

Auditory Ambivalence: Music in the Western from *High Noon* to *Brokeback Mountain*

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The most important film music builds a sense of continuity that unites the visual elements . . . music can be the cohesive force in the making of a movie.

(Tony Thomas, *Music for the Movies* 4–5)

THE MUSIC OF WESTERNS HAUNTS THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE. ONE NEED look no further than my seventy-five-year-old grandfather who, one day while speaking with me on the phone, began to sing (in its entirety) the theme song from *High Noon*—fifty years after viewing the film. The soundtracks of the genre are understood by many as “Americana” *par excellence*; these are the songs that seem to capture or forge the “traditional” sound of American culture. Film music scholar Tony Thomas would label these soundtracks successful: they sink into the audience subconsciously, are noninvasive, and they compliment the primary images of the film. Celebrated *avant garde* use of music in recent westerns such as *No Country for Old Men* (2008), however, leads one to scrutinize more carefully the history of sound in the western genre. Have the soundtracks always been used so conservatively? Or, before the innovations of the past several years, have they ever been used to challenge this “subconscious” role?

K. J. Donnelly writes in *The Spectre of Sound*: “Screen music is a controlling device, in that it wishes to influence behavior, shaping audience reaction to the film or television program in which it appears” (Donnelly 4). Film music has often been recognized with a degree of contempt. Because of its ability to vanish into the background, it raises

a great deal of mistrust among scholars, who are quick to label this as yet another opiate of the masses. Lannin and Caley note, “Like the drug, the audience won’t always notice a familiar tune until the product is completely ingested” (9).

As consumers, we may use recorded music to create our world, but the music is also configuring us . . . (Adorno’s) description of audiences as “marching in line” to music with a regular pulse implies that marching is not simply an activity, and marching music is not simply a reaction to military desires and needs, but that marching is a whole philosophy—and so is film music.

(Donnelly 175–76)

The audience, as Donnelly imagines it, is suspending individual will and succumbing to the cadences of the film. While it is true that film music is always already an ideological force, I would like to offer an alternative analysis that listens for breaks and disjunctures between the image and the music. Often these soundtracks work *against* the images on-screen to create an useful destabilization for the audience. So while I will not deny that film music has tremendous authority, nor that it does ultimately support the goals of a capitalist culture, I will assert a reimagining (or, more appropriately, rehearing) of what is too quickly discounted as sound systematically enforcing conservative “American values” to an unwitting audience.

In his work *Unsettling Scores*, Roger Hillman locates the difference between preexisting music and original music written for the particular film it accompanies. Hillman points to classical music and how, when utilized in film, it carries with it “national weight” that is sometimes “unsettling.” Analyzing Kubrick’s work, he recognizes an important moment: Kubrick’s use of Germanic music. This moment, he contends, provides a “historical dimension, not present in original scores, (that) reinforces music’s archaeological citing among the senses, its archaic aspect as a channel of perception” (Hillman 21). Hillman is important to my argument because this is exactly the type of moment that one can recognize within the American tradition itself: what it means to be a democratic “American” is believed to require internal dissent, a simple premise of absolute freedom (a premise that is, of course, never quite so easy to grasp in reality). In this context, we find soundtracks “rebell[ing]” against images. The western frequently creates a cinematic space in which the experience of vision and sound is

disjointed to mimic a certain schism in the American experience itself. The break that emerges between the soundtracks of many popular westerns and the images of recognizable “American characteristics” speaks directly to the impossibility of essentializing or harmonizing an “American identity.”

The genre of the western is an invaluable starting place for such a discussion. Much like German music’s nationalist implications in Kubrick’s work, westerns have long served to both reaffirm as well as challenge the audience’s concept of “America.” Generally speaking, westerns have offered a cinematic frontier, an imagined space in which to redefine American identity. These narratives frequently express an unsettled or unfinished “ideal”: in short, indecisiveness surrounding the decision of whether one should enforce laws or rebel against them (and the infinite gray spaces in between). Thematically, ambivalence has already been well recognized as a central focus of the films in question. Yet far less recognized is the necessary role of film music in shaping these ambivalent associations. Indeed, many years before the innovative silences of *No Country for Old Men*, westerns were creating the sounds of American identity, soundscapes as complicated as the images and ideas that they accompany.

This article will attempt, in a brief space, to trace the evolution of what I have labeled as “auditory ambivalence” in the western genre. “Auditory ambivalence” results from a fissure between the image on-screen (which has one set of associations for the spectator) and the sound that accompanies it (which already has or is in the process of creating a different set of associations); these “unsettled” moments evoke a response by the audience, a response of ambivalence within their own senses echoing the duplicitous nature of American identity. The typical capitalist conundrums within the diegesis of westerns (should I fight or get hitched? should I ride off into the sunset or settle into the cabin with the missus?) are further impressed upon the spectator by the cinematic form itself.

To begin this conversation, I consider the foundational works of director John Ford and how the music within his films creates identification between “traditional” images of American culture and the “traditional” sounds that accompany these images. Ford’s films are essential to an examination of sound in the western; as many scholars have recognized, sound complements Ford’s ideological goals in multiple ways; however, I am interested in moments in which sound, with

or without Ford's consent, refuses the very ideological groundwork it is assisting in building, therefore exceeding its own purpose. I will then look at the classic film *High Noon* (1952), analyzing how Tex Ritter's theme song "Do Not Forsake Me: the Ballad of *High Noon*" works to shape audience perceptions. Its enormous popularity (not to mention its place in my grandfather's heart) reveals a pivotal moment: a widespread critical and commercial focus on the sounds accompanying the imagined frontier. I will conclude with a discussion of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a contemporary western with a soundtrack that epitomizes the ambivalence discussed throughout. Its reinscription of music traditionally heard in westerns allows us to consider the flexibility of this phenomenon, the ways in which American identity continues to be reorchestrated today.

John Ford and a Ballad Interrupted

John Ford westerns frequently begin with sweeping shots of Monument Valley accompanied by grandiose medleys of the film's various songs. The gravitas of the *mise-en-scene* is given even greater scale and depth by symphonic swells of the soundtrack. Although Ford did not like excess music in cinema, sound (I would argue by its very nature) often eludes attempts at containing it. One must recognize that these films are, at times, guilty of reenforcing "tradition" by matching American folk songs to the imagined glory and honor of the frontier; consequently, the films seek to evoke a certain pathos for audiences as the spectator encounters John Wayne's hypermasculinity in action. I am interested, however, in the moments in which the excessiveness of scale taking place in Ford's films can be heard as internally disruptive.

The excessiveness that cannot (or will not) be entirely contained by Ford is symptomatic of an excessiveness that cannot be contained in the larger project of framing an "American identity." Kathryn Kalinak argues:

In the case of Ford's Westerns, music's rather general utopian promise is transformed, largely through song, into Ford's specific notion of the nineteenth-century American West, an idealized, mythic past that never actually existed. Songs both make that past real and create a nostalgia for it. (188)

Kalinak's work importantly links Ford's music to the formation of a "unified" American past; however, as Kalinak herself notes, there is much contradiction at play in Ford's films. Therefore, while the films do work on the level of reflecting (as well as constructing) American nostalgia, they simultaneously destabilize this identification. The final result is a soundtrack often at odds with itself, impossibly trying to sync emotional swells with regulated cadence. In truth, this type of conflicted soundtrack is inevitable, the only form capable of adequately expressing the vast and problematic symphony that is American culture.

Ford's film *Stagecoach* (1936) employs seventeen well-known American folk tunes to locate and assist the audience in knowing what kind of character is on-screen at any given moment (a technique which later helped the soundtrack win an Academy Award). The clearest example of this is the ominous Native American drumming that disrupts the harmonious medley at the opening of the film to remind us that the Native Americans will yet again be demonized in this narrative. The soundtrack is thus at times coded as foreign, further solidifying the Apache as exotic Other through various uses of stereotypical "Oriental" chord structures and lyrics that would be indecipherable to the non-Spanish speaker. While recognizing the use of music to reinforce harmful prejudices, as Kalinak has done, one must also seek disjointed moments in which the identification between image/sound is not quite as unified.

Stagecoach relies on ambivalence to create narrative tension. The film follows a motley crew of characters, all sharply different from one another, on a stagecoach bound for Lordsburg. The camera must negotiate between the seemingly endless horizons of Monument Valley and the claustrophobic interior of the stagecoach itself. The film's modus operandi is based on this divided representation between the compact domestic space of the coach in which they ride (literally a prison for John Wayne's character, Ringo) and the freedom of the vast landscape. Likewise, the characters are binaries of one another: a school marm and an ex-prostitute, a greedy banker and a law-abiding sheriff, an alcoholic doctor and a prudish whiskey salesman. The film's ideological mission, situating this diverse group of citizens in what will become a microcosm of America, is to navigate "the right path" for its audience to follow.

A further microcosm of this ambivalence appears in Hatfield, a character that begins the film as a scandalous gambler before becoming

enamored, platonically it would seem, with the married (to a dying soldier, no less) Mrs. Mallory. Although Hatfield can be read as a martyr by dying tragically at the close of the film, the majority of the film's narrative is not as definitive. In fact, much of what drives the story is a need to understand what motivates his sudden transformation. Is he going to be dishonorable and take advantage of Mallory's vulnerability? Is he anything more than the low-life gambler the audience is introduced to at the beginning of the film? Coded as a "Southern gentleman," the audience is led to ask: is it reckless hedonism or nobility Hatfield pursues?

Familiar Southern folk tunes are repeatedly linked to Hatfield. Signifying "the good ole'" South, these tunes cause a break in the audience's identification. One such tune, the famous anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic," is frequently problematized in the western (we also find this in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, which I will discuss at length later). What is the song being inscribed to: a gentleman or a con artist? As Hatfield becomes increasingly sycophantic towards Mrs. Mallory, the audience begins to grow weary of his act, doubting his sincerity. While the music, itself ubiquitous in American popular culture history, maintains a pathos of regal dignity, noble in its precise rhythms (marching feet) and through its associations with Old Glory and Main Street parades, the Hatfield character calls all of these familiar associations into question. Film music scholar Daniel Goldmark, in the introduction to *Beyond the Soundtrack*, notes:

In social or ideological terms, (we are) looking at film music not as a scarcely noticed background or an interpolated entertainment that sometimes delivers ideological messages while creating mood or atmosphere, but as an agent, a force, and an object *engaged in ongoing negotiations* with image, narrative, and context (emphasis mine).

(Goldmark 3)

With Hatfield, such negotiations are actively taking place. The music in *Stagecoach* does not result in a coherent identification for the spectator. Instead, the music disorients the audience members and forces them to address their own understanding of these "traditional tunes" from the American canon. The spectator ultimately experiences the same kind of rift within their own relationship to musical propaganda that exists among the characters inside the stagecoach. It is these

moments of “negotiation” that continually complicate our views on Ford’s soundtracks.

The epic proportions of Ford’s films, complimented by moments of extraordinary volume and dynamism in the soundtrack, occasionally create unclear identifications and moments of excess rather than the ideological containment Hollywood, and Ford himself, may have anticipated. Goldmark describes this phenomenon: “Like all representations (the soundtrack) exceeds its immediate purposes” (6). Copious amounts of film music begin to overlap, causing disjuncture and confusion. One common example in John Ford’s films is the moment of cacophony that occurs when the opening ballad, full of swooning and majestic strings, runs into the cool and efficient call of the bugle. As John Wayne’s cowboy is almost always caught between the duty to a good woman and the sheer joy of unrestricted vigilante behavior, there is a battle for supremacy within the soundtrack itself. The bugle cadence, the call of “law and order” in the Wild West, rings out to interrupt the opening medley in *Stagecoach* with associations to “duty”; rather than allowing the romantic harmony to fade off before initiating the cadence, the film lingers on a moment of chaotic sound, of jumbled rhythms and dissonance. One such example of this pattern is the opening sequence of *Rio Grande* (1950). There is a stirring ballad in synthesis with the stirring visuals of the frontier. This romantic bombast, however, is overrun by the stern bugle cadence. The tension lingers, the ballad and the bugle battling as the characters enter the fort. This extended overlap demonstrates the “auditory ambivalence” at work between the sounds of “vigilante” exuberance and the sounds of efficient “law and order” (a source of some ridicule in Ford’s unflattering depiction of the cavalry). The western frontier is not as contained as it may at first seem; it is a space of unrestrained din at constant odds with regulated rhythms, efforts to frame imagined freedom in the safety of 6/8 time.

In the 1950s, the tension between domestication and freedom became ever more pronounced as the political climate of ideological containment increased. There were growing capitalist demands on men to be both a competitive “cowboy” in the office and a loving role model in the home. Likewise, there was ambivalence in the representation of America’s rising stock pile of weapons, a militarism that was linked to masculine posturing but followed by claims that such sauntering was initiated only for the idealistic goal to achieve world harmony and safer

domestic realms.¹ Americans were asked to preserve the frontier by remaining aggressive in their pursuit of prosperity and world standing, but simultaneously they were asked to close up their picket fences and tend to their household duties. While this “unsettled” quality has long existed in America, the rise of consumption post-World War II and widespread middle-class wealth in the 1950s American landscape put the issue more directly into the visual/audible cultural arena.

“Buffalo Gals” and 1950s Suburban Listening

In his seminal work *Hearing Film*, Anahid Kassabian writes: “Identification processes through film music cannot be understood in a single way—not all scores offer similar paths to identifications” (2). He points to the multiple ways music can be employed in the cinema, including music that is “original” for the film and also music that is “previously familiar,” a “compiled score” with “affiliating identifications.” Kassabian’s dissection of film music is extremely helpful in recognizing how music functions with images on-screen, arguing that the cinematic medium exists “within a web of textuality that includes experiences of sound, music, and visuals that begins long before a specific film experience” (49). While Kassabian’s main goal is to chart a pattern that understands the “ideological containment” that occurs, these categories can also be used to analyze how the film *High Noon* exemplifies “auditory ambivalence” in the western genre.

“Do Not Forsake Me” or “The Ballad of *High Noon*,” as a theme song, is at the core of the film. It is the first thing we hear during the opening shots of two cowboys, relaxing in the prairie for a smoke. It functions most directly as a foreshadowing device, proclaiming in the lyrics that “I can’t be leavin’/Until I shoot Frank Miller dead.” Will, the sheriff played by Gary Cooper, is introduced as having to wait until the noon train to protect his town from the infamous Frank Miller, a criminal he sent away who has recently been released from prison. The song works as a *leitmotif*, a reminder that time is of the essence; its purpose is to trigger a reminder for the audience that there is limited time until Miller arrives (this is complimented by multiple shots of a ticking clock and several rhythmic interludes that echo this pulse, including a horse and church bells). As a narrative tool, the ballad is creating the kind of synthesis that many film critics recognize—the

anxiety of Will waiting is perfectly in-sync with the grinding, repetitive nature of the song.

Yet this popular reading neglects two factors that I will explicate further here: the *other* song that arises and the commercial aspect of the film as a marketing device. These two factors reveal an ambivalence that works on multiple layers, beyond the bluntness of the lyrics: "O to be torn 'twixt love and duty!/S'posin' I lose my fair-haired beauty!" Deborah Allison argues, in her "'Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song," that "The song appeals to our knowledge of other western movies and in doing so it encourages us to model our expectations of the film according to generic conventions." This film does depend upon audience familiarity; however, it is not confined within generic conventions but instead plays off of the tension within society at that moment between domesticity and freedom. After all, the story (as with so many westerns before it) rests upon this very tension: Will must choose between his beautiful new bride and his sense of duty to protect the town from Frank Miller.

The ambivalence appears, in Kassabian's terms, as a *quotation/allusion*. It is not overt by lyrics or by deliberate placement in the narrative and yet the association lingers below the surface. "Buffalo Gals, Won't you Come Out Tonight?" is a "traditional" piece of Americana (already disruptive because of its roots as a minstrel song performed by those in black face). The tune first appears in *High Noon* at the saloon; Will has come to request help but is denied. A number of citizens tell him to forget about duty and leave with his wife "before it's too late." It is this decision to either leave to the safety of a stable marriage or to stay and fight (individualistic capitalism) that is at its height at the moment the song is heard. The reason this piece of Americana is significant is due to its association with the film that made it famous in the recent cinematic past: Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In this film, "Buffalo Gals" is used as a *leitmotif* for the relationship between George Bailey (Stewart) and Mary Bailey (Donna Reed). The film can be read as satisfying, a man discovering the beauty of staying home with his family, or as dissatisfying: George is forced to settle down and take care of his family, unable to fulfill his life-long ambition of "seeing the world." The song, repeated throughout Capra's film, signals a certain anxiety: should we feel sympathy for George having to give up his dreams or feel warm and fuzzy at his burgeoning romance? As *High*

Noon was released in 1952, just six years after the release of *It's a Wonderful Life*, "Buffalo Gals" triggers for the audience an association with the ambivalence of Capra's work. The allusion can serve as a reminder to the audience of the central similarity between the protagonists of the two films: brave men who must choose between staying with their loved ones or heading off into the sunset.

Yet the break between music and image might also be read in a different context, one that is born less from links to the recent Hollywood past and more from the cinematic medium itself. More specifically, here one can begin to investigate seriously the result of a film's marketing campaign (*High Noon*'s campaign being one of the first in film history to utilize the soundtrack as a major marketing tool). Films such as *High Noon* thus reflect ambivalence in the very hermeneutics of their consumption. With such a strong focus on selling the soundtrack, *High Noon* is emblematic of the drudgery of suburban consumption its listening spectators were actively engaged in inside and outside the walls of the cinema. Writing in 1957, Roger Manvell and John Huntley's *Technique of Film Music* challenged what they saw as the "improper" usage of sound in film. They write: "To be used successfully, the tunes should not be too fragmented or they merely annoy" (144). The repetition of Tex Ritter singing the theme, over and over again, cannot help but become a bit tiresome for the listener. Pierce, one of the local criminals waiting for Miller, plays the ballad on his harmonica, agitating his companions and causing them to swat it from his hand and demand, "Why don't you put that thing away?" The audience may have a similar reaction to the film music itself. Yet the tune serves an essential purpose, beyond the anxiety about an impending gun fight: it mirrors the advertising campaign that saw the theme song played *ad nauseum* in society, targeting the consumer in such a way as to raise inevitable feelings of resistance, a need to break free from annoying repetitions.

Jeff Smith, a music historian, notes: "(United Artists) touted the *High Noon* campaign as one of the biggest ever, and it features many of the components that were commonly used in later promotions, such as multiple theme recordings and co-ordinated radio exploitation" (59–60). The song also won an Academy Award for Best Song, adding to its extraordinary exposure. This marketing frenzy, the first of its kind, speaks to a new type of musical experience. Robert Fink addresses this relationship to music in his book *Repeating Ourselves*, noting "how

repetition can be harnessed to create inauthentic desire" (140). The repetition of the theme in *High Noon* employs this strategy perfectly, intended to instill, in the audience, the desire to own their own personal copy of the soundtrack. This type of process spurred instant reaction, including outcry from music critics in the long tradition of Hans Keller and Theodore Adorno, who recognized an urgent need for higher quality, not solely commercial film music.

Yet, Fink writes, "implicit within extreme boredom is extreme danger, and thus extreme excitement" (5). As the song recycles itself in the film, the boredom it creates causes a reaction against it—a need to reach a (violent) climax. Designed for domesticated consumers, the song alerts us to our entrapment in the 1950s culture of consumption. Will the listener enjoy the repetition or seek a resolution, a freedom from its trance-like power over them? Will they continue to "wait" for fulfillment in Hollywood merchandise or will they desire something different, the end of the song? Perhaps with a new marketing system in place, and a regiment of catchy western soundtracks soon to be herded out, Adornians might claim that "auditory ambivalence" in the soundtrack from this point forward creates ambivalence to allow the illusion of agency in a populace becoming less like the "cowboy" and ever more like the "cow."

The Reinscription of American Country in *Brokeback Mountain*

I will close my discussion by turning to the phenomenon of "auditory ambivalence" in a contemporary western: Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). This film employs "traditional" country music against a maudlin original soundtrack in similar ways to the moments previously analyzed in the films of John Ford and in *High Noon*. This tension within the soundtrack directly places the suburban space in opposition to the "free" wilderness of the frontier. Beyond reimagining the signification of country music (which importantly the film does), the antagonistic sounds of this film offers the spectator an opportunity to question their own place in the dialectic of domesticity and freedom to roam.

A caveat must be inserted here: the aim of this final section is by no means to associate homosexual relationships with "wilderness," either

real or imagined. Rather, the intention is to include all relationships in the realm of the ambivalence I have been examining. As *Brokeback Mountain* allows for a re-charting of conservative notions surrounding the domestic sphere, it also asserts that this more inclusive sphere suffers from the same anguish as the relationships inspected in *High Noon* and *Stagecoach*. I would like to argue that this film is addressing themes that have long existed in the western, arguing (significantly) that characters and audiences of various sexual orientations experience these capitalist anxieties in similar ways.

Homosocial, if not overtly homosexual, bonds have always been essential to the genre of the western (and for its critics). Beginning with the early American texts that Leslie Fiedler analyzes in his *Love, Death, and the American Novel*, the imagined western frontier is a site of male companionship at odds with “traditional” marriage (Fiedler infamously uses Huck Finn and Jim as an illustration). Howard Hawks’s *Rio Bravo* (1950) explores these issues in a similar vein. Chance (Wayne), the rugged sheriff, protects the local jail, his own domestic space in the film. He enlists several male companions to assist with the job, gleefully abandoning the beautiful woman who awaits him in the hotel to camp out with them. And “camp” he does; while awaiting attack, the group begins a sing-along, complete with decorative guitars and brightly colored shirts. The music of *Rio Bravo* compliments the multiple innuendos, hinting provocatively at an all-male domestic space. Yet *Rio Bravo* ends, as many westerns do, with a refusal of this all-male sphere by allowing Chance to “get hitched.” *Brokeback Mountain*, in contrast, is not mere hyperbolic ambivalence to be diffused; the film instead attempts to reconfigure, and then broaden, the multiple sounds of American identity.

Focusing on the lives of Jack and Ennis, this film has a recurring musical theme that is hauntingly sparse. The camera slowly sweeps the bare and vast landscape as the theme reverberates. It offers Philip Glass-type minimalism, utilizing long, singular notes instead of the usual fast-paced melodies in the vein of John Williams that mark the commercial soundscape of the last several decades. From the opening scene forward, this melody comes to signal the uninhibited frontier. It gradually moves inward, into houses and urban locales, as the film progresses, utilized at moments when Jack and Ennis become full of longing for a reunion with the “freedom” of their mountain getaway. The theme, originally composed for the film, comes to signify romance

both pastoral and human. It is not a “narrative melody,” in that it does not follow traditional tension/release structure; instead, it is constructed of drawn out notes that are not seeking any familiar resolution (hence, the “uncontained” quality).

The theme is set in opposition to the music of the “traditional” domestic realm. The heterosexual relationships of the film each begin at country western bars with classic country tunes playing prominently in the background. The music evokes familiar scenes from American film history, the usual *twang* of the guitar being plucked, causing these men literally to dance and move in ways that conform to their surroundings and consequently to the audience expectations of classical Hollywood. Jack and Maureen initiate their courtship as a Loretta Lynn-type character sings and they dance (the camera also following conservative audience expectations, tracking the couple in slow motion). The life of Ennis and his wife Alma is accompanied by dissonant baby shrieks and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” played at a family picnic (see previous discussion of *Stagecoach*). Domesticity in *Brokeback Mountain* is thus clearly signified by “traditional” country music. The romantic theme, however, returns with a postcard from Jack to Ennis, setting off a romantic affair throughout the rest of the film.

There are two particularly interesting moments of “auditory ambivalence” within Lee’s work in which the notion of ambivalence is made manifest for the spectator by the excesses of the cinematic form. First, there is a montage that occurs half way through the film where it appears that Jack and Ennis have found a balance in their life between marriage and their secret encounters. When this balance seems to be found, the opposing sounds (“traditional” narrative music and the original “independent” theme for the film) begin to meld. The theme loses its sparseness and grows more complicated, adding fiddles and more narrative melodies onto its skeletal frame. The haunting, “untamed” melody begins to transform as the protagonists start to straddle the line between “settled” (presented as heterosexual marriage) and “free” (presented as a homosexual affair on the open range).

Another moment occurs later in the film when Jack drives his truck to see Ennis to discuss the latter’s divorce. The scene opens with Jack happily drumming the steering wheel as an upbeat country song lightly plays on the radio. After their confrontation in which Ennis insists that nothing dramatic should change in their relationship, Jack is seen driving back, crying, this time to the sound of a depressing

country song describing the agony of love lost. The music that is read earlier in the film as “traditional” has now been reinscribed upon a homosexual romance. The film therefore broadens the associations between sound and image, in direct reference to notions of romantic love, for an audience that was likely trained to associate “traditional” country music with the conservative ideology of true love existing solely between a man and a woman (indeed, the opening scenes of the film give one a crash course on how such associations are formed by filmmakers). Lee’s film proceeds to use music as a challenge to these narrow significations. Beyond the story of Jack and Ennis one sees enacted on-screen, musical associations also begin to “unsettle” older patterns of consumption.

Thus we can locate “auditory ambivalence” by scrutinizing the film’s internal conflict between image/sound and analyzing its consumption. Yet in these various interpretations the familiar notion of the Frankfurt School remains: ambivalence is not accidental but is a necessary function of capitalist ideology; capitalism as a self-regulating system requires the picket fence *and* the saloon, the contained marches of Sousa *and* the boundary-less grandeur of Copeland. In truth, the follower of the Frankfurt School would state, this indecision gives the capitalist subject the illusion of choice (in a reality that denies them any true subjectivity). Presenting the audience member with this binary, even in the less recognized sensual divide of sight and sound, is actually an extension of a much larger project that the binary does not disrupt but, it can be argued, ends up supporting. At last, in the darkened theatre, the audience member encounters these conflicting sensations and ideas from nothing more than the conditioned status of consumer. The final alignment of credits and soundtrack work to realign our senses as the lights brighten and the doors open, returning us to a false sense of control, allowing us to imagine that our own agency is still intact. Perhaps, if the sounds are effective enough, we will rush out and purchase a copy of the soundtrack. We were hopeless for a moment, delighting in the suspense as music and image echoed and challenged each other, but all is once again right with the sights and sounds of the world. One can conclude that this “auditory ambivalence” is therefore not combative of capitalism but merely another disguised support beam for an ever-existent ideology.

Brokeback Mountain, like *High Noon* and Ford’s films before it, highlights the dialectics of a capitalist culture caught (comfortably, it

would seem) between the stagnant domesticity of George Bailey and the freedom to be John Wayne, in a format that, consciously or not, reenacts this paralyzed state. Rather than neglect the genre of the western as simply synthesizing the tunes of Americana with a constructed vision of the Wild West, we must seek moments of disjuncture, moments of cacophony or defied expectations. By doing so, we will find yet another level at which these films create anxiety to keep us playing “cowboy” (in a world where there is increasingly less outside of passive consumption). This kind of critical engagement will assist us in rehearing the familiar tunes we hum for our grandchildren, to appreciate sounds that cannot be contained, the unsteady rhythms that define our frontiers, our films, our very lives.

Note

1. See also H. Bruce Franklin's *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination*.

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- High Noon*. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Stanley Kramer Productions, 1952.
- It's a Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra. Liberty Films, 1946.
- No Country for Old Men*. Dir. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. Paramount, 2007.
- Rio Bravo*. Dir. Howard Hawks. Armada Pictures, 1959.
- Rio Grande*. Dir. John Ford. Argosy Pictures, 1950.
- Stagecoach*. Dir. John Ford. Walter Wanger Productions, 1939.

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