

Summer 1996

# Review of "Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music" by R.S. Brown and "Film Music: Fundamentals of the Language" by R. Meyers

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## Recommended Citation

Gorbman, Claudia, "Review of "Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music" by R.S. Brown and "Film Music: Fundamentals of the Language" by R. Meyers" (1996). *SIAS Faculty Publications*. 16.

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have contributed to their very different reputations” (209). As if there were any doubt as to the political motivations of the critical abuse of melodrama, Jane Shattuc’s essay nails the coffin shut. Shattuc concludes: “[U]ntil we break the instrumental logic of reading all ideology as false consciousness and the reproduction of self-serving class and racially bound concepts such as excess, we limit some of the most powerful examples of political resistance and communal beliefs” (154). It is this overlapping of vital insights into melodrama that makes *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* one of the most coherent, useful, and convincing genre anthologies I have ever read.

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## Overtones and Undertones

### Reading Film Music

By Royal S. Brown. Berkeley, CA:  
University of California Press, 1994.  
\$50.00 cloth; \$20.00 paper.

## Film Music

### Fundamentals of the Language

By Randall Meyers. Oslo, Norway:  
ANG. Nkr. 260.

A spate of new books on film music in the last year or two reflects growing interest in the power and artistry of the music behind the images. Until a decade ago—and in subtler ways still today—film music studies have tended to be plagued by a division between film scholars and music scholars. Royal Brown’s work appeals to both sides of this cantankerous divide in its attentiveness both to details of musical form and to film narrative. *Overtones and Undertones* straddles yet another divide, between academia and the world outside. Brown’s unusually extensive familiarity with a huge range of film scores, because of his dual experience as a professor and a serious film music reviewer, brings a range to his study that is lacking in the tidier academic volumes that preceded his book. My own *Unheard Melodies* (1987), Kathryn Kalinak’s *Settling the Score* (1992), and Caryl Flinn’s *Strains of Utopia* (1992) all

concentrated to various extents on theoretical concerns about music and film narrative, and each examined relatively few films. While these studies boast greater overall coherence, Brown’s rambling and enthusiastic tome covers more ground, and complements the others well.

Brown’s subject is, as he puts it, the interaction between music and film. Since he favors artistically notable interactions, this is primarily a book on aesthetics, rather than a historical or cultural study. He develops a number of threads: music, since nonrepresentational, helps to counterbalance the cinema’s “privilege of the iconic”; and normally nonspecific in its affect, music takes on specific emotions once attached to visual narrative. He discusses musical properties of film music in comparison to concert music, silent film music in comparison to sound scores, and key moments and trends in the evolution of film music.

Readers unfamiliar with Brown’s previous essays on Bernard Herrmann’s scores for Hitchcock and on the music of Godard’s films can find extended treatments of both here, as well as detailed analyses of scores from *Alexander Nevsky* through *Laura*, *The Sea Hawk*, and *Double Indemnity* to *Liquid Sky* and *The Hunger*. Brown is nothing if not eclectic, although like most scholars he still refuses to cross the line and acknowledge a predominant form of film music since the late 1980s, the pop compilation score. The book’s final 70 pages contain excellent, well-informed interviews of eight composers, from Rozsa and Raksin to Barry and Shore.

The book need more editing than it received at California—many sentences have far more asides than this one—and such words as “paradigmaticizing” (48), “permanentization” (71), and “hyperexpletive” (111) distress the reader with regularity. The digressive style often distracts, and sometimes Brown uses a single word to mean too many things. Early chapters labor through thickets of dropped names and concepts, many explained only in great haste. Despite these shortcomings, Brown provides valuable insights along the way, especially when he is free to explore individual cases of how film music works.

The first chapter illustrates both the *grandeur* and *décadence* of Brown’s approach. He argues first that music “narrativizes” cinema, steering the film experience away from the strict “screen reality” of the images and toward story. In fact, he continues, music “mythifies” films, or draws the film images in the direction of myth; in a number of ways, it functions to transcend the specificity of the represented onscreen moment. Think of the end of Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*; Lincoln walks up a hill, and we hear music whose effect is to impose a transhistorical grandeur to Lincoln’s ascent. The “hill” he’s climbing becomes a metonym for his difficult destiny as President.

Brown then does a second take on the meaning of myth, calling “cultural myth” the kind that closes off meaning to a particular set of ideological inflections. In my *Young Mr. Lincoln* example, Lincoln’s ascent is accompanied specifically by the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”; this choice of music restricts readings of the scene to patriotic, God-on-our-side connotations. The double use of the term “myth” is hurriedly bridged by a couple of quotes from Barthes. Then the chapter hauls in yet a third characterization, Nietzsche’s “tragic myth.” All we learn about this term comes in a condensed quote from Nietzsche (invoking Schopenhauer, mentions Brown in a throwaway phrase) about Dionysian knowledge in symbols. Before we know it, we wind up in an analysis of *Psycho* based on tragic myth: “With the exploits of an American criminal who indulged in what might best be called ‘postmodern’ (i.e., with no cultural payback) Dionysian ritual as its springboard, *Psycho* concludes as an all but perfect Dionysian tragedy” (33).

Brown’s effusiveness sometimes leads to muddles, but often to penetrating insight. Most thought-provoking is the chapter on postmodernism. We disagree on the usefulness of the term itself: *Terminator* and *Die Hard* are just as “postmodern” as are movies by Beineix and other independents, which are his focus here. Nevertheless, Brown convincingly identifies a distinct kind of contemporary film score, one in which music seems to become an “image” itself, functioning as a “parallel universe” to the story rather than illuminating it in the manner of the classical score. To be sure, one may find examples of isolated techniques and effects of this kind in scores of decades past. But in seeing/hearing *Heavenly Creatures*—to take an example that has appeared since the publication of *Overtones and Undertones*—one senses that the focused deployment of music for irony and excess—toppling the hierarchy of subjectivity, confusing high and low, diegetic and nondiegetic—has resulted in an entirely new paradigm of film/music interaction. Brown’s examination of several films of this nature has brought the paradigm to light.

Randall Meyers, an American composer who lives in Europe, has geared his book to appeal to aspiring film composers and directors, urging them to consider more than the usual possibilities for music in movies. *Film Music* introduces readers to principles of music and compositional strategies of film music through well-chosen examples from key film scores. It includes interviews with four artists: Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, Danish documentarist Jorgen Leth, American sound designer Walter Murch, and Italian composer Nicola Piovani. The good news is that Meyers’ choice of films is not firmly tied to Hollywood (he shares this orientation with the more thorough Michel Chion, whose brilliant *La Musique au cinéma* appeared in 1995). *Film Music* is

concise and full of well-explained ideas. The bad news is that the book seems unaware of the literature on film music in Europe and the U.S. since about 1975.

Meyers clearly states his biases about film: “The cinematic art today, in general, suffers from fossilization and stagnation largely [because] the main creative forces behind films are often culturally and technically poorly equipped for the task of injecting this young yet already decrepit art form with the life-force it so direly needs” (62). His observations on music for film genres provide little beyond Fred Karlin’s excellent book *Listening to Movies* (Schirmer, 1994). A sound designer as well as composer, he includes a chapter on artful uses of film sound, though again, Michel Chion also outdid Meyers in *Audio-Vision* and other volumes on the subject. These overlaps are unfortunate, for Meyers’ work is crisp and nicely organized. One wonders what he would have accomplished had he been better informed on the existing literature.

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## Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa

Edited by James Goodwin. New York: G. K. Hall, 1994. \$50.00.

This informative anthology on Akira Kurosawa gathers together previously published material (reviews, essays, and interviews) and newly commissioned writings and translations from 40 critics, filmmakers, and Kurosawa scholars. Intended for specialists and general readers alike, it covers most of the 30 films that Kurosawa has directed in his distinguished 50-year career. The volume is divided into three main sections: “Film Artists on Kurosawa,” “Kurosawa on Kurosawa,” and “Film Critics on Kurosawa.” In his excellent introduction, James Goodwin not only synthesizes each selection in the volume but locates it in the history of Kurosawa criticism, Japanese film studies, or both. This is extremely useful, but it might have been even more helpful if Goodwin had provided a condensed overview of Kurosawa’s career in the first few pages of the introduction.

The first two sections establish the major themes of Kurosawa criticism: his bold visual style; his adaptations of Shakespearean and Russian classics; his debt to John Ford; his social and political concerns; his work in the