Chapter 9

The classical film score forever?

Batman, Batman Returns and post-classical film music

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Since the 1930s, music has not only been a significant component of narration in mainstream films but also has been organized as a coherent and discrete discourse within them. *Batman* (1989) and its first sequel *Batman Returns* (1992) highlight the ways post-classical Hollywood employs and orders music, both in terms of using classically inspired forms and more recent procedures. It is possible to see the musical strategies of contemporary films in the light both of continuity and of discontinuity with those of classical cinema. In what follows, I will investigate these two films, attending to the relationship between contemporary film music and the film music of classical cinema, noting the similarities but emphasizing the significant differences between the two.

Music was (and continues to be) an integral part of the multimedia phenomenon of the Batman films. Danny Elfman wrote the musical scores for *Batman* and *Batman Returns*, and they provide a continuity across the films along with director Tim Burton and Michael Keaton as Batman. Elfman's music had a significant impact and elevated his reputation for engaging and effective film scores. In some ways, these two Batman films are representative of the contemporary trends in expensively produced Hollywood blockbuster films – *Batman* was ranked in the Top Ten grossers of all time[1] – although both films also have interesting and unusual aesthetic strategies.

The past few years have seen a growth in the number of serious considerations of film music. Although this charting of undiscovered territory has to be welcomed, the focus of most writings upon the musical wealth of classical cinema means that more recent Hollywood film music has been largely ignored. Claudia Gorbman refers to 'classical film scoring' and Kathryn Kalinak to 'the classical film score' to describe the music of classical cinema.[2] For most classical feature films, an orchestral score would be specially written as a coherent piece of music, yet it would be comprised of fragments. It was an intermittent yet substantial, and almost continuous ('wall-to-wall') musical fabric, integrating itself with the film as secondary to the action. The assumption was that music should 'under-

score' the visuals, creating emotional and dynamic effects, homologizing visual activity and providing information and atmosphere for the film's narrative development. Kathryn Kalinak, in *Settling the Score*, asserts that contemporary Hollywood film music proves the persistence of the musical blueprint established by classical cinema,[3] suggesting that the style and assumptions behind film music have changed little. Her declaration of the seeming permanence of Hollywood film music's form directly matches Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's claim for the persistence of the classical mode of film production.[4] Kalinak points to the prevalence of pop songs as scores in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a sort of aberration, indeed an opposition to classical principles through which the process of 'classical scoring' has managed to endure.[5] Yet although many contemporary scores bear some resemblance to studio era film music, industrial imperatives and aesthetic concerns have not remained static, mitigating against the notion of a direct continuity between contemporary film music and that of classical cinema.

While films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *American Graffiti* (1973) forewent especially written musical underscores in favour of a succession of pop songs, many contemporary Hollywood films use *both* in some way. In addition to this, instrumental forces changed. The sound of the romantic large-scale orchestra, which had been introduced to films from the classical concert hall and was ubiquitous from the early 1930s onwards, had declined in the 1960s and 1970s. There were more sparse scores, both in terms of the amount of music and the number of instruments used. Also evident was the use of a more discordant musical language imported from more recent concert music. Prime examples of these styles are Richard Rodney Bennett's score for *Figures in a Landscape* (1970), Jerry Fielding's music for *Straw Dogs* (1971) and Jerry Goldsmith's score for *Chinatown* (1974). In 1970, composer Ron Goodwin declared:

> I think there was once an attitude, very firmly adopted, that 'if it's film music, it's got to be big', but that has certainly changed in the last couple of years . . . the main thing [now] is that 'wall to wall' music isn't necessary. You must give the film room.[6]

Kalinak points out an explicit return to the style and sound of the classical film score in the wake of John Williams' music for George Lucas' *Star Wars* trilogy (*Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983)). These films use a lot of music, and *Batman* and *Batman Returns* both have scores of more than an hour's duration, returning to the wall-to-wall *bravura* orchestral music that had seemingly drifted out of fashion.

Orchestral music in the two Batman films certainly draws on the classical Hollywood tradition, yet rather than being simply a return to the styles of studio era scores, it manifests explicit allusions to particular stylistic aspects of studio era

film music. Kalinak's use of the term 'persistence' presupposes direct continuity – 'revival' might be a more appropriate description. After all, contemporary Hollywood films differ in many ways from those of the studio era.

In industrial terms, the mode of production for film music in contemporary cinema is very different from that of classical cinema. There are no longer any full-time employees and thus there is no more film music 'production line',[7] where there were rosters of composers, arrangers and musicians all under one roof. This has meant that there is undoubtedly less of the standardization that characterized the music of classical cinema. Now there are even a few film composer superstars with names known by the general public, figures like Ennio Morricone, John Barry, Jerry Goldsmith, and Vangelis. The last of these composers had a Number One single in Germany with the 1995 release of his music for *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992) and a UK Top 20 and a US Top 10 hit with his theme for *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Scores by solo synthesizer players such as these are now a relatively cheap and easy option, a process that is reminiscent of nothing so much as the cinema pianist of silent days. Most significantly, there are different imperatives, especially tied-in musical products – namely singles (45s) and soundtrack LPs of both orchestral scores and pop songs. There have been musical tie-ins with films since silent days, for example, 'Fats' Waller's 'The Sheik of Araby' was sold as a sheet music tie-in for the Rudolph Valentino film *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), while the development of the film musical gave great impetus to the sheet music industry. Yet since the late 1950s, with the advent of rock'n'roll and the saturation development of the record market, there has been a proliferation of tied-in songs in films.

Batman's high-profile release in 1989 was complemented by the release of two soundtrack LPs, Danny Elfman's large-scale orchestral score and Prince's song cycle. At this point, Elfman was a relatively minor name on the film composing circuit, having scored Tim Burton's previous films *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985) and *Beetlejuice* (1988). Prince, on the other hand, had become one of the best-selling pop artists of the 1980s with LPs such as *Around the World in a Day* (1985) and *Sign 'O' the Times* (1987), as well as writing the music for and starring in the film *Purple Rain* (1984). *Batman* involves a cohabitation of Elfman's score with Prince's songs. Although the songs are marginalized and indeed much of Prince's LP does not grace the film, it manifests an *extension* of the text beyond its traditional boundaries to include intersecting aesthetic products.

During the 1980s, the term 'synergy' gained currency as a description of the simultaneous promotion of a 'franchise' product,[8] tying-in products from the music industry with the film industry to create a compound package. Thomas Schatz cites *Batman* as characteristic of the multimedia nature of contemporary film production.[9] The existence of two soundtrack LPs for *Batman*, indeed the existence of Prince's music tied to the film, is an example of the synergy of

Warner Brothers' recording and cinematic arms. *Batman*'s producer Jon Peters commented on the high-profile extensions of the film: 'The album and the film are two separate works . . . in two different media, complementing and supporting each other.'[10] It seems that Peters was instrumental in the release of Elfman's LP, the music of which was originally to appear only as a track or two on the Prince LP.[11]

Soundtrack LPs provide a space for the plenitude of music; what may have been a few seconds and hardly noticed in the film can be enjoyed as an aesthetic object in its own right, its own logic undiluted by the exigencies of the film. *Batman* was the first film to institute the release of two soundtrack LPs, a strategy that has become more common since, examples being *Dick Tracy* (1990) (three LPs), *Addams Family Values* (1993), *The Crow* (1994) and *Forrest Gump* (1994) (two LPs, one of them double). In each case, these soundtracks reveal a division of the films' music into orchestral score and song compilation. One reviewer commented about *Batman*'s dual soundtracks: 'both [LPs are] excellent accessories for the further enjoyment of the biggest movie of the year' and suggested, 'Buy the Prince album to get in the mood for the movie. Then go see it and whistle Elfman's haunting theme on your way back home to Prince.'[12]

Prince's LP forms an intersection with the film, aesthetically, commercially and in narrative terms. Prince's LP not only includes some dialogue from the film, but is bizarrely conceptualized as a coherent narrative with dialogue apparently sung between the characters. It comprises its own narrative of sorts, with Prince singing various character parts: Batman in 'The Future', Joker in 'Electric Chair', Vicki Vale and Bruce Wayne in 'Arms of Orion', Joker in 'Party Man', Bruce Wayne in 'Vicki Waiting', The Joker in 'Trust', Vicki Vale in 'Lemon Crush', Batman in 'Scandalous', and all characters in 'Batdance'. This final song is the culmination of the dynamics and the narrative of the LP. 'Batdance' comprises an 'operatic' interaction between Joker, an obscure character called 'Gemini', Vicki Vale, Bruce Wayne and Batman. While Joker and Batman interject samples of dialogue from the film (such as 'I'm Batman'), the sleeve notes also ascribe voices within this song to 'choir', 'Joker's Gang', 'Bat Dancers' and even 'Prince' himself.

'Batdance' was the scout single from the package, released before the film to precede it as an advertisement. It became Prince's equal most successful single in the UK and was the forerunner to two other UK Top 30 singles from his soundtrack ('Party Man' and 'Arms of Orion'), with the film seemingly having driven his LP's success.[13] 'Batdance' provides an interface with the past, announcing the new Batman film through referencing the chorus vocals from Neal Hefti's theme for the camp 1960s television show. This provided a musical bridge between the previous representation of the character and the oncoming film. *Batman* presents all the songs as diegetic music, that is, it grounds them all as appearing 'realistically'

within the filmic world. 'Party Man' is foregrounded, played on a ghetto-blaster by Joker when he indulges in some art terrorism, while 'Trust' materializes at the carnival and some Prince songs appear as ambient music at Bruce Wayne's party ('The Future', 'Vicki Waiting', 'Electric Chair'). Thus the film ties the songs to the mundane everyday 'reality' of the film, while Elfman's more prominent non-diegetic orchestral score functions as the film's 'heavenly voice', appearing from nowhere. Despite the bipartite nature of the music in the film, there is one point of union between the two. The Prince song 'Scandalous' appears for a portion of the end credits while some of its music, rearranged by Elfman, appears earlier in the film, albeit fleetingly. Generally, Prince's music appears obtrusively but only occasionally, while Elfman's orchestral music is virtually continuous throughout the film. The music as a whole is constantly foregrounded in a non-classical fashion; as we will see, musical logic often overrides narrative logic.

Reviewers noted the film's musical strategy, that of Elfman's wall-to-wall studio era-styled score plus the foregrounding of Prince's music in the fringes of the film: 'Prince's songs, which interrupt an outstandingly old-fashioned score by Danny Elfman . . . only get gratuitously in the way during two scenes.'[14] Prince visited the set during production and was inspired. He reportedly said, 'I can hear the music.'[15] But sadly for him the final product turned out to have Danny Elfman's music rather than his own.

Elfman's orchestral score dominates, but is not as well integrated with the film as it initially appears. At times it is obscured by sound effects rather than taking them into account, and the internal musical logic of many pieces outweighs their logic in the filmic environment. For example, when Joker first sees a picture of Vicki Vale, the refrain of 'Beautiful Dreamer' appears, and dialogue continues, the music lacking any direct interface with the action. At this point, the music does not bow to the image track through matching the momentary dynamics of the action; rather its time scheme carries on regardless of the film. Much in the same way that pop songs often have in films, the music here retains its own full integrity rather than being forced to bend itself to fit the action. Songs usually have their own regular rhythmic and standardized temporal structure (set by tempo and repeating structures like verse and chorus), which means that when they are foregrounded, action must be cut to their requirements, unlike the flexible orchestral underscores which have traditionally been built around the requirements of the processes of filmic narration.

Elfman's music distinctly resembles scores from classical Hollywood films. His score not only uses an extremely large orchestra, up to 110 instrumentalists, but also *leitmotifs*, musical themes associated with characters or other things, a central strategy of musical scores in classical cinema. There is the repeated Batman theme, while Joker has a foregrounded musical theme associated with him, the melody from the old Stephen Foster song 'Beautiful Dreamer'. In addition to these, a

rearrangement of Prince's 'Scandalous' appears twice, associated with the love of Wayne and Vale. These themes interact at times, forming a direct union between musical and narrative processes. At the film's conclusion, for example, the Batman theme and the 'Scandalous' melody (the love theme) alternate in quick succession, suggesting a union of Batman and Wayne's love for Vale, the two halves of the protagonist's schizoid character. Yet the film's climactic triumphant fanfare, which owes more than a little to Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, immediately supersedes them and asserts the superhero himself as we then see Batman alone on the rooftops.

The theme for Batman himself codes the Gothic at its opening, with deep strings and brass, and then the martial, where it leads to a pounding march with snare drum and brass punctuation. It functions directly as a fanfare for Batman, announcing his presence while being associated solidly with both film and character. Consequently, along with the overall style of the film's music, it also works outside the film's context. It was prominent in the trailer for the film and reappeared in the first sequel, *Batman Returns* (1992). Despite the wide usage of the theme, *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997), in keeping with many other changes from the previous films, instituted a new theme for Batman, the musical score being written by Elliot Goldenthal rather than Elfman. Along the same lines, one-time Elfman orchestrator and conductor of the *Batman* score, Shirley Walker, wrote the music for the film derived from the animated television series, *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm* (1993), and declined to use Eltman's Batman theme. However, the distinct flavour of Elfman's music is so centrally associated with Batman that both Goldenthal's music for *Batman Forever* and Walker's for *Batman: Mark of the Phantasm* have retained its broad style.[16]

A key characteristic of Elfman's score is the use of massed and strident brass instruments. In this way, Elfman's music betrays an influence from key film composer Bernard Herrmann, who is most widely known for his scores for many of Hitchcock's films in the 1950s and 1960s. The non-diegetic score for *Batman* is characterized by parallel harmonies, chords that move up and down by a semitone, a staple of music in the horror genre. The music is also underlined consistently by a strong rhythmic impetus, a pulse or beat that is at the heart of many of the film's pieces of orchestral music. This beat gives the music a highly purposeful edge as well as propelling the action. For instance, when Batman with Vicki Vale drives the Batmobile to the Bat Cave, the music is portentous and compensates for the lack of dialogue. A vocal chorus provides stabbing rhythmic notes, reminiscent of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The choir keeps a regular rhythm in operation, which builds and paves the way from the Batman theme's climactic entrance, and while this provides an aural zenith for the sequence, it is surmounted by the visual *coup de grâce* of the Batmobile not slowing to enter a hatch in a sheer rock wall.

Elfman's music in *Batman* is pure Gothic melodrama, using a large, dark and

Wagnerian orchestral sound. Some reference points apart from Wagner might be Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre* and horror film music that has formalized Gothic musical traits. Indeed, it signifies directly to the audience through the use of recognizable musical forms and styles. It uses the melody of 'Beautiful Dreamer' for its many extra-textual connotations of wistful nostalgia. The arrangements of the tune underline this, coding childlike innocence and having an air of ironic sincerity that counterposes Joker's real intentions with respect to Vale. The score is also replete with waltzes of all kinds, which are also associated with Joker. These include a circus-type waltz when Joker first reveals himself and kills crime boss Grissom and later a mock-Strauss waltz when he dances with Vale. Elfman's arrangements include some very distinct instrumental sounds, such as the celesta and the Ondes Martenot. The celesta's delicate bell-like sound is probably most widely known for its use in Tchaikovsky's *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* from *The Nutcracker*, while the Ondes Martenot was an early electronic musical instrument used for its otherworldly sound in some film scores of the 1940s such as Miklos Rosza's for *Spellbound* (1945) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945). At the denouement in Gotham's deserted cathedral the score uses a *Phantom of the Opera*-style organ, a referential strategy that Elfman also followed in his score for *Darkman* (1990).

The Flugelheim art gallery sequence is explicit in its use of the audience's mental library of musical styles and genres. It contains in succession Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (a token of high art culture), Prince's 'Party Man' (pop song) and 'A Summer Place' (cheap Mantovani-style arrangement of a worn-out romance tune, originally a film theme). Audiences are more musically literate than in the past. They are familiar with a wide variety of musical styles through radio, television and the saturation marketing of the recording industry. The music in the film gears itself precisely towards this. Also, while Joker and his gang perform their art terrorism in the gallery, the foregrounded song 'Party Man' flaunts its self-consciousness through being explicitly about Joker and indirectly about Prince. ('All hail, new king in town. Young and old, gather round. Black and white, red and green, the funkiest man you've ever seen.')

In the 'Party Man' sequence, the beat of the music is the central temporal process, underlined by some cuts taking place on emphasized beats (the first beat of the bar). Joker and his gang's actions directly reflect the rhythmic impetus of the song through their dancing. Musical logic dominates visual and narrative logic. This bears out Kalinak's point about pop songs disregarding the dynamics of films,[17] yet in this case the song is articulating and creating the dynamics of the action in a way reminiscent of song sequences in film musicals. In any case the aesthetic evident in this sequence is certainly an anomaly in the dominant form of mainstream narrative cinema, where music regularly takes a back seat to other elements of the film, and traditionally is rarely foregrounded in this manner.

Prince's songs are notably associated with Joker, 'Party Man' at the Flugelheim

and 'Trust' at the Gotham carnival. These and 'Beautiful Dreamer' tend to keep their integrity, their musical logic – one could almost say that Joker represents the triumph of musical logic over cinematic logic, while Batman represents the subordination of musical logic to cinematic logic, his image consistently invoking his musical theme.

If *Batman* demonstrates a situation where commercial logic has foregrounded aspects of the film's music, the first sequel displays a qualitatively different scenario – or at least a development from the musical strategy of the original film. *Batman Returns* has a similarly large-scale orchestral score using a language derived from classical cinema, while relegating pop music's role to some music at a party and the end titles song. It has one featured song, 'Face to Face' (performed by Siouxsie and the Banshees), although it briefly uses Rick James' 'Super Freak'. 'Face to Face' was co-written by Elfman and attains a degree of continuity with the orchestral score through using musical elements from the film's character themes (*Leitmotifs*). It appears for the end titles and as diegetic ambient music in the party sequence where, literally face to face, Bruce Wayne (Batman) and Selina Kyle (Catwoman) recognize each other's alter egos. *Batman Returns* certainly contains less in the way of pop music than its predecessor, with the film's LP consisting of Elfman's score and the one featured song. According to Elfman, 'Tim Burton was very clear that there wouldn't be Top 40 songs dropped in at random.'[18] The film expressly used the song sufficiently to justify its tied-in status while the promo for the single incorporated images from the film.

Batman Returns' preponderance of scored orchestral music demonstrates film logic dictating musical logic, following the modes of the prestige orchestral scores of the 1930s and 1940s. The music is tethered directly to the screen action. So the film's principal characters all elicit the appearance of their respective musical themes: Batman has his own heroic theme that survives from the first film, a four-note figure and a deep plodding melody represent The Penguin, while Catwoman has scratchy string *glissandi* and a full string melody. My rudimentary descriptions of the respective musical themes ('scratchy' like a cat, 'plodding' like a penguin) bear out the use of musical clichés. Elfman confirms this: 'whenever he walked on the stage, I saw the Penguin as an opera singer who was about to deliver an aria. I gave his melodies a grand, overblown quality.'[19] All three *Leitmotifs* appear in quick succession when Batman accosts The Penguin 'surveying the riot scene', which intercuts with Catwoman's acquisition of a whip in a department store. Here the music moves from one character theme to the next, subordinating itself to the film's action. Classical Hollywood composer Max Steiner said of his score for *The Informer* (1935): 'A blind man could have sat in a theatre and known when Gypo was on the screen.'[20] Steiner means that whenever the film's protagonist appeared, he was doubled by the appearance of his own *Leitmotif*, much like sections of *Batman Returns*. Elfman's orchestral score is, however, paradoxical in

that it follows very precisely the modes of classical scores, using thematic techniques to build a wall-to-wall fabric in the same way that Steiner and Erich Wolfgang Korngold constructed their scores in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a paradox in that it copies explicitly the musical techniques of classical cinema, yet the effect is overblown and parodic. On the one hand this is due to Elfman's distension of classical principles, but on the other it should be accounted for by changes in the ways that we understand film music. For example, in my experience audiences now think *Now, Voyager*'s (1942) music and romance crass, as the codings that applied in the 1940s have shifted.[21]

How far can post-classical film music revive the musical modes of the studio system, where the industrial base is no longer in place? The *Batman* scores seem quite literally to be 'speaking in a dead language' to use Fredric Jameson's phrase.[22] Arguably the language of classical film scores was already a dated if not outmoded musical language in its studio system heyday, since nineteenth-century concert hall music provided the musical language of classical cinema. The Batman scores do not fully comply with Jameson's description of pastiche, which he distinguishes from parody. While parody uses and exaggerates language with an ulterior (often comic) motive, pastiche involves the neutral re-use of an antiquated or obsolete language.[23] Rather the *Batman* scores contain a degree of parody corresponding with the generally hyperbolic and self-conscious character of the films themselves. They take the techniques of the classical film score and elevate them to the level of cliché. The music is melodramatic, lacks subtlety and foregrounds clichés with which the audience is familiar, or rather over-familiar.

We could see the score's 'revivalism' in terms of the art music (and art history) concept of the neoclassical, where composers 'revived the balanced forms and clearly perceptible thematic processes of earlier styles . . . [while] the prefix of "neo-" often carries the implication of parody, or distortion, of truly Classical traits'.[24] The *Batman Returns* score is certainly excessive in comparison with the scores in classical cinema, despite its obvious referencing of that style. It uses the principles and form, the surface of studio era scores, yet these appear distorted by the music's distinctive character and its conspicuousness in the film. Elfman verifies this process: 'Though I try to reflect the spirit of Korngold and Rozsa when I write traditionally, the music still goes through some funny circus mirrors in my head. So it comes out far more twisted than those great old scores.'[25]

John Williams' film music is also an essential reference point (in fact the *Batman* music bears a passing resemblance to Williams' music for Brian De Palma's *The Fury* (1978)), yet Elfman's music is much more arch and based more upon exaggerating the tenets of musical style in classical cinema. However, both composers could to some degree be dubbed neoclassical in that they value the classical and use it as a model while also differentiating their music from it. The architectural resonance of the term neoclassical ties the music of the Batman films with the

startling set designs of Anton Furst (*Batman*) and Bo Welch (*Batman Returns*). Both music and set design situate the film in what seems to be an alternative present, one projected to now from a 1940s past. This resonates with Jameson's description of earlier representations of the future having 'turned out to have been merely the future of one moment of our past'.[26] Elfman's music then, seems to be a future version of the Classical Hollywood film score, but one that has followed a different and more direct line of development, although perhaps not as direct as John Williams' music. While both composers' music could be characterized as neoclassical, John Williams' work is best described as a pastiche of classical film scoring, and Danny Elfman's music for the Batman films as a parody of the film music of the past.

It is striking that Thomas Schatz identifies *Jaws* (1975), the film that established John Williams as one of Hollywood's pre-eminent composers, as the film that heralded the New Hollywood.[27] While *Jaws* has a prominent musical score, the music in classical films more directly inspired Williams' music for *Star Wars*. Kalinak writes that 'Through Williams' example, the epic sound established in the thirties once again became a viable choice for composers in contemporary Hollywood.'[28] Williams' music for *Superman* (1978) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) are characteristic of this style, as is Alan Silvestri's for *Back to the Future* (1985). The epic sound and style of the studio era classical score is clearly evident in *Batman Returns*. Elfman is plain about his admiration for the scores of classical cinema, particularly Hugo Friedhofer's score for *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and decries modern film music. He said: 'To me, contemporary film scoring doesn't enhance the action, all it does is provide pretty wallpaper. Old-fashioned film scores were much more dynamic.'[29] Elfman's music is certainly dynamic, but while it exhibits massive variation in texture as well as temperament, much of the rise and fall of the music's intensity is dictated solely by the film's visual track.

In *Batman Returns*, the music is tailored directly to the film's momentary dynamics. At times it even 'mickeymouses' – mimics screen action – yet it is not pleonastic, it is a central component of the film's identity and of its narration. The music sounds like an overblown, impossibly large and prestigious classical symphonic score. It sounds rather like a spoof, a distortion of studio era film music, but this is due to the use of culturally coded (or, more precisely, overcoded) instrumental timbres and styles, like the use of deep Gothic brass, chiming celesta and *grand Guignol* organ. These are musical clichés, and Elfman's awareness of this means that it is foregrounded as an effect. This procedure is far more pronounced than in *Batman*, forcing the music explicitly into the realms of parody. The sheer volume of music, added to the world that the film creates, is reminiscent of the stylized world of the film musical, such as *The Pirate* (1948) and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), where design and music coalesce into a world of dazzling

visuals and explosive musical sound. This style also relates to cartoons and, like cartoons, *Batman Returns* constructs its own world rather than directly copying our own, while the preponderance of 'mickeymousing' (which was named after cartoon music) can be accounted for with reference to the Batman films' cartoon qualities, inherited from their origin in comics. Elfman supplied the theme for the television cartoon series *The Simpsons*, and there is a correlation between his style and the dramatic and quick musical changes, quotation and parody established by cartoon composers such as Carl Stalling and Dick Bradley.

Elfman is highly conscious of his music being something more than simply a silence-filler: 'I would love some day to have people hear the two *Batman* scores while looking at the image, but without the sound effects.'[30] The relationship of music to image in *Batman Returns* often resembles that of a ballet, in the way that the continuity of the music interacts with, but is not necessarily subordinated to other elements. Film composer Dimitri Tiomkin wrote: 'There is a much closer affinity between ballet and movies than casual thought suggests. . . . Sometimes I think a good picture is really just a ballet with dialogue.'[31] This perspective, also verified by sound designer Walter Murch,[32] is at times explicitly borne out by *Batman Returns*. Its opening gives Elfman a showcase for his music, with the first five minutes of the film containing just two words of dialogue, thus allowing the music a major role in the articulation of action. The opening of the film resembles silent cinema music in that it is continuous and proceeds without the inconveniences of the spoken word or excessive sound effects. The music replaces both, asserting itself as a major component of the film and retaining its own internal logic despite its close marriage with the image and storytelling processes.

Batman Returns starts with a slow version of the *Batman* melody as snow falls over the Warner Bros. logo. As this changes to an urban exterior scene, a Gothic organ presents the short four-note musical figure associated with the Penguin throughout the film. The camera cranes upwards and across to a large Gothic house that has a light and shape at the window in a visual *hommage* to *Citizen Kane* (1941). Cut to the interior of the house and a birth offscreen. Next a caged infant attacks a cat as its parents look on, and the music here features the celesta and plays a short ballet-styled piece to counterpoint the comic violence. The next cut moves back outside, following the parents pushing their cage-like baby carriage through a snowy park, and culminating in them throwing it into the river. Here the music is a corruption of clichéd Christmas music featuring sleigh bells and a wordless choir singing Disney-style. Elfman's interim project, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), was undoubtedly influential, with *Batman Returns* using beautiful and overwrought fantasy-invoking choirs more than *Batman*. This walk to doom features the first appearance of the full melody associated with the Penguin, anticipating the child's rebirth. Upon the baby carriage's impact in the water and disappearance down a drain, the music punctuates the seeming finality of the act

with tubular bell toll. The camera then closely follows the baby carriage down the river, while the music starts a solid 4/4 rhythm and begins tentatively to offer excerpts from the *Batman* theme. Upon the appearance of the main title (with bats flying through it) the music reaches a climactic chord and then proceeds with the full *Batman* theme that it has been withholding from the audience. The thumping beat persists along with an arrangement of the *Batman* theme that has changed little since the first film, as the camera follows the baby carriage floating along the sewer finally to come to rest inside the Penguin house at the zoo. It is a highly melodramatic opening to a film, with massively telescoped action in temporal terms. This sequence is a rebirth sequence, the Penguin going from human birth to symbolic rebirth through the sewer into the zoo. Radical changes in the character of the music mark each step of the way. It involves direct mimicking of action ('mickeymousing'), articulates the changes in the image track, and provides narrative information (themes for Batman and the Penguin, the Christmas setting, the film's mixture of moral darkness and quirky humour). *Batman Returns*' opening sequence provides remarkable scope for Elfman's music, indeed an opportunity rarely available for composers in contemporary cinema.

In summary, the first two Batman films demonstrate two strata of contemporary Hollywood's musical strategies. *Batman* exhibits a cohabitation of orchestral score and tied-in pop songs, while *Batman Returns* uses only one tied-in song and has a large-scale score inspired more directly by the music of classical cinema. They both use classically inspired forms recast by more recent procedures.

The fragmenting of the Hollywood studio system had a significant effect upon the production of music for films, and there have also been important changes in film music due to cultural developments outside the cinema. With film production becoming a component of multimedia industries, films themselves have increasingly become vehicles for tied-in pop music, as can be verified by any visit to a CD shop. Musical tie-ins were important for film production during the studio era and they directly affected film form: they spawned the musical film. With the recession of the musical genre, this impetus has moved into dramatic films, as witnessed by the use of Prince in *Batman*.

Yet, tie-ins can equally include the film's orchestral score as well as songs. The mere existence of two soundtrack LPs suggests that music has a more important position in films than it had in the past. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the dual function of music – as both film element and object in its own right – has had an effect upon the character of the music itself. Music's status in films has become elevated[33] and this has removed the orchestral music from the alleged position of 'unobtrusiveness' which it occupied in classical cinema and into a more conspicuous position.

Although it initially seems to resemble the film music of the 1930s and 1940s, the orchestral music in the two films signifies in a fundamentally *different* way from

classical film scores. Both of the films are premised upon the existence of a sophisticated cultural literacy among the audience. This assumes that the unprecedented access to images and narratives has supplied a knowledge of the Batman figure, Gothic imagery, and so forth, largely made available through contemporary audio-visual culture's principle of recycling. The music works in exactly the same way, relying on the audience's musical literacy for its signification. Particularly in *Batman Returns*, the music goes beyond the generic music and forms used in classical cinema. It works through the use of archetypal sounds and musical styles, burlesquing certain musical forms under the umbrella of its parody of the classical film score.

The orchestral music in the *Batman* films matches the mixed construction of period in the films, blending both the historical (1940s design, the classical score) with parodic and contemporary aspects. Post-classical cinema seems to display a proliferation of music that is unified at the point of the film as both text *and* as commodity. Indeed, Tim Burton, director of the first two Batman films allegedly asked, 'Is there a movie here, or just something that goes along with the merchandising?'[34] Yet *Batman* and *Batman Returns* can hardly be accused of being fully determined by the requirements of tie-ins. The music in the films is testament not only to the pressure to use marketable pop music in films, but also to the ongoing significance of several aesthetic traditions and strategies which incorporate such music in a variety of ways.

Notes

1 *Variety*, All-time Top Ten grossing films at North American Box Office, 20–26 February 1995, A54.
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3 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, p. 189.
4 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 368.
5 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, p. 187.
6 Rod Cooper, 'Beating the drum for the music makers' (Interview with Ron Goodwin), *Kinematograph Weekly*, vol. 634, no. 3279 (15 August 1970), p. 3.
7 William Darby and Jack Dubois, *American Film Music: Major Composers. Techniques, Trends, 1915–90* (Washington, DC: MacFarland, 1982), p. 486.
8 R. Serge Denisoff and George Plasketes, 'Synergy in 1980s film and music: formula for success or industry mythology?' in *Film History*, vol. 4 (1990), p. 257.
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10 R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (London/New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991), p. 694.

11 Jon Burlingame, 'Danny Elfman on the move', *Soundtrack!* (September 1990), p. 21; Daniel Schweiger, 'Danny Elfman returns' (interview with Danny Elfman), *Soundtrack!* (September 1992), p. 19.
12 Barry McIlheny, review of Elfman and Prince soundtrack LPs, *Empire* (1990), p. 108.
13 Denisoff and Romanowski, *Risky Business*, p. 697.
14 Kim Newman, review of *Batman* in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 56 (668) (September 1989), p. 269.
15 Denisoff and Romanowski, *Risky Business*, p. 693.
16 Although Eliot Goldenthal praises Danny Elfman's music, he asserts that his music never looks back to it: Michael Singer, *Batman, and Robin: The Making of the Movie* (London: Hamlyn, 1997), p. 125.
17 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, p. 187.
18 Daniel Schweiger, 'Danny Elfman returns', p. 19.
19 Ibid., p. 18.
20 Roy M. Prendergast, *A Neglected Art: Film Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 42.
21 Just as the use of the sentimental Victorian violin tune *Hearts and Flowers* on a film soundtrack is now a joke about the hackneyed use of music in silent cinema.
22 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Left Review*, no. 146 (July/August 1984), p. 65.
23 Ibid. The term comes from 'Pasticcio', which was used to describe operas that consisted of arias from disparate sources and 'faked' bridging parts.
24 Arnold Whitall, entry in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 104.
25 Daniel Schweiger, 'Danny Elfman returns', p. 17.
26 Fredric Jameson, 'Progress versus utopia, or, can we imagine the future?' in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinkng Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 244.
27 Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', p. 17.
28 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, p. 189.
29 Didier Deutsch, Interview with Danny Elfman in *Soundtrack!* (December 1993), p. 9.
30 Ibid.
31 Dimitri Tiomkin, 'Composing for the films' in James Limbacher (ed.), *From Violins to Video* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1974), p. 58.
32 Frank Paine, 'Sound mixing and *Apocalypse Now*: an interview with Walter Murch', in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (eds), *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 356.
33 Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 162; K. J. Donnelly, 'Altered status: a review of music in postmodern cinema and culture', in Steven Earnshaw (ed.), *Postmodern Surroundings* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), p. 50.
34 Daniel Schweiger, 'Danny Elfman returns', p. 19.

Chapter 10

A cry in the dark

The role of post-classical film sound

Gianluca Sergi

The word 'sound' has always had several positive meanings. Indeed, expressions such as *sound* thinking, a *sound* person, and *sound* judgements belong to our everyday vocabulary. However, all this stops when we reach the realm of Film Studies. Here, sound seems like an obstacle in the way of the essence of cinema: the image. This bias against sound, generated mainly by early film scholars, was partly supported by the limitations that characterized Hollywood film production and reception prior to the mid-1970s, as we shall see. However, since then, a series of technological developments and changes in production and reception have ensued, and these have modified the ways in which film sound has been constructed, and the relationship between sound and image, audience and film. It is this period, which we may define as the 'Dolby era', upon which I wish to focus here. In exploring its characteristics I shall follow two distinct 'tracks', an aesthetic one and an economic one. It is in the interaction between them that one can perhaps begin to identify the parameters of what might be called 'post-classical' film sound.

The soundtrack: a misleading notion?

Before launching into any discussion of the role – or roles – of film sound, we need to confront a major problem: the lack of a proper vocabulary with which to articulate the complexity of the subject. Although this is true of other areas of film (production design and art direction come to mind), this particular lack is an acute one. There are several reasons for it. Film sound shares the same physical medium as music, that is, sound waves, and this has often helped to reinforce the use of musical terms in discussions of sound. This is particularly evident in the insistent use of terms like pitch, tone and timbre. These terms are relevant but insufficient. They are simply not flexible enough to articulate the complexities of contemporary soundtracks (for example, musical vocabularies are concerned with sound *per se*, while film sound works in symbiosis with the image). This

problem is intensified by the disparity in critical attention given to popular music as compared to the cinema. Whereas in the UK at least there are a number of TV shows which set out to discuss or to analyse films (such as *Film 98* and *Moviewatch*), equivalent programmes on pop music simply present the product or performer without ever discussing their qualities or the ways in which they work (consider, for example, *Top of the Pops* and *The Chart Show*). In short, we have an inadequate vocabulary which is in any case rarely used in popular critical contexts. Perhaps we should attempt to side-step some of these problems by turning our attention to the soundtrack itself.

Rather than being conceived as a complex combination of different elements, the term 'soundtrack' has come principally to signify the music track of a film, dialogue being confined to another – 'superior' – realm, that of the screenwriter. This is a rather convenient way of arranging perception and appreciation. First, by singling out specific portions of a soundtrack, critics can praise the contributions of individual practitioners rather than focus on the much more complicated issue of what actually becomes of these contributions once they are recorded, mixed and reproduced not as independent elements, but as elements in a complex structure. Second, this type of approach betrays a certain attitude towards the more apparently 'ordinary' elements of the soundtrack, its everyday sounds: noise and silence. Critics seem to find it easier – and worthier – to focus on the art of the spoken word or the composed note than on the unsettling noise or the 'empty' silence. Yet it is precisely the relationships between all four elements – effects, music, dialogue and silence – that require investigation, and that mark the nature of the soundtrack itself. A soundtrack is like a cake. Each ingredient has its own distinctive flavour and makes its own individual contribution. However, once blended together they cannot and should not be separated one from another. Their contribution to the final product can only be considered by referring to the other ingredients and to the cake itself as a whole.

Pre-Dolby sound

Although production during the classical period did not present sound personnel with insurmountable technical and creative barriers, reproduction did, and damagingly so. The poor conditions of sound reproduction present in the vast majority of cinemas was a key factor. Quite simply, most film theatres were incapable of coping with complex soundtracks, and often produced distracting echoes and unwanted reverberations. Loudspeakers were capable of reproducing only a very limited frequency range (they were designed principally to reproduce audible speech), and powerful sounds were in general not a feasible option because of the risks (or certainties) of sound distortion. Moreover, the (mal)practice of exhibitors in 'pumping up the volume' in order that action films had maximum impact

on spectators often had the effect of wiping out the more subtle dimensions of sound design. Given these limitations, filmmakers could only feasibly employ a limited number of tracks if they were to avoid a cacophany of sounds, and tended to give aural priority to music and the human voice.

This is not to underestimate the aesthetic efforts or the technological advances of the 1950s and 1960s. The differences between then and now lie largely in the combination of standards of production and reproduction. Where with a film like *Spartacus* (1960), full stereo sound reproduction was possible with only a handful of (extremely expensive) 70mm roadshow prints in a handful of first-run cinemas, the soundtrack on *Star Wars* (1977) could be reproduced to high standards in most theatres thanks to the cheaper and more flexible Dolby system. Thus where the costs of quality sound reproduction in the 1950s and 1960s and the concomitant lack of good sound facilities in most theatres tended to inhibit the development of a more positive approach to film sound, the availability of Dolby has inspired confidence, and a concomitant willingness to experiment.

In the pre-Dolby era of the 1950s and 1960s, movie soundtracks were produced in-house by the studios, limiting external influences and generating a reliance on standard practices, established techniques and old sound libraries. In order to gauge the magnitude of the problem, it is worth bearing in mind that this was a period of profound changes and developments in aural terms. The 1960s witnessed the sweeping away of established listening patterns and the introduction of increasingly sophisticated experiments in sound recording and sound reproduction in the music industry as well as a much more 'aggressive' type of sound. Rock concerts in particular, with their blend of powerfully amplified music and enhanced 'sensual' experience (literally, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll) introduced a new type of leisure activity engaging the 'participant' (no longer merely a 'spectator') on more than just an intellectual level. In addition, squeaky transistor radios were being rapidly replaced by affordable hi-fi systems capable of reproducing good quality sound. Consumers, spectators and participants could now enjoy better quality sound at concerts and in their homes than in the vast majority of cinemas. Films and film theatres desperately lagged behind and seemed unable to respond to such changes.

The unexplored potential of the medium was embodied in the fact that sound, a three-dimensional phenomenon, the *only* three-dimensional phenomenon in the movies, was being deployed in a one-dimensional manner, and not merely in the sense that sound reproduction was generally monophonic. To put it simply, the agenda informing the use of sound was that it should fulfil one principal requirement: to match the image without attracting unwanted attention. Even when we look at one of the most obvious areas for potential aural innovation, the musical, we find further evidence of a conservative use of sound. Hugely successful films like *Gigi* (1958) and *My Fair Lady* (1964) never really threatened the established

power of the characters to open their mouths and summon up rivers of melody. Contrast this with later films like *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), where music and its sources (a pirate radio station in *Graffiti*, a discotheque in *Fever*) must be actively sought for, and where the sounds of car engines and of New York slang are given such status that they are able to interrupt the sound of the music.

However, as these examples demonstrate, the early 1970s saw some filmmakers trying to use sound in new and interesting ways despite the continuing limitations of technology and studio practice. Films like *The Conversation* (1974), *Jaws* (1975), and *Taxi Driver* (1976) all evinced a willingness to experiment with the soundtrack by choosing to foreground sound (as well as music) rather than using it solely as a backdrop to the image. Moreover, this time a willingness to experiment (especially on the part of the 'movie brats'[1]) intersected with the availability of a new and important technology.

Listen, here comes Dolby

The development of sound technology from the mid-1970s on has been extensively charted in the last few years, thanks to an increasing interest in the subject. (See the section on sound in Michael Allen's Chapter 7 in this volume.) Thus it will be sufficient here to highlight the three major changes central to an understanding of what follows. First, the mid-1970s saw the introduction of the *Dolby Stereo Sound System*. This was the first economically viable stereophonic system. Employing multi-channel technology, Dolby was able to reproduce a new range of sounds (thanks to its wider frequency range) and, most importantly, it provided improved conditions of reproduction in most theatres. Second, at the beginning of the 1980s, George Lucas and his collaborators developed the *THX Sound System*. Arguably the most ambitious sound project in film history, the THX system enables conditions of reproduction in cinemas equal to those of professional mixing stages. In principle at least, it therefore enables the standardization of sound reproduction as intended by those at the point of production.[2] Last, but by no means least, the late 1980s have seen the introduction of digital sound in three different systems: *DTS*, *Dolby Digital SR-D* and *SDDS*. This is the present and future of film sound, extending frequency range to maximum capacity and providing discrete multi-channel recording and reproduction.[3] It allows soundtracks to reproduce extremely powerful and detailed sound at virtually zero distortion, and has generated a number of dramatic innovations. The result of these changes is that the situation now with regard to sound production and reproduction is almost the reverse of the situation prior to the advent of Dolby. I should like now to explore some of these changes in more detail.

Multi-layered sound

The first major development was the introduction of multi-channel recording technology. The use of an analogy may help us to understand the relevance of this change. Let us imagine that a film theatre has only one access door and that it is designed to admit twenty people at any one time. Should more than twenty people be admitted, the result would be chaos. This is akin to the situation prior to the mid-1970s, with the dominance of monophonic sound and hence one channel or 'door'. The introduction of stereophonic technology meant the opening of new doors to the same auditorium, and helped remove the old limitations as to the number of tracks those who made films could employ. The result was the use of dozens of different tracks, which meant that filmmakers had to deal with an increasingly complex, and increasingly multi-layered, 'architecture of sound', an architecture requiring careful planning, coordination and control.

Multi-directional sound

One of the consequences of this development was that multi-channel sound was projected into the auditorium from a number of different directions. Pre-Dolby 'classical' sound was overwhelmingly one-directional, and originated for the most part from the centre of the screen.[4] This limited the potential of the soundtrack to unsettle the audience's reception of a film. Spectators knew exactly what to expect and where to expect it from. Contemporary Hollywood film sound is multi-directional. Thus filmmakers now are able to challenge audience assumptions as to the range, power and source of sound and sounds. Theorists like Mary Ann Doane have argued that the new sound technology has increased the capacity of the apparatus to 'hide' itself.[5] I would argue on the contrary that the introduction of multi-directional sound has displaced the reproduction of sound, at least physically, from the screen to any point in the auditorium, hence alerting the audience to its place in a constructed environment. In other words, if it is conventional to accept that a spaceship can move towards us frontally, on the screen, it takes a bigger leap of the imagination to accept that it is flying over our heads and into the auditorium from a point in the cinema lobby.[6]

Larger sound budgets and increasing numbers of sound personnel

The more complex soundtracks became, the higher the budgets devoted to sound could be. Aside from the cost implications, this meant that more people could be employed to work on the construction of a soundtrack. Gone is the solitary credit attributing sound to one individual department head. In has come the listing on

credits of more and more people (over fifty in the case of *The Fugitive* (1993) and *Speed* (1994)), and more and more specialist functions: sound designer, supervising sound editor, sound editor, foley artist, sound recordist, sound mixer, and so on. Moreover, sound personnel are now often involved not just in production and post-production, but in pre-production and initial planning and design as well. Crucially, the waves of sound personnel who worked in Hollywood from the 1970s on came from a variety of sonic backgrounds. They brought an awareness of sound and the possibilities of sound, bridging established patterns and contemporary innovations in both technological and cultural terms, and thus helped to spur and to enable the technological and aesthetic innovations of the post-Dolby era.

The creation of new sounds

The combination of new technologies, larger budgets and new personnel had an important effect: the creation of 'new' sounds. In an era when soundtracks were mostly created in sound studios, this was an important and significant step. Indeed, it signalled a definitive break with the sound of the past. New sounds meant new styles, and in retrospect we can pinpoint two major styles or schools: the precise and detailed Bay Area sound, influenced by the electronic and esoteric stylizations of the 1960s, and the more gutsy New York Metropolitan sound, influenced, among other things, by rap and other forms of black music. Instances of the former can be found in Spielberg's films, from the sound of Indiana Jones' cracking whip in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) to the creaking of Schindler's jacket in *Schindler's List* (1993). Examples of the latter can be found in Scorsese's films, from Jake La Motta's punches in *Raging Bull* (1980) to the editing of the fast-talking dialogue and menacing sounds in *Goodfellas* (1990).[7]

Improved sound reproduction in cinemas

Following closely on developments such as these, the quality of sound reproduction in auditoria began to improve. Sound engineers designed new auditoria and helped adapt existing ones. Sound-absorbent material was used to minimize unwanted echo and reverberation; sound insulation was improved to muffle the noise produced by projectors and air conditioning equipment, and to prevent the sounds from adjacent auditoria interfering with one another. In this context, it is significant that Lucasfilm's THX Division developed not just a sound reproduction system, but a set of criteria for sound reproduction as a whole. These developments signalled a definitive shift away from the old sound hierarchies in which speech and music were accorded unconditional priority. New auditoria were built with all four elements of the soundtrack in mind.

New sounds, new pleasures: physical sound and heightened realism

During the course of the 1970s, Hollywood's use and conception of sound underwent a fundamental change. The possibilities of multi-channel technology, a wider frequency range and improved conditions of reproduction encouraged filmmakers to feel more confident about sound, and led them to rely more and more on the soundtrack. As a result, contemporary filmmakers have shown an increasing awareness of the 'physical', three-dimensional qualities of sound, and audiences are encouraged not just to listen to sounds but to 'feel' them – film-goers experience sound more sensually than ever before. The extensive use of deep bass sounds, a legacy of the new 'aggressive' sounds associated first with rock then with rap, is a mark of this new physical style. However, it is not just a matter of matching 'big' sounds with 'big' images; it is rather a matter of achieving a startling, communicative effect. Thus in the opening sequence of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Linda Hamilton's voice-over guides us through the devastating effects of the machines' revolt against the humans. The camera picks out a human skull. As it lingers for a moment, all sounds fade. Then as the voice-over ends, a mechanical foot appears and crushes the skull. The deep bass sound employed at this moment (a sound hardly close to the 'real' sound an action like this would produce) is used both to startle the audience and to convey the mightiness of the struggle awaiting the humans in their fight against the machines. In such cases, to use an expression dear to sound designers, the sound 'breaks through the screen' and takes centre stage.

Another development, and a further departure from classical sound, is the use of what might perhaps best be defined as 'heightened realism'. By highlighting particular sounds and softening others, filmmakers can enhance sound detail in such a way as to enable audiences to hear the unhearable. An example can be found in the opening sequence of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). Three villains try to outwit Dr Jones by tricking him into drinking a glass of poisoned champagne. They reveal the nature of what it is he has drunk by showing him a bottle containing the antidote. In the struggle that ensues, the bottle is flung across the dance floor amid scenes of chaos and confusion. Yet the sound of a bottle rolling on the floor is given prominence over all the other sounds we can hear.

Thus contemporary film sound, unlike the sound in classical Hollywood cinema, is significant not just in terms of its literal meaning, but also in terms of its weight, its power, its detail and its direction. Moreover, the complexities of the contemporary soundtrack alter the relationship between sound and image. No longer content to function merely as an aural backdrop, the soundtrack takes its place as a site of interest and experiment in its own right.

The economic dimension

The need to reconsider the role and the relevance of film sound in contemporary Hollywood is as much a function of economics as it is of aesthetics. This is not just a matter of production costs. Other economic factors are at stake as well.

Since the 1920s in particular, sound, and in particular musical sound, has been of great importance in the marketing of films, and as an ancillary commodity or off-shoot of the industry and its product. In the form of sheet music, of stars like Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson, and in the form of radio programmes and variety shows, the cinema, music and broadcasting industries have often been interlinked through the medium of sound, and sound itself used as a vehicle for attracting audiences to films. However, sound has never been such an important marketing force as it is today. Since the introduction of Dolby, the industry has enjoyed a slow but steady revival in terms of attendances, revenues and profits. Indeed, it is worth noting that the twenty biggest money spinners in Hollywood's history have been produced in the era of Dolby sound. Emphasis has often been placed on the visual aspects and attractions of these films. But it is at least worth noting the contribution that sound has made as well, as it is a vital element in the visceral aesthetic of the contemporary blockbuster.

One of the major factors here is the extent to which audiences were now able to enjoy sound of a quality that matched, and often surpassed, that of the sound they could enjoy at home. Producers were quick to exploit the qualities of surround sound, for instance, not just in the films, but also in trailers and advertisements.[8] Film exhibitors rose to the occasion and started to advertise their theatres as being equipped with 'true stereo sound', and today all major chains make a point of advertising those theatres equipped with THX or the latest digital system. In the last few years, the ever-expanding home video industry has elected and advertised surround sound as one of its principal commercial attractions. Meanwhile the advent of a wealth of consumer magazines run by a generation of sound-sensitive media journalists has been decisive in spreading knowledge about – and an appetite for – high quality sound both at home and in the cinema.

All these developments have accompanied and been accompanied by conglomeration, particularly in the multimedia field. Large media conglomerates have invested heavily in the sites of interaction between the film and music industries – it is no accident that as I write, the three biggest selling singles in the UK in the 1990s (after 'Candle in the Wind 97') were all showcased by films, and can all be found on their soundtracks.[9] Almost inevitably, interest – financial as well as intellectual – in the new sound technologies has spilled over into the computer industry, with Dolby developing Dolby Net, a surround sound system for the Internet.

In addition, one of the bloodiest corporate battles of the last few years has been

waged over digital sound. All the major companies are involved in this battle, each having developed and marketed their own particular system. MCA–Matsushita (now MCA–Seagram) has developed DTS,[10] CBS–Sony has responded with SDDS,[11] and Dolby has collaborated with Time Warner to produce Dolby Digital SR-D.[12] What has been impressive has been the pace of acquisition of what is still a relatively new technology. When Time Warner joined forces with Dolby to launch the Dolby Stereo Digital system in 1992, there were only a handful of theatres equipped to show *Batman Returns* (1992) in digital sound. Two years later, over 2,000 systems had been installed. Even more importantly, the availability of hardware has been increasingly matched by the availability of software. Most of the majors have now pledged to produce all their new features in one or more of the digital formats, and digital is now also available in the lucrative home video and TV markets.

Agendas for further research

Vast areas still remain to be researched. The relationship between sound and censorship is one. At present, there would appear to exist an unwritten rule that 'what you can't see can't hurt you', a rule which allows spectators to hear – but not necessarily see – crushing bones, searing flesh and record-breaking sexual activity. A further issue is the issue of pleasure. A great deal of attention has been paid to visual pleasure, but little to its aural equivalent. It is significant that we tend to think of production values in visual terms, not in aural ones, despite the fact that the sound of a screeching car tyre in an elaborate chase sequence can be just as important as the close-up of the tyre itself. Another issue worth exploring is the issue of genre. Genres have frequently been defined in visual terms – in terms, for instance, of iconography – but rarely in terms of what they sound like (the musical is the obvious exception). Yet in films like *Batman Returns* we are often confronted with images that are drawn from fantasy and sci-fi, juxtaposed with sounds reminiscent of those from a 1930s gangster film.

This is a long list of topics. What is at stake is the theoretical framework that we bring to the analysis of films. The place of sound in this framework has for too long been left in the dark.

Notes

1 See Lynda Myles and Michael Pye, *The Movie Brats, How the Film Generation took over Hollywood* (London: Faber, 1979).

2 However, as Stephen Handzo has pointed out, the concept of 'correct' sound reproduction is by no means straightforward. See 'The sound of sound', *Cineaste*, vol. 21, nos. 1–2 (1995), p. 68.

3 Six channels for DTS and Dolby SR-D, and up to eight for SDDS.

4 The only exception, as we have seen, being a handful of extremely expensive 70mm roadshow prints, prints whose soundtracks mostly – and conventionally – prioritized music and speech.

5 Mary Ann Doane, 'Ideology and the practice of sound editing and mixing', in Theresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds), *The Cinematic Apparatus* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 47–56.

6 One of the best-known examples of directional sound occurs in the opening sequence of *Star Wars*, in which a rebel fighter and an imperial destroyer are first 'heard' at the back of the auditorium before flying over the heads of the spectators and eventually appearing on the screen.

7 Although the directors mentioned may call the shots, it is important to remember that behind these examples are the names of some of the best sound designers in Hollywood: Ben Burtt, Skip Lievsay, Frank Warner, Walter Murch and a number of others.

8 Some of these, specifically filmed for trailer presentation, employed sound in a very aggressive fashion to win viewers' attention. The sound of the earth-rumbling thumps of a terminator or of the glass-shattering force of a twister will command the attention of even the most dedicated popcorn-munching audience.

9 These are: Bryan Adams' 'Everything I Do, I Do It for You', from *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), Whitney Houston's 'I Will Always Love You', from *The Bodyguard* (1992), and Wet, Wet, Wet's 'Love Is All Around', from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

10 DTS stands for Digital Theatre Sound, a sound-on-disc system capable of providing six discrete channels. It was launched with *Jurassic Park* in 1993.

11 SDDS stands for Sony Dynamic Digital Sound, a sound-on-film system capable of providing up to eight discrete channels. It was launched with *The Last Action Hero* in 1993.

12 SR-D stands for Spectral Recording-Digital, a sound-on-film system capable of providing six discrete channels. It was launched with *Batman Returns* in 1992.