

## Scoring Digital Hollywood

**MUS 190S**  
**Spring 2023**  
**TuTh 5:15 – 6:30 PM**

Instructor: Cole Swanson (PhD Candidate)

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Office Hours: By Appointment

This course is an in-depth exploration of film music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with Hollywood scoring and soundtrack design as the primary field of focus. In addition to analyzing and discussing cinematic texts that display the range of musical styles that have emerged in the past 20 years, we will study how technological developments have affected scoring and soundtrack practices, beginning with the vastly influential music of Hans Zimmer, whose body of work and signature style has defined an era of Hollywood film scoring. Units focus on contemporary methods of digital composition, postmodernism and aesthetic recycling, and the reinterpretation of classic cinematic genres. Our inquiry will investigate how Hollywood's "digital hegemony" has aided its proliferation as a cultural force, cinema's influence on contemporary society, and the importance of reading and interpreting media texts.

In tracing the emergence of digital technology as a defining practice in Hollywood music, we will also consider the persistence of older audio and visual styles as both functional and representational components of contemporary cinema. Our study of contemporary films will benefit from comparison to stylistic representative films from earlier periods of Hollywood production. Our discussions will be stimulated and challenged by insights from music and film scholars, philosophers, critics, filmmakers, composers, and sound designers.

**Areas of Knowledge:** ALP   **Modes of Inquiry:** W, CCI

### Course Objectives

- 1) **Knowledge and Interpretation of Contemporary Film Music:** Students will learn about film scoring and soundtrack practices of contemporary Hollywood (2000 to the present). We will examine the artists and trends that have influenced these practices, focusing on the emergence of digital technologies, instances of aesthetic recycling, and the reconfiguration of existing tropes and genres. In this context we will explore how these topics relate to the creation and consumption of contemporary films. We will also develop the basic analytical tools necessary to discuss the components of film music, including the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound, traditional hierarchies of musical style, cinema's privileging of the voice, and the complexities of sound mixing.
- 2) **Critical Thinking and Reflection:** Students will formulate their own arguments regarding cinematic music and sound. Responses to assigned readings and mindful viewing of assigned films will inform their thinking, supplemented by individual research and exploration. Students

will share findings and thoughts with their colleagues through class discussion, participating in a collegial seminar atmosphere.

3) **Writing Skills and Intellectual Inquiry:** Students will strengthen their capacity for intellectual inquiry through focused writing assignments of varying length and purpose. Students will: respond and refer to scholarly writings; synthesize and summarize their analytical findings regarding cinematic scenes and sequences; and produce an original thesis grounded in individual research. The instructor will provide timely feedback on all writing assignments, which students will apply to their work throughout the semester. Class time will be devoted to discussing writing strategies, research methods, peer-review, and workshopping writing samples.

*Course Materials:* The films (or scenes from films) we discuss will be available on SAKAI, accessible via Duke's vast catalog of streaming services, or on Reserve at Lilly Library. All assigned readings will be posted to SAKAI.

*Prerequisites:* None! Advance knowledge and practice of music or film is **not** a requirement; this class is open to majors and minors, non-majors, performers and non-performers, etc. We will discuss essential concepts as necessary to facilitate class discussion.

### **Assessment and Expectations:**

Participation & Engagement  
 Reading Responses  
 Analytical Papers  
 Research Paper

25%  
 20%  
 25%  
 30%

***Participation & Engagement (25%):*** Attendance during class meetings is required and will be recorded in accordance with Trinity College Policies:

<https://trinity.duke.edu/undergraduate/academic-policies/class-attendance-and-missed-work.>

It is expected that any assigned readings or viewings will be completed before class in order to participate in class discussion and demonstrate your engagement with the material. You should be prepared to share your thoughts, ask meaningful questions, and respond to your colleagues with openness and curiosity. Your willingness to be mindful and present is ultimately more valuable than immediate mastery or understanding of the concepts we will discuss.

As part of your engagement, students will be asked to share specific scenes (assigned by the instructor in advance) from films on our syllabus to present to the rest of the class, highlighting notable features of the score, soundtrack, and sound design. Don't simply walk us through these scenes; connect these sonic features to the themes of the course and to the scholarly discourses and debates we encounter in our reading. Sharing scenes or musical excerpts in a concise and well-planned way will prepare you to present your research project at the end of the semester.

***Reading Responses (20%):*** Respond to assigned scholarly resources by summarizing and analyzing the author's arguments. Identify what you find convincing or unconvincing, asking questions as well as suggesting potential answers. Support your response with observations from

assigned viewings as well as those referred to in the readings. Practice citing and referring to scholarship in preparation for your own research. Responses (approx. 500 words) will be due on the date for which the reading is assigned:

- 1) James Lastra, “Film and the Wagnerian Aspiration: Thoughts on Sound Design and the History of the Senses” **(due 1/19)**
- 2) Sergi Casanelles, “Mixing as a Hyperorchestration Tool” **(due 2/7)**
- 3) Joshua Wucher, “Let’s Get Into Character”: Role-Playing in Quentin Tarantino’s Postmodern Sandbox” **(due 2/28)**
- 4) Kate McQuiston, “Some Assembly Required: Hybrid Scores in *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*” **(due 3/21)**

***Analytical Papers (25%)***: Two short (4-5 pages) essays discussing individual scenes. Analyze these examples as we have practiced throughout the semester: highlight notable features of the score, soundtrack, and sound design; orient your comments in relation to the artistic, technological, and cultural themes and we’ve explored in class; and compare what you perceive to other examples we’ve discussed. Supplement your analyses with additional research when appropriate, and be prepared to summarize your work in class discussion:

- 1) **Scene analysis:** A close analysis of an individual scene or sequence from one of the following films on our syllabus: *Batman Begins*, *Inception*, *Dunkirk*, *The Social Network*, *Gone Girl*, *Birdman*, *Moonlight*, *Eighth Grade*, *BlacKkKlansman*, and *Joker*. Provide an apparatus that shows your analytical work, consisting of a shot list that describes the visual frame and accompanying music and sound. Examples will be provided by the instructor, and class time will be dedicated to practicing this type of analysis together. **Due 2/23**
- 2) **Anachronism and Incongruity:** Discuss an example of film music (score or soundtrack) that is incongruous with the narrative or visual frame in some way: stylistically, historically, affectively, emotionally, etc. How does the use of this music affect your experience as a viewer? Is the incongruity of the music highlighted or obscured through techniques of mixing and sound design? Why do you think the filmmaker, composer, or sound designer is utilizing anachronistic or incongruous music in this film? **Due 3/28**

***Research Paper (30%)***: A case study on an original topic relating to cinematic scoring, soundtracks, and sound design. You will explore scholarly literature, film criticism, and primary sources (such as interviews or ‘making-of’ featurettes) in your research. Take our class meetings and discussions as inspiration, expanding the scope of the topics we explore before determining a central thesis. The final product should be approximately 10-12 pages, double-spaced. You will present your work in subsequent stages:

- 1) Research proposal (5%): Give a brief description of your topic, clearly and concisely explaining the issues you plan to explore. Provide a preliminary bibliography, including the media text(s) that will formulate the backbone of your study. You will

meet individually with me to discuss the proposal and ensure that the topic meets the expectations of the assignment. **Due 3/2**

- 2) First draft (5%): Submit an initial draft of your paper, which will be largely graded on completion and effort. You will receive timely feedback to help you craft the final versions of your paper, focusing on structure and clarity of argument. **Due 4/11**
- 3) Formal Presentation (5%): A brief (10-12 minute) presentation on your final paper topic to your colleagues. This is an exercise in concision: be selective in the scenes or recordings, resources, and information you wish to include. **Presentations will occur on last day of class and final exam date.**
- 4) Final draft (15%): Graded on implementation of instructor feedback, effectiveness of argument, proper academic style and formatting, attention to detail, and thoughtful consideration of the topics at hand. Formatting instructions and sample rubric will be given well ahead of time. **Due on final exam date, 5/1**

**Note:**

**Grading Scale:**

A+ = 96-100 / A = 93-97 / A- = 90-92  
 B+ = 87-90 / B = 84-86 / B- = 81-83  
 C+ = 78-80 / C = 75-77 / C- = 72-74  
 D+ = 69-71 / D = 66-68 / D- = 63-65  
 F = 0-62

With the consent of the instructor and your academic dean, you may register for grading on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U) basis in one course credit per semester or summer session.

**Academic Integrity:** All students are expected to adhere to the standards of the Duke University Academic Honor Code in all assignments and examination procedures. Suspected cases of plagiarism (including copying or quoting without attribution, submitting the same assignment as another student, and/or turning in another person's work as your own) will be reported to the Duke University Office of Conduct. Plagiarism can result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, and/or suspension from Duke University.

<https://registrar.duke.edu/university-bulletins/duke-community-standard>

**Content Advisory:** This course will occasionally engage with films that depict emotionally and intellectually challenging topics, including racism, misogyny, physical violence, and psychological trauma. Engagement with this content is reflective of the interest in the use of music and sound in these films, and the intellectual value of probing difficult topics in a compassionate way. I will flag graphic or intense content and will give ample warning ahead of time so that you may employ whatever self-care strategies are necessary, including avoiding specific scenes or films. I recognize that disengagement with the material may be an act of self-care to ensure reengagement later.

**Diversity & Inclusion:** This classroom is a space where we can engage empathetically and thoughtfully with intellectually challenging content and contribute our own thoughts to discourses surrounding these issues. All students have the right to live and study in an environment free of abuse, discrimination, and harassment. Our collective success depends on

the robust exchange of ideas—an exchange that is best when the rich diversity of our perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences flourishes. To achieve this exchange, it is essential that all members of the community feel secure and welcome, that the contributions of all individuals are respected, and that all voices are heard. All members of our community have a responsibility to uphold these values.

#### ***Academic & Wellness Resources:***

##### ***Thompson Writing Program (TWP) Writing Studio:***

At the Writing Studio, you can meet with highly educated writing consultants to discuss your writing concerns. Discussing your work-in-progress with a writing consultant will help you develop the awareness and skills to improve as a writer. Consultants help at any stage of the writing process – from brainstorming and researching to drafting, revising, and fine-tuning a final draft: <https://twp.duke.edu/about-writing-studio>

##### ***Accommodations, Accessibility, Assistance:***

The Student Disability Access Office (SDAO) works with each student individually to establish academic accommodations for the purpose of eliminating the environmental barriers impacting the student's equitable access to the campus facilities, programs and activities:

<https://access.duke.edu/students>

##### ***Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):***

CAPS offers many services to Duke undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, including brief individual and group counseling, couples counseling and more. CAPS staff also provide outreach to student groups, particularly programs supportive of at-risk populations, on a wide range of issues impacting them in various aspects of campus life. The CAPS staff includes psychologists, clinical social workers, and psychiatrists experienced in working with college-age adults. <http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/caps/about-us>

##### ***The Academic Resource Center (ARC):***

Learning is a process unique to every individual. The ARC works with students to create a comprehensive approach to learning, including peer tutoring, test prep, and ADHD/LD support: <https://arc.duke.edu/what-we-do>

## Class Schedule

### Week 1: 1/12

#### Introduction to Course and Each Other

### Week 2: 1/17 & 19

#### Introduction to Film Music Studies

**Read for 1/17:** Robynn J. Stilwell, "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic"

**Read for 1/19:** James Lastra, "Film and the Wagnerian Aspiration: Thoughts on Sound Design and the History of the Senses."

### Week 3: 1/24 & 1/26

#### "The Zimmer Effect"

**Watch:** *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005)

**Read:** Nicholas Reyland, "Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style: Affects, Effects, and Contexts of Two Recent Trends of Film Scoring"

**On 1/26:** Attend Zoom interview with composer Michael Abels (*Get Out, Us, Bad Education, Nope*)

### Week 4: 1/31 & 2/2

#### Composing in the Digital Age, pt. I

**Watch:** *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017)

**Read:** Frank Lehman, "Manufacturing the Epic Score: Hans Zimmer and the Sounds of Significance"; and excerpt from Stephan Eicke, *The Struggle Behind the Soundtrack: Inside the Discordant New World of Film Scoring*

### Week 5: 2/7 & 9

#### Composing in the Digital Age, pt. II

**Watch:** *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), *Gone Girl* (Fincher, 2014)

**Read:** Sergi Casannelles, "Mixing as a Hyperorchestration Tool"

### Week 6: 2/14 & 16

#### Composing in the Digital Age, pt. III: Responses to the Digital Hegemony

**Group Presentations, choosing from:** *Birdman* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014), *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018), *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019)

### Week 7: 2/21 & 2/23

#### Introduction to Postmodernism & Soundtrack Movies

**Watch:** scenes from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014)

**Read:** Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"

**Due 2/23:** Analytical Paper #1

## Week 8: 2/28 & 3/2

### Postmodernism in Practice, pt. I

**Watch:** *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

**Read:** Joshua Wucher, “Let’s Get Into Character”: Role-Playing in Quentin Tarantino’s Postmodern Sandbox”; and Ken Garner, “You’ve Heard This One Before: Quentin Tarantino’s Scoring Practices from *Kill Bill* to *Inglourious Basterds*”

**Due 3/2: Research project proposal**

## Week 9: 3/7 & 9

### Postmodernism in Practice, pt. II

**Watch:** *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006)

**Read:** Anna Backman Rogers, “The Historical Threshold: Crisis, Ritual and Liminality in Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*”; and Meghan Joyce Tozer, “Mixing Punk Rock, Classical, and New Sounds in Film Music—An Interview with Brian Reitzell”

## Spring Break: no class 3/14 & 16

## Week 10: 3/21 & 23

### Postmodernism in Practice, pt. III

**Watch:** *Moonrise Kingdom* (Wes Anderson, 2012)

**Read:** Kate McQuiston, “Some Assembly Required: Hybrid Scores in *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*”; and Arved Ashby, “Wes Anderson, Ironist and Auteur”

## Week 11: 3/28 & 30

### Reimagined Genres, pt. I: The Western

**Watch:** *No Country for Old Men* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 2007), *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016)

**Read:** Matthew McDonald, “Mountains, Music, and Murder: Scoring the American West in *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*”; and Lindsey Coleman’s interview with Carter Burwell

**Due 3/28: Analytical Paper #2**

## Week 12: 4/4 & 6

### Reimagined Genres, pt. II: Horror

**Watch:** *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) & *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019)

**Read:** Stan Link, “The Monster and the Music Box: Children and the Soundtrack of Horror”; and Ross Fenimore, “Voices that Lie Within: The Heard and Unheard in *Psycho*”

## Week 13: 4/11 & 13

### Reimagined Genres, pt. III: Science Fiction

**Watch:** *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016)

**Read:** Tijana Mamula, “Denis Villeneuve, Film Theorist; or, Cinema’s Arrival in a Multilingual World”; excerpt from William Whittington, *Sound Design & Science Fiction*

**Due 4/11: First draft of final paper**

**Week 15: 4/18**  
**Begin Student Presentations**

**Final Exam Date: 5/1, 2-5 pm**  
Research Paper Due  
Continue Student Presentations

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## Assigned Readings

Ashby, Arved. "Wes Anderson, Ironist and Auteur." In *Popular Music and the New Auteur: Visionary Filmmakers after MTV*. Edited by Arved Ashby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 180-201.

Backman Rogers, Anna. "The Historical Threshold: Crisis, Ritual and Liminality in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*." *Relief* 6, issue 1 (2012): 80-97.

Casanelles, Sergi. "Mixing as a Hyperorchestration Tool." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*. Edited by Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 43-56.

Coleman, Lindsay. "Carter Burwell Interview." In *Contemporary Film Music: Investigating Cinema Narratives and Composition*. Edited by Lindsay Coleman and Joakim Tillman (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2017): 87-96.

Eicke, Stephan. *The Struggle Behind the Soundtrack: Inside the Discordant New World of Film Scoring*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019.

Fenimore, Ross. "Voices that Lie Within: The Heard and Unheard in *Psycho*." In *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*. Edited by Neil Lerner (Routledge: New York, 2009): 80-97.

Garner, Ken. "You've Heard This One Before: Quentin Tarantino's Scoring Practices from *Kill Bill* to *Inglourious Basterds*." In *Popular Music and the New Auteur: Visionary Filmmakers after MTV*. Edited by Arved Ashby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 157-179.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *Studies in Culture: An Introductory Reader*. Edited by Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (London: Arnold, 1997), 192-205.

Joyce Tozer, Meghan. "Mixing Punk Rock, Classical, and New Sounds in Film Music—An Interview with Brian Reitzell." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*. Edited by Liz Green and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2016): 261-270.

Lastra, James. "Film and the Wagnerian Aspiration: Thoughts on Sound Design and the History of the Senses." In *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*. Edited by Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 123-137.

Lehman, Frank. "Manufacturing the Epic Score: Hans Zimmer and the Sounds of Significance." In *Epic Music in Film: Spectacular Listening*. Edited by Stephen C. Meyer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 27-55.

Link, Stan. "The Monster and the Music Box: Children and the Soundtrack of Horror." In *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*. Edited by Neil Lerner (Routledge: New York, 2009): 38-54.

McDonald, Matthew. "Mountains, Music, and Murder: Scoring the American West in *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*." In *Music in the Western: Notes from the Frontier*. Edited by Kathryn Kalinak (New York: Routledge, 2012): 214-227.

McQuiston, Kate. "Some Assembly Required: Hybrid Scores in *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*." In *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound* (Routledge: New York, 2017): 477-493.

Reyland, Nicholas. "Corporate Classicism and the Metaphysical Style: Affects, Effects, and Contexts of Two Recent Trends of Film Scoring." *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 9 vol.2 (2015): 115-130.

Stilwell, Robynn J. "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic." In *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*. Edited by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 184-202.

Whittington, William. *Sound Design and Science Fiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

Wucher, Joshua. "Let's Get Into Character": Role-Playing in Quentin Tarantino's Postmodern Sandbox." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no.6 (2015): 1287-1305.

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