

The Contemporary Hollywood Film Soundtrack: Professional Practices and Sonic Styles Since the 1970s

Submitted by Amy Charlotte McGill to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, November 2008.

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, the soundtrack in Hollywood has come of age as a complex and sophisticated site of cinematic art. Greater combinations of sounds expressing a wider spectrum of tones, textures and volumes can be heard at the movies more than ever before, while behind the scenes, the number of personnel producing them has grown considerably. Moreover, this era has witnessed a proliferation of different artistic and professional approaches to sound. This thesis provides a detailed and wide-ranging picture of these developments and how they were ultimately affected by changes within the American film industry. Drawing on a range of accounts by contemporary sound practitioners and critics, the thesis explores sound production practices, focusing on the sound designer and composer, their creative choices, collaborative relationships - or “sound relations” - and the technologies they employ. The soundtrack is also examined in terms of “sonic style”: the ways in which sound effects, music and the voice function variously in the service of contemporary film narration and genre. It is argued that Hollywood sound production practices and styles have diversified to a high degree, particularly during the last three decades. Industrial realignments on the “New Hollywood” landscape in the 1970s and the integration of the independent and major sectors throughout the 1990s have introduced greater flexibility to mainstream filmmaking norms. These events have played key roles in the expansion of its different sonic styles and working practices in contemporary Hollywood. I take George Lucas and David Lynch, their respective sound design partners Ben Burtt and Alan Splet and composers John Williams and Angelo Badalamenti, and identify distinctions between their professional *modus operandi* and sonic styles to illustrate the growing diversification within the industry. Most importantly, these examples are used to demonstrate both the intricacy and variety that characterises the styles and crafts of the contemporary Hollywood soundtrack.

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