film music is produced through culture, but it is perceived by individuals. A significant amount of film music is perceived consciously: we wouldn’t come out of a film remembering its music or be induced to buy a soundtrack recording otherwise. But if we are to analyze fully film music’s power and understand the pleasures it offers us, we need to address how film music works in another register—in the unconscious. Watching film is enjoyable. It has a unique hold over us, an ability to make us forget where we are or who we are when we are engrossed in watching it. Psychoanalysis, a theory of the mind that seeks to understand the operation of the unconscious, can help us grasp why this hypnotic fascination is so pleasurable and specifically what part music plays in this fascination.
Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, French and North American theorists turned to psychoanalysis to bring music into focus. Music plays a key role in human psychic development. From our earliest moments inside the womb, we experience the elements of music: the rhythmic patterns of our mother’s heartbeat, breathing, and pulse as well as the pitch and dynamics of her voice. In fact, the womb is often described in psychoanalysis in acoustic terms as a “sonorous envelope of the self,” in the words of Didier Anzieu, the “sonorous space” of Gerard Blanchard, or “the murmuring house” of Guy Rosolato. We know, for instance, that a newborn can already recognize its mother’s voice. After birth, the infant continues in a bath of aural stimulation, including and especially the mother’s voice, which, again, is experienced as music. (Think of the ways in which language itself incorporates musical elements such as rhythm, pitch, dynamics, and intonation and the musical way we talk to babies.) Psychoanalysis posits the pleasure of music as stemming from both our pre-birth experience as well as our earliest, pre-linguistic existence. Music allows us to experience what we are forced to repress in our adult lives: longings for a return to the original state of plentitude and fusion with the mother, a fusion we experienced as music. Rosolato argues that Western harmony, with its patterns of divergence and unity, can be understood psychoanalytically as the “dramatization of these separated and reunited bodies” of mother and child. But it is not only Western music that can claim a connection between its music and elemental psychic processes. The famed taiko drummer Daihaichi Oguchi explained the lure of the taiko drum in similar terms: “Your heart is a taiko. All people listen to a taiko rhythm ‘dantsuku-dantsuku’ in their mother’s womb.”

Psychoanalysis helps to account for music’s centrality in human experience. Music stimulates us to regress back to that complete sense of satisfaction and pleasure that the union with the mother represents. When we watch films and hear film music, something similar happens. A number of factors, the comfortable seats, the darkened auditorium, the hypnotic effect of the bright images
on the screen, and the music come together to encourage us to regress back to a psychic state of profound plenitude and satisfaction. This is what gives film music such a powerful hold over us and at least partially explains why it is in film at all. Film music short-circuits consciousness, as Gorbman points out, “bypassing the usual censors of the preconscious,” facilitating the hypnotic power of film and encouraging us to regress to a place of complete psychic satisfaction. No wonder we love going to the movies!

Psychoanalytically informed theories of film music have come under fire from cognitive theorists who argue that psychoanalysis ignores the conscious work performed by audiences as they experience a film. Pointing to the successful soundtrack recording industry, the popularity of songs conceived for films, and the millions of film music fans around the world, among other reasons, cognitivists posit that we interpret music in the same way that we do any other cinematic element: by processing the information it presents us. For example, Ben Winters argues that it is our active engagement with musical conventions that allows us to simulate the emotions experienced by on-screen characters and share in their response, a process he describes as “far from subliminal.” Jeff Smith has written the most sustained cognitivist critique of psychoanalytic film music theory by posing a series of difficult questions, among them: how does psychoanalysis account for the intermittence of film music? Since film music, in sound film at least, is not a continuous but a fragmentary phenomenon, how are the unconscious processes it activates sustained when it is absent? What is the relationship between the unconscious and conscious perception of film music? How much or what part of music is “unheard”? Cognitive film theorists argue that a psychoanalytic theory of film music is not yet fully realized and needs to take into account a number of unresolved issues. But if we are looking for the sources of our fascination with film music and our pleasures in listening to it, we should not dismiss the relationship between music and the unconscious. Although we do
not access it consciously, this facet of music cannot be discounted in a theory of what pleases and engages us when we listen to film music.

So where has this journey into theory taken us? It has offered some thought-provoking ideas about the sources of music's powers and pleasures. But more than that, this chapter hopefully prompts deeper and more far-reaching reflections on both the nature of power, how it circulates through culture and is manifested through its art forms, and the power of the unconscious, which underlies all of human activity.