

Sculptural Dissonance: Hans Zimmer and the Composer as Engineer

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Abstract

Welcome to our new series Sculpting the Film Soundtrack, which brings you new perspectives on sound and filmmaking. As Guest Editor, we're honored and delighted to have Katherine Spring, Associate Professor of Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Classical Music, Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Film/Movies/Cinema



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Welcome to our new series **Sculpting the Film Soundtrack**, which brings you new perspectives on sound and filmmaking. As Guest Editor, we're honored and delighted to have **Katherine Spring**, Associate Professor of Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Spring is the author of an exciting and important new book ***Saying it With Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema***. Read it! You'll find an impeccably researched work that's the definition of how the history of film sound and media convergence ought to be written.

But before rushing back to the early days, stick around here on **SO!** for the first of our three installments in **Sculpting the Film Soundtrack**.

– **NV**

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It's been 35 years since film editor and sound designer **Walter Murch** used the sounds of whirring helicopter blades in place of an orchestral string section in *Apocalypse Now*, in essence blurring the boundary between two core components of the movie soundtrack: music and sound effects.

This blog series explores other ways in which filmmakers have treated the soundtrack as a holistic entity, one in which the traditional divisions between music, effects, and speech have been disrupted in the name of sculpting innovative sonic textures.

In three entries, **Benjamin Wright**, **Danijela Kulezic-Wilson**, and **Randolph Jordan** will examine the integrated soundtrack from a variety of perspectives, including technology, labor, aesthetic practice, theoretical frameworks, and suggest that the dissolution of the boundaries between soundtrack categories can prompt us to apprehend film sound in new ways. If, as Murch himself once said, "Listening to interestingly arranged sounds makes you hear differently," then the time is ripe for considering how and what we might hear across the softening edges of the film soundtrack.

– Guest Editor **Katherine Spring**

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Composing a sound world for *Man of Steel* (2013), Zack Snyder's recent Superman reboot, had Hans Zimmer thinking about telephone wires stretching across the plains of Clark Kent's boyhood home in Smallville. "What would that sound like," he said in an interview last year. "That wind making those telephone wires buzz – how could I write a piece of music out of that?" The answer, as it turned out, was not blowing in the wind, but sliding up and down the scale of a pedal steel

guitar, the twangy lap instruments of country music. In recording sessions, Zimmer instructed a group of pedal steel players to experiment with sustains, reverb, and pitches that, when mixed into the final track, accompany Superman leaping over tall buildings at a single bound.



<https://youtu.be/T6Djcg3wNY>

His work on *Man of Steel*, just one of his most recent films in a long and celebrated career, exemplifies his unique take on composing for cinema. “I would have been just as happy being a recording engineer as a composer,” remarked Zimmer last year in an interview to commemorate the release of a percussion library he created in collaboration with [Spitfire Audio](#), a British sample library developer. “Sometimes it’s very difficult to stop me from mangling sounds, engineering, and doing any of those things, and actually getting me to sit down and write the notes.” Dubbed the “HZ01 London Ensembles,” the library consists of a collection of percussion recordings featuring many of the same musicians who have performed for Zimmer’s film scores, playing everything from tamtams to taikos, buckets to bombos, timpani to anvils. According to Spitfire’s founders, the library recreates Zimmer’s approach to percussion recording by offering a “distillation of a decade’s worth of musical experimentation and innovation.”



https://youtu.be/me_8pWY2HpQ

In many ways, the collection is a reminder not just of the influence of Zimmer's work on contemporary film, television, and video game composers but also of his distinctive approach to film scoring, one that emphasizes sonic experimentation and innovation. Having spent the early part of his career as a synth programmer and keyboardist for new wave bands such as The Buggles and Ultravox, then as a protégé of English film composer Stanley Myers, Zimmer has cultivated a hybrid electronic-orchestral aesthetic that uses a range of analog and digital oscillators, filters, and amplifiers to twist and augment solo instrument samples into a synthesized whole.

<https://youtu.be/lwuy4hHO3YQ>

Zimmer played backup keyboards on "Video Killed the Radio Star."

In a very short time, Zimmer has become a dominant voice in contemporary film music with a sound that blends melody with dissonance and electronic minimalism with rock and roll percussion. His early Hollywood successes, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) and *Days of Thunder* (1990), combined catchy themes and electronic passages with propulsive rhythms, while his score for *Black Rain* (1989), which featured taiko drums, electronic percussion, and driving ostinatos, laid the groundwork for an altogether new kind of action film score, one that Zimmer refined over the next two decades on projects such as *The Rock* (1996), *Gladiator* (2000), and *The Pirates of the Caribbean* series.

What is especially intriguing about Zimmer's sound is the way in which he combines the traditional role of the composer, who fashions scores around distinct melodies (or "leitmotifs"), with that of the recording engineer, who focuses on sculpting sounds. Zimmer may not be the first person in the film business to experiment with synthesized tones and electronic arrangements – you'd have to credit Bebe and Louis Barron (*Forbidden Planet*, 1956), Vangelis (*Chariots of Fire*, 1981), Jerry Goldsmith (*Logan's Run*, 1976), and Giorgio Moroder (*Midnight Express*,

1981) for pushing that envelope – but he has turned modern film composing into an *engineering* art, something that few other film composers can claim.



Zimmer's studio

One thing that separates Zimmer's working method from that of other composers is that he does not confine himself to pen and paper, or even keyboard and computer monitor. Instead, he invites musicians to his studio or a sound stage for an impromptu jam session to find and hone the musical syntax of a project. Afterwards, he returns to his studio and uses the raw samples from the sessions to compose the rest of the score, in much the same way that a recording engineer creates the architecture of a sound mix.

"There is something about that collaborative process that happens in music all the time," Zimmer told an [interviewer](#) in 2010. "That thing that can only happen with eye contact and when people are in the same room and they start making music and they are fiercely dependent on each other. They cannot sound good without the other person's part."

Zimmer facilitates the social and aesthetic contours of these off-the-cuff performances and later sculpts the samples into the larger fabric of a score. In most cases, these partnerships have provided the equivalent of a pop hook to much of Zimmer's output: [Lebo M's opening vocal in *The Lion King* \(1994\)](#), [Johnny Marr's reverb-heavy guitar licks in *Inception*](#), [Lisa Gerrard's ethereal vocals in *Gladiator*](#) and *Black Hawk Down* (2002), and the recent contributions of the so-called "Magnificent Six" musicians to *The Amazing Spider Man 2* (2014).



<https://youtu.be/eSUBzoCdGDE>

The melodic hooks are simple but infectious – even Zimmer admits he writes “stupidly simple music” that can often be played with one finger on the piano. But what matters most are the colors that frame those notes and the performances that imbue those simple melodies with a personality. Zimmer’s work on Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight* trilogy revolves around a deceptively simple rising two-note motif that often signifies the presence of the caped crusader, but the pounding taiko hits and bleeding brass figures that surround it do as much to conjure up images of Gotham City as cinematographer Wally Pfister’s neo-noir photography. The heroic aspects of the Batman character are muted in Zimmer’s score except for the presence of the expansive brass figures and taiko hits, which reach an operatic crescendo in the [finale](#), where the image of Batman escaping into the blinding light of the city is accompanied by a grand statement of the two-note figure backed by a driving string ostinato. Throughout the series, a string ostinato and taikos set the pace for action sequences and hint at the presence of Batman who lies somewhere in the shadows of Gotham.

Zimmer’s expressive treatment of musical colors also characterizes his engineering practices, which are more commonly used in the recording industry. Music scholar Paul Théberge has [noted](#) that the recording engineer’s interest in an aesthetic of recorded musical “sound” led to an increased demand for control over the recording process, especially in the early days of multitrack rock recording where overdubbing created a separate, hierarchical space for solo instruments. Likewise for Zimmer, it’s not just about capturing individual sounds from an orchestra but also layering them into a synthesized product. Zimmer is also interested in experimenting with acoustic performances, pushing musicians to play their instruments in unconventional ways or playing his notes “the wrong way,” as he demonstrates here in the making of the Joker’s theme from *The Dark Knight*:

<https://youtu.be/r-L1RCtgoE>

The significance of the cooperative aspects of these musical performances and their treatment as musical “colors” to be modulated, tweaked, and polished rests on a paradoxical treatment of

sound. While he often finds his sound world among the wrong notes, mistakes, and impromptu performances of world musicians, Zimmer is also often criticized for removing traces of an original performance by obscuring it with synth drones and distortion. In some cases, like in *The Peacemaker* (1997), the orchestration is mushy and sounds overly processed. But in other cases, the trace of a solo performance can constitute a thematic motif in the same way that a melody serves to identify place, space, or character in classical film music. Compare, for instance, Danny Elfman's opening title theme for Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and Zimmer's opening title music for *The Dark Knight*. While Elfman creates a suite of themes around a central Batman motif, Zimmer builds a sparse sound world that introduces a sustained note on the electric cello that will eventually be identified with the Joker. It's the timbre of the cello, not its melody, that carries its identifying features.

To texture the sounds in *Man of Steel*, Zimmer also commissioned Chas Smith, a Los Angeles-based composer, performer, and exotic instrument designer to construct instruments from "junk" objects Smith found around the city that could be played with a bow or by hand while also functioning as metal art works. The highly abstract designs carry names that give some hint to their origins – "Bertoia 718" named after modern sculptor and furniture designer Harry Bertoia; "Copper Box" named for the copper rods that comprise its design; and "Tin Sheet" that, when prodded, sounds like futuristic thunderclaps.



<https://youtu.be/RSFMh0KKl9c>

Smith's performances of his exotic instruments are woven into the fabric of the score, providing it with a sort of musical sound design. Consider General Zod's suite of themes and motifs, titled "*Arcade*" on the 2-disc version of the soundtrack. The motif is built around a call-and-answer ostinato for strings and brass that is interrupted by Smith's sculptural dissonance. It's the sound of an otherworldly menace, organic but processed, sculpted into a conventional motif-driven sound world.

Zimmer remains a fixture in contemporary film music partly because, as music critic Jon Burlingame has [pointed out](#), he has a relentless desire to search for fresh approaches to a film's

musical landscape. This pursuit begins with his extracting of sounds and colors from live performances and electronically engineering them during the scoring process. Such heightened attention to sound texture and color motivated the creation of the Spitfire percussion library, but can only hint at the experimentation and improvisational nature that goes into Zimmer's work. In each of his film scores, the music tells a story that is tailored to the demands of the narrative, but the sounds reveal Zimmer's urge to manipulate sound samples until they are, in his own words, "polished like a diamond."



Ben Wright holds a Provost Postdoctoral Fellowship from the University of Southern California in the School of Cinematic Arts. In 2011, he received his Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture at Carleton University. His research focuses on the study of production cultures, especially exploring the industrial, social, and technological effects of labor structures within the American film industry. His work on production culture, film sound and music, and screen comedy has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. He is currently completing a manuscript on the history of contemporary sound production, titled *Hearing Hollywood: Art, Industry, and Labor in Hollywood Film Sound*.

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