Hearing Film

Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music

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At the Twilight’s Last Scoring

I am the street of your childhood,
I am the root of your ways,
I am the throbbing rhythm
in all that you long toward.
I am your mother’s gray hands
and your father’s worried mind,
and I am the light, wispy yarn
of your earliest dreams.

... I am the street of your childhood,
I am the root of your ways.
I gave you the watchful eyes,
by them shall you be known again,
If you meet someone with the same look,
You will know he is your friend.

—“Childhood’s Street (Barndommens gade),”
Tove Ditlevsen (1942) (Translation mine)
Since the late 1970s, one of the most important film score styles has been the heavy, Romantic symphonic score with thick instrumentation. The most important careers of the 1980s and 1990s, John Williams's and Danny Elfman's, were made almost exclusively on classical scores. Why has classical Hollywood scoring enjoyed such a resurgence? Is that resurgence organized around a particular ideological or subject position? If so, what position(s) and how?

In Settling the Score, Kathryn Kahanek argues that the classical film score as a formal structure has remained the dominant model since the 1930s. She argues that the classical Hollywood score is a series of procedures, and in this sense separates it from its musical idiom, late German symphonic Romanticism. She locates the particular defining features as the subservience of the score to the narrative and the principles Gorbsman calls "inaudibility" and "invisibility," according to which the music must never make itself obvious, whether through technological or specifically musical materials.

Caryl Flinn, however, defines the classical film score as a discursive field embedded in Romantic ideology, and so finds for it a different relationship to contemporary Hollywood. She notes that the background quality of the classical score has fallen by the wayside, giving way to an industry both enabled by and hungry for new rock product. But even contemporary film music, she argues, conditions passage into "idealized states and pasts, be this through the rock music of American Graffiti or in John Williams's neoclassical theme for Star Wars" (1992: 152).

What Flinn argues for nostalgia, however, also describes an almost obsessive relationship between Hollywood and nationalism. While film studies have grappled with issues of nationalism in genre criticism of westerns and war movies and in studies of first-, second-, and third-world national cinemas, very few works have drawn on recent critiques of "nationalism" and the category of the nation-state. U.S. nationalism is a defining feature of Hollywood film history, as seen in a long line of movies from Birth of a Nation (1915) to Mission to Mars (2000). And that nationalism continues to be played out, in large part, through the scores.

But where is nationalism located in music? The relationship of music and the nation-state has a long and elaborate history. It includes the rise of national styles in Europe in the 1500s, the time of the rise of the nation-state formation. These styles are often identified with specific genres—irrespective of the "nationality" of the individual composer—such as the Italian frottola and lauda, the French chanson, the German lied and quodlibet, the Spanish villancico, and the English Service and anthem (Grout and Palisca 1988: 248–59). It also includes musical discourses of patriotism (national anthems), the development of overtly nationalist art music movements (e.g., the late-nineteenth-century Russian nationalist composers Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Moussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov, known as "the Russian five" or the "mighty handful"), and the collection and setting of folk songs as art music (Bela Bartók in Hungary, Gomidas Vartabed in Armenia).

Although the category of the nation has been present throughout histories of the aesthetic, it has always been something of an absent presence in conventional histories of western art music: while musical styles are named by it, it is never examined as a category. In Grout and Palisca's History of Western Music (1988), for instance, nationalism appears repeatedly throughout the text, but the authors seem unable to settle on what kind of relationship or relationships it can have to music:

Musical Romanticism flourished especially in Germany, not only because the Romantic temper was congenial to German ways of thinking, but also because in that country national sentiment, being for a long time suppressed politically, had to find outlets in music and other forms of art. (p. 664)
To some extent Chopin's polonaises may also be regarded a national manifestation ... some of [them] blaze anew with the knightly and heroic spirit of his native land. (p. 687)

Verdi, as we saw, became a symbol for national unity, but this was for reasons other than the character of his operas. (p. 771)

]Verdi] believed wholeheartedly that each nation should cultivate the kind of music that was native to it. (p. 736)

The authors stumble over a series of possibilities (none of which they engage as the stuff of serious music history). Can nationalism be a formal feature of music, as the "Russian five" contended, and if so, can one nationalism be distinguished from another? Can it reside in the spirit of a land that can blaze in a polonaise, and if so, does it reside in the melody, or the performance, or the rhythm, or the instrumentation, or harmonic treatments, or some other features? Can it be a thematic feature whereby native music is cultivated into an art form (Bartók and Gomidas)? Or does it reside entirely in realms outside the music qua music, as Grout and Palisca suggest about Verdi (and as Stravinsky and Adorno, as quoted in chapter 1, said of all meaning in music)?

This confusion over if and how nationalism might operate musically—and over the social or political functions or effects of musical nationalism—has everything to do with the ongoing debates about meaning in music on the one hand, and about the discourses of nationalism on the other. The musical production of U.S. nationalism in contemporary film intertwines inseparably with the categories of race, gender, and sexuality. In the following section, I discuss three very different action-adventure films with three very different scores, all of which track identifications with a particular U.S. national subject.

The Hunt for Lethal Red Weapons in the Temple of October Doom 2

Different versions of U.S. American nationalism underpin Lethal Weapon 2, The Hunt for Red October, and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. Each organizes what it means to be American, as they uniformly call it, in terms of race and gender, but not identically. The Hunt for Red October was released in 1990 to great response on the part of spy-thriller fans. Tom Clancy's book made what a popular video guide book called an "edge-of-your-seat winner" (Martin and Porter 1992: 897) about a Lithuanian sub captain who defects with a new high-tech Soviet stealth sub and its crew. The audio track seems perfect for a spy film; it is overwhelmingly sneaky, in two senses. First, it sounds like a spy film, in that much of the music is short repeated chromatic figures (see example 4 below). Second, the music constantly edges in under the omnipresent ambient noise of the subs, beginning as a barely audible hum that lasts for long seconds before the musical cue seems to come from nowhere. This technique, called "sneaking," is central to classical Hollywood practice; it protects the score from being noticed. Because it uses extremely heavy ambient noise, because it blurs the distinction between sound and music, and because much of its music is very small repetitive figures, the overall sound of Red October is very thick and organized by an emphasis on sound over music.

The only melodic music in the film is the anthem of the Soviet Union, which appears again and again. It is sung through the opening titles, in an odd kind of pseudo—Soviet Army Chorus style that includes female voices and symphonic orchestration. When Ramius (Sean Connery), who importantly is Lithuanian rather than Russian, informs his crew that their mission is to sneak into U.S. waters, they break out singing. In fact, it is precisely this moment of singing that gives them away to the U.S. sub—
Example 4

*The Hunt for Red October*: Submarine ostinato

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Brass & Choir} \\
\text{\ding{41}} = 86
\end{align*}
\]

Moreover, the film’s dialogue keeps returning to music in strange ways. When Ramius tells the crew that they are headed for American waters, he says, “We will pass through the American patrols, pass their sonar nets, and lay off their largest city and listen to their rock ’n’ roll while we conduct missile drills.” When the captain of the Dallas wants to express how careless the Red October is being, he says, “They’re moving at close to thirty knots; at that speed, they could run over my daughter’s stereo and not hear it.”

So. Rock ’n’ roll is U.S. noise. Russians sing. And both narratively and musically, it is obvious who the real Americans really are. The first musical cue belongs to Ramius, during the sequence in which he kills the political commissar of the mission. The music invites identification at the moment of his radical separation from the USSR (see example 5 below). While the music is almost identical to the ostinato for the submarines in example 4, the difference here is that the music expresses Ramius’s subjective state.

Example 5

*The Hunt for Red October*:

Ramius kills the political commissar
The next cue is organized around Jack Ryan (Alec Baldwin), who
a variety of filmic devices have made clear is the hero from the
outset of the film. (For example, the entire opening sequence of the
film is devoted to Ryan in his home with his wife and child, Ryan
afraid of flying and on a transatlantic flight, and point-of-view
shooting of his arrival by limousine at the Pentagon.) On one oc-
casion later in the film, during a joint chiefs of staff meeting to de-
termine what to do about the Red October, the music (see example 6)
enters on a cut to Ryan thinking, and exits on the president’s
national security advisor saying, “You wish to add something to our
discussion, Dr. Ryan?” This is the moment at which Ryan’s identifi-
cation with Ramius takes over both Ryan and the film, and the
music draws them together in opposition to the quite different
musicality the film creates for Russianness.

To be vulgar, then: Americans are white and men. Jonesy comes
close to earning American status, but he fails on several counts. First,
his music listening practices separate him out from the crew as
weird, and quite possibly gay. As Philip Brett (1994) argues, musicality
has an intimate ideological and discursive connection with male
homosexuality. Not only do musicality and homosexuality both cir-
culate as deviances, but they are also, to some extent, stand-ins for
each other. While gay men (pre-Stonewall) used phrases such as
“Does he play in the orchestra?” as markers of gay identity, musi-
cality signifies feminization, “queerness,” homosexuality in every-
day boy locker-room parlance. According to Brett’s argument,
Jonesy’s musicality implies at least the possibility of homosexuality.
Second, the film’s score never supports his bid for symbolic citizen-
ship—of the roughly thirty musical cues throughout the film, not
one accompanies Jonesy directly. The score’s message is: pumped-
up patriotic anthem singing is old-fashioned, and real American
nationalism opens its very white arms to all the Ramiuses who are
smart enough and man enough to deserve the embrace.
Lethal Weapon 2 tells a slightly different story about race, nationalism, and masculinity. The South African consulate in Los Angeles is a front for all kinds of illegal activities; officers Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh (Danny Glover) must uncover the scheme and get the bad guys. The Eric Clapton cool jazz-rock sax-guitar score suggests a musical discourse that crosses racial lines. Unlike classical scores organized around one or more leitmotifs, but similar to the case of The Hunt for Red October, this score uses small varying figures of four notes to signify danger/suspense, as I discuss further below, and the seemingly unraced style of fusion—a combination of jazz and rock—for Riggs and Murtaugh. But over the course of the film—and, actually, over the course of the three films—it becomes clear that the Eric Clapton and David Sanborn licks are really Riggs’s and not Murtaugh’s. They enter with Riggs, they follow him around, they express what his character is experiencing, and so on. Even in the opening sequence, the music really belongs to Riggs. During the long chase sequence, there is no music until it enters on the cut to Gibson crawling out through the windshield of Murtaugh’s wife’s bashed-up car. As in Red October, the musical cues have the earmarks (and consequences) of a particular point-of-view, and it is Riggs’s.

Moreover, fusion signifies race, in a rather confused field. It is generally understood by aficionados to have begun in New York in 1969 with Miles Davis’s In a Silent Way and Bitches Brew (on which virtually every future fusion star played). Since then, it has been “whited” in a series of ways. First, many of its major players have been white: Josef Zawinul, John McLaughlin, Al DiMeola, and others. Second, it is defined in part by its considerable roots in rock ‘n’ roll, which by that time was quite monolithically white in both production and consumption. Finally, it is discursively produced in jazz history as inauthentic and mercenary; Len Lyons, in a jazz listener’s guide, says:

Fusion has been both lucrative and controversial in its short lifetime. According to the music’s many critics, its popularity and profits far exceed its aesthetic values, durability, or contribution to jazz’s developments. . . . the lure of fame and fortune has lured some promising serious musicians into wasting their talents in pursuing financial goals. (1980: 333)

In jazz tradition, these musical judgments are very often made with respect to white jazz musicians. So, in many ways, fusion signifies as a white jazz genre. On the other hand, it signifies as a jazz genre, not as a rock genre. Fusion holds a small place as a failed experiment in jazz history, but it is absent altogether from most rock histories. To the extent that it sounds “jazzy,” then, and to the extent that “jazz” still signifies as “black” music, fusion may well signify blackness or, closely enough, hipness, to an audience unfamiliar with jazz history and discourse.

Verbally, Lethal Weapon 2 is oddly preoccupied with nationalism. Nationality defines the bad guys here; once the film introduces the South African consul, it isn’t very surprising that he is running drugs, laundering money, and smuggling krugerrands. And since he and his fellow countrymen have diplomatic immunity, the only way to “get them” is to blow them sky high, thus earning this sequel the right to bear the Lethal Weapon brand.

Beyond this, there are two very telling moments where the film defines for us who gets to be American. When Riggs needs a cover to sneak into the consul’s office, Leo (Joe Pesci) and Murtaugh create a diversion by having Murtaugh apply for a visa to emigrate to South Africa. The official, of course, tries to dissuade Murtaugh, who gives a rousing speech about going to South Africa to help his brothers in their struggle for freedom. If one is black, in other words, one’s allegiances cross national boundaries. Simultaneously, Riggs gets caught breaking into the consul’s office
and identifies himself as an American. He says: "I'll make a deal with you, Arjun, or Aryan, or whatever the fuck your name is. You get the fuck out of my country, and I won't blow your head off." (The music throughout this scene has been marimba octaves, until Riggs attacks; his actions are accompanied by fusion guitar.) For Riggs to identify along racial lines, he would be required to side with the bad guys. But he can't; he's the hero. And anyway, why should he? He's American.

In all the ways that the music defines Riggs as (1) a hero, (2) the hero of the movie, and (3) the hero of the country, Murtaugh is excluded from those definitions. He can't be American as the film defines it because he's black. Beyond that, he can't, as Danny Glover has noted in interviews, be romantic, which often defines a hero. And the music isn't his, and the narrative isn't his. And he has commitments beyond the realm of justice—a family. In the opening chase scene, Murtaugh worries about destroying his wife's station wagon, but his concern is dismissed by Riggs and ridiculed in the station house. That sequence guarantees that we know right from the start who the real man is, and he isn't the one with the family; at least since Rebel Without a Cause, Hollywood has made sure perceivers know what to think about men who worry about what their wives will say. (In terms of the debates about family values in the 1992 presidential campaign, it is telling that Murphy Brown was a target of criticism while the Lethal Weapon movies weren't.) So, as in The Hunt for Red October, to the extent that men of color are included in the film, they are excluded from symbolic citizenship.

The connection to Rebel Without a Cause raises some interesting questions about the role of masculine sexuality in Lethal Weapon 2. Just as Jonesy marks the threat of homosexuality in The Hunt for Red October, so too does Leo mark that same threat in this film. And like Jonesy, Leo is marked as gay not directly, but indirectly by stereotypes of gay masculinity. The film shows his distance from Hollywood heterosexual masculinity in his obsession about cleanliness and order, in his constantly fluttering hands, in his continuous talking, and in his affected speech. But the film goes even further in defining the terms of its symbolic citizenship. After Riggs threatens to blow the consul's head off, he continues, "If you stay around, I'm gonna fuck your ass." The worst punishment Riggs can threaten, it seems, is that he will anally penetrate the consul. The equivalence—the exchangeability—established is between illicitly crossing national boundaries and crossing illicit sexual ones.2

Unlike Red October, then, Lethal Weapon 2 is not generous with its symbolic citizenship. Narratively, the film belongs to Riggs, who is the only cast member to occupy the "American" position, in spite of Mel Gibson's Australian accent. Musically, too, the film is his. During the long sequence that shows cops being killed, Riggs is in his beach trailer making love to the consular secretary. Small danger figures accompany the various deaths, while Riggs and the girl get source music—an oldies radio station. At first hearing, it may seem that the danger figures signify the South African villains, as a kind of stylistic leitmotiv similar to Riggs's fusion.

But I want to suggest that this oversimplifies the way the music signifies. The use of source music for Riggs's sex parallels the use of source music in other scenes in the movie(s): the themes to the Looney Tunes and the Three Stooges and early sixties rock 'n' roll all seem to express his subjectivity by accompanying major subjective moments, such as his contemplation of suicide, or sex with a new lover. The danger figures for the deaths of the cops, who noticeably and multiculturally include blacks and women, are scored for strings and marimbas, an instrument with a very distinctive sound. Various marimba patterns appear throughout, associated with the South African consul and his gang. But Riggs's
fusion sound also has marimbas—usually accompanying guitar and sax. That orchestration gives the film an overall sound; without it, the difference between the strings and the guitar-sax combo could be jarring. Moreover, the use of the marimbas for both Riggs and the South Africans creates an eerie sense of a threat from within (perhaps related to the diplomatic immunity of the consul’s staff).

The presence of the marimbas suggests that the deaths of the cops have some direct relationship to Riggs, that they are his issue and his responsibility to avenge. This distribution of music—fusion for Riggs, strings and marimbas for danger, and source music for Riggs’s “weak” moments—performs an overwhelming array of ideological work. It places Riggs firmly within the discourses of both hegemonic masculinity and Hollywood herodom, wherein he seems sensitive and loving, while his “self”—marked by his “own” music—is entirely located in action rather than emotion. It also places him within the discourse of American patriotism, because his self is defined in terms of his commitment to justice.

_Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom_ is the only one of these three films not overtly about Americanism in some way. Moving around Asia as if it were the size of New Jersey, Indy crashes a plane in China, sleds down the Himalayas in a life raft, and lands in an Indian jungle, in a sequence held together (to the extent that it is held together) by continuous music. Thereafter, the film revolves around barbarians in India who have revived a cult of human sacrifice. A predictable score would have included a lot of what Jerry Goldsmith called Hollywood ethnic-oriental music: fourths and gongs in China, snake charmer harmonic minors in India. After all, it seems reasonable to expect the John Williams classical style to do the classical thing where ethnicity is concerned. But it doesn’t.
There is very little ethnic scoring at all in the film, and most of what there is is source music. For instance, during the snakes-and-monkey-brains banquet in Pangkot Palace, there is music for the dancing girls to dance to. And during the heathen Kali rituals of sacrifice, there is chanting, focused on words without melody to speak of. But the dramatic scoring almost never has an "ethnic" sound, and when it does, it only lasts for a few phrases. In large part, the film is a Ben-Hur epic soundalike, which suggests that there is a style of music we might call spectacle or epic in its own right (see example 7). However this music is named, it has room for neither subjectivity nor geography; it only bothers to represent the film's broad comic action. The two-dimensional ethnic villains don't get a chance, a point on which the narrative and the score are in wholehearted agreement. And Willy, whose rendition of "Anything Goes" in Chinese opens the film, does not get another musical moment to herself. So, Indiana Jones, even more blatantly than Riggs and Ryan, earns the right to herodom and citizenship by virtue of gender and color.

In fact, it is interesting to note the oedipal trajectory of this film. As Sobchack (1986) and Clough (1992) have argued, the 1980s produced a spate of films in which children become their parents' parents. From Close Encounters of the Third Kind to the first Back to the Future, children do what their parents cannot, go where their parents cannot, and repair what their parents broke. Here, this fantasy of reversal is twisted; Indy, the father, saves Short Round and hundreds of enslaved Indian village children. But Short Round also saves Indy. Willy, who is about to be sacrificed to Kali-ma, begs and pleads with a drugged Indy, crying and screaming for her life. But only Short Round can break him out of his drug-induced trance—by yelling "Indy, I love you, you're my best friend, Indy"—and this only after escaping from a flock of child laborers in an action sequence that Indiana alone could match.

Musically, the extended sequence mainly uses source chanting, which at times becomes source scoring, as the crowds begin to chant/sing in four-part harmony with the sudden addition of women's voices. But at two moments, when Short Round is escaping from his shackles and when he approaches Indy, the full-blown symphonic dramatic scoring pulls no punches. Trumpets and french horns, supported by strings and timpani, carry the epic melody that accompanies Short Round's escape. The timpani become the drums beating a rhythm for the chanters, who have returned to their original genders. But when Shorty lands in front of Indy—crying out "Wake up, Dr. Jones, wake up!"—the horns return, then thin out by reducing in numbers. Then they audiomorph into high, keening violins that begin a short tremolo passage (a classical danger and suspense device), returning to a solo trumpet in time for Shorty's curative cry.

By juxtaposing the chanting to symphonic scoring, the score clearly divides "us" and "them." The pagan chanting hordes will allow their evil leader to tear out someone's heart as part of a ritual of sacrifice, while good Americans reserve their hearts for classical symphonic technique and young boys crying out "I love you."

Identification as Assimilation

Musically, these films reside resolutely within the classical Hollywood tradition, both in Kalinak's procedural sense and Flinn's nostalgic sense. The films I discussed in chapter 3 tend to proliferate possibilities of identification, often in part by giving two female characters comparable (though never equal) technical and narrative attention. I am suggesting here that Lethal Weapon 2, The Hunt for Red October, and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom appear to do the same with their casts, but the potential for alter-
native identification choices posed by the competing characters (Murtaugh, Leo, Jonesy, and Short Round) is ultimately neutralized. This is accomplished through all the ways film theory has articulated: through narrative, editing, and camera techniques. The ability for perceivers to shift positions within the fantasy scenarios offered by these films is carefully limited.

But music, too, is entirely imbricated in the relationship of characters to filmic positions of power. In the previous chapter I worked from films that do not simply follow classical Hollywood scoring procedures, arguing that the use of popular songs in scores invites perceivers to bring their own “music histories” into play with the film. Music editing procedures for popular songs also generally take different approaches than for classical scores, with less care taken to parallel visual continuity editing.

For example, to return to *Thelma and Louise* for a moment, in the sequence with “House of Hope,” the song is mixed (i.e., the volume is changed) according to classical procedures for dramatic scoring, but the editing is not in the same tradition. As a broad generality, classical cues are relatively short, whereas “House of Hope” lasts for about three full minutes, from when Louise and Thelma pull out of the driveway until just before they pull into the parking lot of the bar. It is anything but “inaudible”; its entrance is not “sneaked”; it exists in a simple fade—the volume gets lower and lower until the music disappears. In this sequence, it would be hard work not to notice “House of Hope.” What emerges in part through the mixing and more strongly through the editing is an extended moment of music that commands a relatively high degree of attention, and that is likely to be perceived as a quotation.

This particular textual profile, created by the postproduction technical decisions of editing and mixing, makes a wide field of identifications possible. In extreme contrast, the scoring of the short underwater sequences of the subs in *The Hunt for Red October* leaves relatively little room for mobile identification processes. They signify strongly within classical Hollywood tradition: the first ostinato quoted above, for example, clearly marks something in the realm of suspense or danger, predominantly because of its tight range (a perfect fourth), size (three chords), and chromaticism. But as a performed piece of music, its meaning becomes even clearer. There are still dozens of musical and technical features to consider. The orchestration is classical Hollywood symphonic, predominantly strings; the phrasing is legato; there is little echo; all the recording and mixing features suggest acoustic performance. This tiny figure is purebred classical Hollywood.

By this I do not mean to suggest that the procedures of classical Hollywood scoring and the Romantic symphonic idiom most closely associated with them regulate significance in some complete way. No semiotic system can completely control or guarantee the production of a particular meaning. Rather, the question of the difference between compiled and composed scores centers on how their different relationships to intertextuality and textual competences condition identification processes.

The music in *The Hunt for Red October* refers to Hollywood film music, with the exception of the Soviet anthem, which is used, much like Goldsmith’s fourths and gongs, for identification in the sense discussed in chapter 2. It signifies nationality and geography without an unwieldy concern for ethnomusicological accuracy. (For example, the military thematics of the film and the invocation of the Soviet Army Chorus could have precluded the possibility of women’s voices, as the choruses themselves did.) I argued empirically in chapter 1 that broad audiences are competent in Hollywood film music; that position is further supported by the music’s ubiquity in both film and television. (One would have to work hard *not* to acquire competence in it; for example, the theme
for *Jaws* that I discussed in chapter 2 developed a life of its own, becoming the sound of ironic danger. Such uses—quotations—both reinforce and undercut the semiotic system of classical Hollywood film music.) Film scores composed in that tradition, then, rely on a signification system designed for precisely the same uses to which the scores themselves will put it, and their perceivers only need competence in that one system.

*Thelma and Louise’s* score, however, requires multiple competences: in Hollywood film music, in country and western, in blues, and in rock. Some of these musics are subcultural practices that are mainly consumed by perceivers with particular competences, acquired inside one or more particular communities. Moreover, competences acquired in the same musics in different communities may lead to very different kinds of identifications. For instance, the associations of country and western listeners who grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, might make *Desert Hearts* a disorienting experience, while the associations of country and western listeners who began listening to it in gay bars in New York City might make the score seem perfectly natural or strange for women.

The *Lethal Weapon* films problematize this distinction in important ways. The music in *Lethal Weapon 2* is not really fusion in the sense that it would not stand up to listening on its own as an example of the genre. One of fusion’s most particular features is a virtuoso instrumental technique that would be inappropriate (because distracting) in a classical Hollywood score like this one. On the other hand, the music is unmistakably fusion in its instrumental, melodic, and textural procedures. Arguably, this score invites identifications as a classical Hollywood score, because the music signifies “urban,” “hip,” and “interracial,” rather than opening particularly onto specific perceivers’ histories. *Perceivers* is the word I have chosen to designate the theoretical placeholder for audience members; it cannot be reduced to either textuality or an extratextual “real.” While perceivers, as theoretical constructs, can never be the same as “real” audience members, they mark an important distinction from previous theoretical positions both because they are decidedly multiple and because they have ears.

Perceivers come with social histories—they bring gender, race, class, sexuality, and many other axes of identity to the foreground. Unlike the spectator of psychoanalytic film theory, they engage films, complete with visual, verbal, sound, and musical tracks, in a flow of conscious and unconscious operations. And their unconscious are not those of traditional psychoanalysis, organized around sexual difference conceived from the perspective of the penis-cum-phallus. Their unconscious are, rather, organized by the particular differences that strain the match between their subjectivities and the subject positions offered by dominant modes of textuality and narrativity. Perceivers—these theoretical entities produced in the writing of a hearing film critical practice—engage films in identification processes that reproduce, on a microcosmic level, their everyday processes of assimilation.

But if traditional psychoanalysis does not describe perceivers’ unconscious, who or what does? The epigraph of this chapter is an excerpt of a poem by Tove Ditlevsen (1918–1976), a Danish woman poet and novelist whose work centers on the subjective experiences of working-class girls and women.4 “Childhood’s Street” (“Barndommens Gade”) describes a process of subjectivity formation not quite the same as the one described by psychoanalysis, but with many similar principles. Subjectivity is formed in childhood—“I am the street of your childhood / I am the root of your ways”—as a drive to fulfill desire—“I am your throbbing rhythm / in everything you may desire.” Parents play a significant role in its formulation; aside from the “I” and the “you,” “your mother’s gray hands” and “your father’s worried mind” are the only phrases in which specific people appear.
The poem also makes clear that those formative experiences are neither simply painful nor simply comforting—

I hit you once to the ground
  to make your heart hard,
but I gently pulled you up again
  and dried the tears away

—and that identity as an experience of similarity (not sameness) is grounded in similar experiences—"If you meet someone with the same look / You will know he is your friend." In this sense, the poem roots its operation in the principles of assimilation. It suggests that people with similar experiences recognize each other and that these processes are both conscious—about knowing and knowledge—and unconscious—about modes of being and hardened hearts.

The "I" that governs the development of the poem's addressee marks the significant difference between psychoanalysis and the model of the poem. Psychoanalysis posits a subjectivity formed primarily in relation to heterosexual parents living together within a particular ideological formation of domesticity (Gelpi 1992), or at least in relation to the figures of those parents as they circulate generally in culture (television, schools, church, and so on). It therefore posits sexual difference as the inaugural difference. "Childhood's Street," however, posits a subjectivity formed in relation to a broad social realm, suggesting quite strongly that surviving difficult early experiences draws a common bond, differentiating subjects not primarily as men or not, but rather as watchful or not.

Perhaps most importantly, however, it suggests that watchful subjects recognize each other, but are not recognized generally by others. They appear, in other words, or perhaps behave as if they were not watchful. This is the governing principle of assimilation—that subjects behave as if they were not different from the idealized dominant subjectivity that organizes most of culture. And that behavior is not simply reducible to role-playing. As the poem suggests, subjectivities tune themselves to the roles they are asked—and choose—to play. In Althusserian terms, the act of answering a hail is not reducible to a function of either agency or desire.

Which brings us back to music more generally. Music has a particular relationship to processes of assimilation. As many have argued, music acts as a lubricant to identification processes, smoothing the transition into (often barely plausible) fictional worlds by washing perceivers in a "bath or gel of affect" (Gorbman 1987: 5). But this model only begins to describe the relations between perceivers and music, and it does not describe the relations between perceivers and popular songs.

More to the point, music facilitates perceivers in assimilating into one of the available subject positions of the film. In the case of films, like those in chapter 3, that do not limit those positions to the rigid classical one, the music proliferates possibilities by opening perception onto perceivers' own (socially conditioned) histories. In the case of more classical films, like Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, the score limits possibilities by narrowing access to perceivers' histories and focusing instead on their competence in assimilation.

To return to Lethal Weapon 2, then, it becomes clear that the identification processes likely to be engaged in by gay and black male perceivers will be significantly different, both because gay and black identities operate differently from each other and because the categories of race and sexuality operate differently within the film. Murtaugh provides an eminently accessible path of assimilation; through an initial identification with him, a perceiver can
be eased into a white male subject position, in part because of Murtaugh’s proximity to Riggs and in part because the score directs that kind of passage. In the opening sequence discussed previously, the scenario is wide open to identification with either Riggs or Murtaugh, but once the score enters as Riggs climbs out the window, the available positions narrow down. Assimilation can operate in this way, by metonymy. But the processes available through Leo are quite different. By making him a clown and stereotypically gay, the film makes three paths most likely: refusal to engage with the film on the grounds that it is insulting, a camp identification with Leo, and identification with the homophobic position—organized by Riggs’s and Murtaugh’s annoyance—that finds him funny. Assimilation can also operate in this way, by making disavowal attractive.

Both sets of possibilities depend, however, on the score’s resolute production of a privileged subject position. Where the score is less narrowly committed to one position, more mobile processes of identification are possible. Even in Dirty Dancing, the organization of the score around Baby and Johnny’s dancing facilitates movement between a working-class male white ethnic subject position and a middle-class white Jewish female one. As Thelma and Louise does for Thelma, Dirty Dancing speaks from Johnny’s perspective with increasing strength over the course of the film; as his subjective experiences accumulate screen time, the possibility of seeing the world of Kellerman’s Catskills resort from a working-class subject position becomes increasingly available. But that play of availability would be impossible if Johnny were scored the way Murtaugh is.

The final sequence of Dirty Dancing, however, makes clear another trajectory of assimilating identifications: they are never completely successful, and therefore always up for grabs. There is no reason for a white middle-class perceiver to find the joy and exuberance of the final sequence uncomfortable. Johnny—he of the beautiful and knowledgeable body—singles Baby out for her outstanding ability to practice good middle-class values—sticking to one’s principles, honesty, trustworthiness, and so on. And the music he brings has, of course, a hypnotic effect on everyone in the room, so that the guests at Kellerman’s forget their middle-class inhibitions, not only by beginning to dance, but even by dancing with some of the entertainment staff. The film makes it clear that the music made them do it, and a happy, nonclassed fantasy ending is enjoyed by all.

Or is it? For perceivers of any class who believe in the American dream, the ending of Dirty Dancing can seem uncomplicated and right. But for those who have difficulty fantasizing a happily-ever-after for Baby and Johnny, the film’s ending is more complicated, and that difficulty settles preferentially onto Ditlevsen’s watchful subjects. The problem is in the nature of any moment of narrative closure; what McClary argues for closure in tonal procedures—the cadence—is also true of closure in film narrative:

A significant factor that contributes to the violence of tonal procedures is that the actual reward—the cadence—can never be commensurate with the anticipation generated or the effort expended in achieving it. The cadence is, in fact, the most banal, most conventionalized cliché available within any given musical style. (1991: 127)

In this sense, not even the score can finally seal the arbitrariness of closure, because its own closure is equally arbitrary. The film is most at risk of losing perceivers engaged in assimilating identification processes at this moment, because the banality of closure makes them likely to call a halt to the process altogether and step outside again. But the cadence will in some way disappoint even
perceivers who are comfortably interpellated by the film, and it is in this sense that assimilation is never successful or complete, but always a continuous process.

The microcosmic process of assimilating identification that I have described here depends on and participates in the macroscopic level production of U.S. nationality by many, many layers of accumulated processes of assimilation. As many film and social historians have argued, film was an important part of immigrants' complex and ambivalent assimilation processes in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. I have argued, much more broadly, that assimilation is a necessary ongoing function for the constitution of the United States as a nation; that it operates in movie theaters (and many other cultural venues); and that film scores regularly perform its work. In the next chapter, I will turn again to scores that work according to a different logic, a logic of affiliation that does not track identifications quite so rigidly.