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How the West Was Sung (review)

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REVIEWS

Books

How the West Was Sung

BY KATHRYN KALINAK

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2007

Kylah Magee

Film music is one of the most neglected components of film analysis. Several books and essays by authors such as Claudia Gorbman, Roy Pendergast, and Royal S. Brown point out the tendency in film theory and history to largely ignore the music in critical study. In her recent book, *How the West Was Sung*, Rhode Island College professor Kathryn Kalinak singularly identifies this fault within auteur theory. In her analysis, she makes a strong case for film music by applying auteur theory, continental philosophy, semiotics, and music

theory to the music in the westerns of auteur, John Ford. Ford's control and implementation of music and song characterizes the personal style and vision of his work and, according to Kalinak, "operate narratively, thematically, structurally, and ideologically" (3) thus providing a superior understanding of characters, historical setting, and narrative implications.

Kalinak is a professor of English and film studies and her passion and knowledge for music is originally demonstrated in her first book, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (1993), a wise read before forging ahead with *How the West Was Sung*, since her recent work places very little emphasis on the constructs of the classical Hollywood film score. Kalinak's current focus is song and how traditional American and folk music operate in Ford's westerns. However, knowledge of the classical Hollywood film score and its function in film is beneficial to understanding how Ford's songs work in much the same way.

Kalinak begins with the question of authorship. Fully aware of the difficulties within the theory itself, she clarifies her position immediately and outlines the definition of an auteur and John Ford's placement within the composition of the theory. Her discord is immediately clear: "Ignoring the score may be the least of traditional auteurism's problems, and it has long been put to rest in academic film studies as a viable approach to understanding meaning" (11). Films are grouped together by their relationship to one another, with *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956) in chapters by themselves. Beginning in Ford's early years, chapter 2 dives into his silent films, illustrating Ford's control of the music from the start of his career. Kalinak notes collaborative relationships between Ford and his composers, music supervisors,

and orchestrators. Chapter 3 covers *Stagecoach* and Kalinak's thesis begins to set in as she not only explains the significance of every song used in *Stagecoach*, but also suggests that Ford originated the sound that is now associated with the western genre.

Because of the similarities between the musical scores of *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), chapter 4 illustrates how the music in these two films is used to, "lend verisimilitude to the film's portrayal of the American West" (90). Composer Cyril J. Mockridge combines folk music with the format of the classical Hollywood score by introducing traditional American songs to the romantic arrangements of the typical orchestral film score, providing, "reassuring signs of the authenticity of the images" (77). This is especially significant considering Kalinak's earlier claim that Ford has formulated the quintessential sound for the western genre by using American folk music. The score is also used as a signifier of togetherness and community, and singles out characters that don't belong, or rather the Others. The philosophical definition of the Other is not completely clear but rather Kalinak explains how community and the outsider are illustrated in Ford's use of song. Ford's tendency in these two films is to provide the outsiders with individual pieces of music representative of their characters and, "song provides a moment when the outsider is given a voice and an opportunity to raise concerns that the films do not fully develop" (84).

The Searchers, commonly referred to as Ford's magnum opus, is definitely the most significant chapter for Kalinak as she states her surprise at how little attention has been given to the music in the historical analysis of the film. "The music has much to reveal, enriching an understanding of both the film and the culture in which it was produced" (159), and Kalinak states that characters and the driving force behind their decisions are revealed in the music. The role the music plays in the film helps illustrate Ethan Edwards's reasons for searching, and ultimately saving, his niece Debbie. Kalinak identifies the song "Lorena" as representative of Ethan's love for Debbie's mother Martha at the start of the film, and explains, "It is 'Lorena' that accompanies Ethan's lifting of a tense and terrified

Debbie into the air. 'Lorena' functions as a specific aural marker for Martha. Thus, I would argue that hearing 'Lorena' at this moment brings us back to the figure of Martha, who returns to the scene and supplies Ethan's motivation" (169). Music as signifier is carried heavily throughout this chapter, revealing hidden meanings in Ford's portrayal of race relations between Native Americans, Mexicans, and white Americans across the western frontier during this period. *The Searchers* has long been analyzed as a film about prejudice and hatred, and the music helps further the conversation regarding Ford's true implications in his portrayal of different race and ethnic backgrounds. It is no longer just a commentary on race; the music moves the discussion further by identifying the way in which music represents all characters of different backgrounds and their relationships to one another.

One problem in Kalinak's book begins in chapter 3 as she attempts to define what makes music American. It's not so much that Kalinak fails to define what constitutes a purely American sound in folk song. The problem comes from even attempting to define such a difficult genre of music. Folk and/or traditional music is different depending on what part of the world it comes from. America is known as the melting pot of the world and with that comes a melting pot of music from various cultures that influence American music. Four pages are spent attempting to define traditional American music but instrumentation, rhythm, style, and structure are never fully identified. Finally Kalinak concedes, stating, "Folk song, by its very nature, is a slippery entity characterized by a high degree of variation . . . depending on era, geographic location, and performance setting" (57). This postulation would be justified at the beginning of chapter 3 since her attempts early in the chapter to explain where and how American folk music began can cause some confusion, especially for music historians or theorists.

Kathryn Kalinak has proven her skills when critically analyzing film music in the essays, "Disturbing the Guests with this Racket: Music and Twin Peaks," focusing on the television show's orchestral score, and "Flashdance: The Dead End Kid," pointing out the film's fantastical use of song. The amount of research completed in *How the West Was*

Sung is evident while her writing style is always clear and conscientious. She has a way with words, illustrated in appealing background stories and anecdotes that convey the depth of her knowledge, and I thoroughly enjoy her sense of humor: "Are all prostitutes in Ford's westerns named after cities?" (114). In the end, Kalinak efficiently ascertains that auteur theorists have committed a major faux pas in omitting music from their theory and analysis. Kalinak's book offers a shrewd hypothesis, well organized and thoroughly examined, that brings a wealth of discovery into the formative study of film music.

Body Shots: Early Cinema's Incarnations

BY JONATHAN AUERBACH

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2007

Mia Ferm

While not a complete invalidation of his compatriots' work on early cinema, Jonathan Auerbach's new book, *Body Shots: Early Cinema's Incarnations*, presents a nuanced argument that deliberately sets itself apart from studies on modernity and audiences of the last two decades. In it, he wrestles with well-accepted

theories on early film, namely Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" model and the emergence of parallel editing in relation to narrative development. Having set the parameters with more or less nonnarrative films dating from the first decade of cinema, roughly 1893–1904, Auerbach particularizes concepts of attractions and modernity rather than overturning them.

He does this through concentrating on a curiously overlooked subject in the study of early cinema, specifically the presence of the human body on screen rather than those bodies—the supposed modern audience—that sit before it. "[L]ess concerned about the bodies in the seats than those moving in the frame" (3). Auerbach's focus may be seen as a possible thumbing at the work of Miriam Hansen on early cinema audiences. The idea, however, was inspired by something that film scholar and historian Linda Williams once proposed: "what is a body without a comprehensible story?" or "what remains before narrative arrives?" (2). Although in Auerbach's examination, he admittedly separates his focus from issues of gender and race, the questions posed by Williams remain intriguing, and require some wading through of the semantic and rhetoric employed by many early film historians. Auerbach asks, therefore, how we can discuss concepts like "continuity" and "shot" in films produced before such terminology existed. As a result, the role of the theorist often includes unpacking this excess baggage.

By positing the human body "as the basic building or 'primitive' block for plotting," (103) Auerbach's focus shifts toward the actual figures in the frame, how long we see them and how they interact with the space they inhabit; essentially, getting back to the images at hand rather than constructing a universal argument. The critique is most palpable in the introduction, where Auerbach accuses Gunning of evacuating the filmic image of form and content, similar, Auerbach contends, to what apparatus theorists did in the 1970s. In discussing the 1904 film *A Subject for the Rogue's Gallery*, Auerbach writes, "Gunning's emphasis on the camera's movement toward the criminal subject, rather than her own movement, tends to rob her of her agency" (5). By moving away from issues of reception and spectatorship (what he calls Gunning's eventual "aesthetic of