

**People's Democratic Republic of Algeria  
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research**

**University of Tlemcen**



**Faculty of Letters and Languages  
Department of English**

**Section of English**

**Soundscapes of Storytelling: A Comparative Study of  
Music and Emotion in *La La Land* (2016) , *Interstellar*  
(2014) , and *The Dark Knight* (2008)**

Dissertation submitted to the Department of English as a partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for Master's degree in Literature and Civilisation

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**Examiner**

**2024 - 2025**

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## Dedications

To my mother for her love, sacrifices and the support throughout my education.

To my father for his calm presence that taught me to be grounded even in stressful times.

To my sister for her lighthearted spirit that brings me joy every day.

To my brother, for always being there with quiet strength and encouragement when I needed it most.

To my friends for believing and supporting me in everything I do.

To Nesrine for her encouragement, willingness to listen to my endless reflections on music and film, and generous help with this research.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Faiza **SENOUCI**, for her valuable guidance, support, and constructive feedback throughout the development of this thesis. Her encouragement has greatly contributed to the successful completion of this research.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to the board of examiners, Dr. **Badra Menouar** and Prof. **Mohamed Kheladi**, for their time, insightful comments, and critical evaluation of my work.

## **Abstract**

This research explores the role of music, sound design, and soundscapes in shaping narrative and emotional experiences in film. Focusing on *La La Land* (2016), *Interstellar* (2014), and *The Dark Knight* (2008), the study analyzes how different genres employ musical and sonic elements to guide storytelling, develop characters, and influence audience perception. It highlights the impact of techniques such as silence, rhythm, leitmotifs, and musical contrast in creating psychological immersion and emotional resonance. The objective is to demonstrate that music and soundscapes are not secondary elements but fundamental storytelling tools that shape cinematic meaning and the viewer's emotional journey. This work will hopefully contribute to film and sound studies by offering a comparative insight into how sound operates as a narrative force across distinct cinematic worlds.

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# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

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Cinema has often been recognized as one of humanity's most impactful communication mediums. Moving images have expressed feelings, stories, and ideas across the barriers of language, culture, or politics, often in ways that travel the world without translation. An expression of the face, a single tear, and a slow moment of contemplation allows people around the globe to see the same emotions or ideas without ever exchanging a word. In this way, cinema has become a kind of emotional language that expresses borderless stories and, in some way, creates transnational dialogue. But what gives each story a fuller dimensionality, what raises it from motion to emotional experience is sound. Sound is not simply one more technical layer; sound is the rhythm of cinema. Sound does not just underpin the storytelling; it animates the whole experience. Ambient sounds, atmosphere, speech, silence, sound effects, combine to create a soundscape perceived by the viewer and directed by the filmmaker. The soundscape of the film is a tool to guide us emotionally and psychologically as we experience the film.

Among the components of soundscapes, music becomes the most visceral vehicle for human emotion. It is not only accompaniment, but it is also a narrator on its own. Music develops a psychological dimension, it creates emotional tone, and it enhances narrative progression. Music, through rhythm, harmony, and silence, can create subtext, develop tension, provide catharsis, and ultimately inform a viewer's understanding and feeling of a story. Film music becomes the emotional code, often guiding viewers more powerfully than the image itself.

This research focuses on the role of music to develop narrative and emotional depth in film, through a comparative analysis of three films with different genres: *La La Land* (musical/romantic drama), *Interstellar* (science fiction), and *The Dark Knight* (psychological thriller/action). Each film represents a unique approach to

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music as a storytelling component, all three films rely heavily on their musical architecture to construct narrative meaning and character complexity. There are many inquiries into music in film, but as a strictly comparative cross-genre analysis of how music drives narrative, develops character arcs, and develops psychological complexity, there is a significant lack in the scholarly framework. This gap calls for a more intensive interdisciplinary investigation into how music functions as a narrative force across different cinematic languages.

Considering these goals, the central research questions guiding this dissertation are as follows:

- How do music, silence, and sonic contrast in film soundscapes construct emotional and psychological immersion for the viewer?
- How do the differing musical styles and sound design techniques in *La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight* reflect and shape the films' storytelling and viewer interpretation?
- In what ways does music contribute to character development and the communication of internal worlds in *La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight*?

This research adopts an analytical comparative study to answer these questions, aiming to understand how music and sound design function in *La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight*, and how they shape storytelling, character development, and viewer emotion. This work is divided into two chapters; Chapter One provides a theoretical foundation, defining the concept of the film soundscape and examining its core components such as diegetic and non-diegetic sound, leitmotifs, musical contrast, and silence while emphasizing music's role in enhancing emotion, psychological manipulation, internal subjectivity, and physiological response. Chapter Two applies these concepts in practice, analyzing each of *La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight* to investigate how music

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and sound were employed to lead the narrative, construct meaning, develop characters, and immerse the audience in complex emotional experiences.

**Chapter One:**  
**Understanding Film**  
**Soundscapes: Foundations,**  
**Functions, and Emotional**  
**Impact**

# Chapter one: Understanding Film Soundscapes: Foundations, Functions, and Emotional Impact

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## 1.1. Introduction

Sound serves not only as an accompaniment but as an active storytelling device which builds emotional and psychological hooks. Through a focus on its elements, history and effects, the chapter outlines a theoretical ground for the study of film soundscapes. It begins with a definition of the soundscape in film, broken down into three distinct contributions: dialogue, sound effects and music. Diegetic sound (sound that comes from within the world of the film) and non-diegetic sound (sound that is not part of the film's world, like a musical score). The leitmotif, a type of recurring musical theme used with characters, ideas, or emotions, is explored in relation to narrative structure and spectator identification. A historical overview traces the evolution of how soundscapes have been crafted and perceived, from the silent era to the birth of orchestral scoring till digital sound.

The latter portion of this chapter focuses specifically on music's narrative and psychological functions, analyzing its capacity to heighten emotion, direct viewer attention, and manipulate subconscious responses. Drawing from film studies, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience, this section investigates how musical cues trigger affective and physiological reactions, effectively shaping the viewer's engagement with the cinematic text.

By dissecting these elements, this chapter provides a foundation for understanding sound not as a secondary feature but as an essential system of meaning-making in film.

## 1.2. Defining Soundscapes in Film

The term soundscape was first coined by the Canadian composer, educator, and ecologist R. Murray Schafer in the 1970s, when he was a leading figure in acoustic ecology. Schafer used the term to describe all the sound in a given

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environment natural or constructed and emphasized the importance of hearing and becoming attuned to our acoustic landscape. He writes in his influential book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*:

The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program, or an industrial environment, or a wilderness environment. We must learn to listen to the sounds around us as if they were music, and to recognize the patterns, textures, and tonalities that make up the acoustic fabric of our world (Schafer, 1977, p. 3).

For Schafer, soundscapes were not ambient noises but structured, expressive, and significant levels of sound that form the core of how human beings experience and engage the environment. For him, they were not fixed, static objects but dynamic systems with the power to shape cultural identity, environmental consciousness, and mood. He also argued:

We are losing our ability to hear the subtle, delicate sounds of the natural world. The modern soundscape is dominated by machines, and the more we surround ourselves with mechanical sound, the more disconnected we become from our acoustic heritage (Schafer, 1977, p. 4).

In the media context of film, the term soundscapes has been deployed to characterize the full acoustic environment of a world on film, encompassing not just music and dialogue but even ambient noise, textures, silences, and spatial markers. French film theorist Michel Chion underscores the significance of this term by explaining that sound gives shape and meaning to what we see on screen. In *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, he argues that sound does not merely accompany the image; instead, it interprets and guides it, making the visual experience feel more embodied and grounded in a physical space (Chion, 1994). Thus, in essence, a soundscape is the intentionally composed or naturally

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developed tapestry of sound that defines a place be it a forest, city street, or film set. It is as much a matter of what one hears as of how one hears. Whether intentionally composed, like in a movie, or experienced naturally, like in the wild, a soundscape communicates spatial, emotional, and cultural information through sound alone.

### 1.3. Components of a Film Soundscape

The film soundscape encompasses several key elements: dialogue, sound effects, ambiance, and music. They are all crucial to the development of the atmosphere, realism, and emotional content of the film and create a multi-sensory experience in concordance with the visual storyline.

#### 1.3.1. Dialogue

Dialogue is the most direct form of communication in cinema. It conveys explicit narrative information, it not only drives the plot forward by delivering essential details but also reveals character motivations and establishes the work of building relationships between characters and viewers.

Dialogue is also an instrument of psychological exploration, offering insight into characters thoughts, emotions, and complexities. Michel Chion argues that "dialogue often functions as the first key to understanding a film's world" (Chion, 1994, p. 29). By grounding the viewer in the world of language shared by the characters, dialogue ensures that the narrative is understandable, and the audience develops an emotional connection with the individuals on screen. If there is no dialogue, the audience would not be able to understand the internal as well as external conflict driving the narrative forward.

#### 1.3.2. Sound Effects

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Sound effects plays a pivotal role in creating a sense of reality in the film. These sounds, like footsteps or clothing rustling and explosions or tire squeal, enhance the realism of what is on screen. Such sounds bring to life the world of sight by providing auditory hints that play in sympathy with the on-screen movement. As David Sonnenschein contends, "sound effects serve as an essential tool in reinforcing the physical world, giving viewers a sensory immersion into the environment" (Sonnenschein, 2001, p. 23).

The sound effects act as sonic markers, verifying the spatial configurations and motions within the narrative. Control of the sound effects can be used to build an even greater sense of immediacy, as they are directly associated with the characters' actions, causing the world thus to be further real.

### **1.3.3. Ambient Noises**

Ambient noises open the sense of space, providing a broader aural context that carves out the spatial world wherein the characters reside. Whether a distant hum of city traffic, the sound of wind through the trees, or the ambient noise of a market square, ambient noises contribute considerably to the feeling of a movie. They not only set the location but the atmosphere of the scene, subconsciously influencing the impression of the space and the action that is happening in it.

Barry Truax observes that "ambient sounds create an emotional subtext that fills the sonic landscape and reflects the hidden layers of the scene" (Truax, 2012, p. 68). These noises tend to pass unnoticed in the foreground, but they enhance the viewing experience by complementing the mood and temporal progression of the narrative.

### **1.3.4. Music**

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Music is the most emotionally charged component of a film's soundscape. It has a special ability to overcome the limitations of language, directly influencing the viewer's emotions. In contrast to dialogue, which must be heard, or sound effects, which are focused on realism, music expresses meaning through tonal characteristics, rhythm, and harmonic structure. As Claudia Gorbman puts it, "music in film is the most emotionally immediate of all the sound elements, working directly on the audience's emotions" (Gorbman 1987, p. 12).

Music can alter an audience's sense of time, heighten emotional moments, and create a thematic coherence that binds disparate elements of a film together. It can strengthen the emotional stakes of a scene, create an atmosphere impossible to achieve through words or sound alone. The function of music in a soundscape is not so much to underscore the images but to enhance the emotional effect of the story, taking the viewer up and down the highs and lows of the narrative without the need for word or bodily gesture.

All these features ambient sound, dialogue, sound effects, and music work together to construct the sound experience of the movie. The physical and emotional realities of the movie are constructed using dialogue and sound effects, while ambient sound gives a sense of place, and music gives emphasis to the emotional and thematic weight of the story. Together, they create an integrated soundscape that enhances the quality of cinema.

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### 1.4. Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sound

In the world of film sound, the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is central to how the audience interprets the narrative and engages emotionally with the film. These categories define the source of the sound, its

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relationship to the world of the characters, and its role in shaping the viewer's perception of the story.

### **1.4.1. Diegetic Sound**

It is a sound that originates from within the narrative world. It includes any auditory element that the characters can hear, such as dialogue, footsteps, the sound of a door creaking, or music playing from an on-screen source, such as a radio or a musical instrument. Diegetic sounds help establish the physical reality of the film, providing the audience with sensory information that supports the visual world. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, “diegetic sound is part of the characters’ world and acts as a tool for grounding the story in its realistic context” (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, p. 272). This type of sound enhances the immersive quality of the film, reinforcing the spatial and emotional dimensions of the scenes.

The function of diegetic sound goes beyond mere realism; it is a way for filmmakers to shape the viewer’s perception of the environment and the events taking place. The sounds of footsteps, for example, can indicate the presence of a character or suggest a certain pace or urgency in the narrative. Similarly, the sounds of nature rainfall, birds chirping, or wind howling help to establish the mood and tone of a scene. These diegetic elements serve as a sonic backdrop that anchors the viewer within the world of the film, making it feel tangible and real.

### **1.4.2. Non-Diegetic Sound**

It exists outside the narrative world of the characters. It is not part of the physical environment of the film and is intended only for the audience. This includes music scores, voiceovers, and sound effects that are added in post-production for emotional or narrative purposes. As Chion argues, “non-diegetic sound functions as a tool for guiding the emotional response of the audience, providing a layer of meaning that is outside the characters’ awareness” (Chion, 1994, p. 89). Non-

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diegetic sound is crucial in shaping the emotional tone of the film, providing cues that influence how the viewer responds to the narrative.

A well-known example of non-diegetic sound is the musical score. A film's score can establish mood, build tension, or signal the emotional undercurrent of a scene, even though the characters themselves do not hear it. By using music in this way, filmmakers can control the emotional pacing of the film, eliciting specific reactions from the audience. Music can also serve a thematic purpose, linking different parts of the film together by recurring motifs or harmonies. Non-diegetic sound also encompasses voice-overs, which provide internal thoughts or commentary that the characters cannot hear but the audience can.

Sometimes, filmmakers blur the line between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, creating moments where the two overlap or transition. A sound that starts as diegetic such as the sound of a character playing a song on a piano might gradually shift into non-diegetic sound as the music becomes more expressive, symbolizing a character's emotional state or a shift in the narrative. This transition can heighten the emotional impact of a scene, creating a more profound connection between the viewer and the film's themes.

Understanding the role of diegetic and non-diegetic sound is essential to analyzing how filmmakers manipulate audience emotions and perceptions. By playing with these distinctions, filmmakers can craft intricate layers of meaning, using sound to control not just the realism of the film world but also the emotional journey of the viewer. The interplay between these two forms of sound is a powerful tool in creating a rich, immersive cinematic experience.

### **1.5. Leitmotif**

The leitmotif is a recurring musical theme used to represent certain characters, feelings, or ideas, and is a very effective instrument in the narrative

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format of film. Leitmotifs started as a tool in 19th-century opera and particularly in Richard Wagner's operas and were first used to define characters and key plot points using characteristic musical motifs (Gorbman, 1987). At the film level, this process produces a coherent narrative by projecting familiar themes that evolve throughout the story, thus adding to more emotional depth and character development (Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, 2010).

Leitmotifs are sound cues that enable the audience's subconscious mind to link setting and character. A theme in a predetermined major key may be altered later into a minor key to indicate loss, change, or conflict (Kalinak, 1992). Harmonic shift, tempo, and instrument enable the composers to react to character and thematic evolution. These dynamic applications of leitmotifs drive the music beyond accompaniment and make music an equal participant in the drama.

Besides facilitating character identification, leitmotifs enhance the soundtrack of a film. By coupling diegetic and non-diegetic sound, composers close distances between musical features and reality of narrative, continuing audience engagement (Winters, 2010). Leitmotifs are utilized to predict scenarios, declare mood states, or evoke memories, and they also help significantly to build audience perception as well as emotional reactions. Their range and expressiveness as an emotional instrument place them in the top ranks of the film composer's toolkit.

### **1.6. The Evolution of Film Soundscapes in Hollywood**

The role of soundscapes in film has undergone significant transformations over time, influenced by both technological advancements and creative developments. From the silent film era to the present day, the evolution of film sound has expanded the auditory experience of cinema and reshaped how narratives are constructed and received.

#### **1.6.1. The Silent Era: Music as the Primary Soundscape**

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Early films were without synchronized sound, and thus, they required external sources of sound to provide a complete experience for the audiences. Under this silent regime, music had a monopoly over the world of film sound. Since there were no speech, live pianists, live orchestras, or phonograph records were often used to provide the soundtrack. The music played an important part in carrying the emotional atmosphere of the film, compensating for the lack of synchronized speech and audio effects. Cooke (2008) believes that "music is used not just to evoke emotions but also to determine the rhythm and pacing of the story, making up for the absence of spoken dialogue" (p. 18).

The music used with silent films was usually designed to fit the mood of specific scenes. Musicians and composers would get musical ideas to fit into what helped invest the audience in their emotions, guiding the audience through the pacing of the plot. This process of using repeating musical themes to represent characters, emotions, or events predated the process of developing leitmotif techniques, which later became standard procedure in film scoring. These early soundscapes, technologically uncomplicated in their construction, were critical to the evolution of the audience's connection to the story. The evolution of film music during this period laid the groundwork for subsequent innovations in film sound.

### **1.6.2. The Introduction of Synchronized Sound: A New Narrative Tool**

The arrival of synchronized sound revolutionized the film soundscape, beginning with the landmark release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. This innovation introduced diegetic sound, a sound that exists within the film's world, such as dialogue and sound effects and marked the beginning of a new era in film sound. The introduction of synchronized dialogue, through sound on film technology, allowed filmmakers to pair verbal communication with visual storytelling, enriching the narrative in ways previously unimaginable. However, music continued to remain

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central in the soundtrack, often used to underscore emotional beats or to enhance moments of silence and contemplation.

The early sound films largely retained the continuous orchestral scores common in the silent era. However, by the 1930s, filmmakers and composers began to experiment with more complex ways of integrating diegetic sound, such as dialogue and sound effects, with non-diegetic sound, particularly music. This blending of elements allowed for a richer auditory experience, enabling soundtracks to evolve dynamically with the unfolding narrative. As Richard Dyer points out, “the introduction of synchronized sound significantly expanded the role of music, allowing it to operate in more complex ways than just accompanying the action” (Dyer 1992, p. 53). Music began to play a more integrated role in shaping both the emotional and psychological aspects of film, making it an indispensable narrative tool.

### **1.6.3. The Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s–1950s): The Birth of Orchestral Scoring**

The Golden Age of Hollywood marked a period of immense creativity and sophistication in the development of film soundscapes. This era saw the emergence of orchestral scoring as a dominant method of film composition. Pioneers such as Max Steiner, Bernard Herrmann, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold expanded the expressive possibilities of film music by incorporating large orchestral arrangements that deepened the psychological impact of the narrative (Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, 2010, p. 37). Their work was characterized by leitmotif techniques, where recurring musical themes were used to represent characters, emotions, and key narrative moments.

The use of orchestral scores helped to enhance dramatic tension, define character arcs, and guide the audience's emotional responses. For instance, Steiner's

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work in *King Kong* (1933) utilized orchestral music not only to emphasize the grandeur of the film's action sequences but also to underscore the emotional depth of the human-monster relationship. According to Claudia Gorbman, "the leitmotif, as a structural principle, provided composers with a way to introduce thematic continuity, making it easier for the audience to recognize and emotionally connect with specific characters or events" (Gorbman, 1987, p. 15).

Additionally, the Golden Age saw the blending of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, with filmmakers skillfully integrating on-screen music with orchestral scores. Music was not simply a tool for background emotional manipulation but became an integral narrative device that interacted with dialogue and sound effects, providing a multi-layered auditory experience.

### **1.6.4. The Rise of Sound Design and Experimental Techniques (1960s–1980s)**

As filmmakers gained more control over sound technology, the film soundscape underwent another significant transformation in the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of sound design as an artistic discipline allowed directors to experiment with new ways of incorporating sound into their films. With more advanced recording techniques and a growing interest in non-traditional forms of sound, the 1960s saw a shift toward more experimental and unconventional approaches to film sound.

Films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) demonstrated the potential of using classical music in new, innovative ways. Stanley Kubrick's decision to pair Richard Strauss's "Also sprach Zarathustra" with the film's opening sequence redefined the relationship between music and film imagery, highlighting the potential for music to elevate the philosophical themes of the story (Cooke, 2008). Additionally, *Star Wars* (1977), directed by George Lucas, merged groundbreaking sound design with John Williams' iconic orchestral score, creating an unforgettable auditory

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experience that complemented the film's visuals and expanded the emotional depth of its story.

This period also saw the introduction of electronic music and synthesized sounds, which broadened the sound landscape of films. The ability to manipulate electronic sounds allowed for a more abstract use of sound that could heighten the surreal and fantastical elements of a film, as seen in *Blade Runner* (1982). These technological advancements also introduced new forms of ambient sound, which played a critical role in establishing mood and atmosphere.

### **1.6.5. Digital Sound and the Blurring of Boundaries (1990s–Present)**

With the development of digital sound technology in the late 20th century, filmmakers achieved unprecedented control over soundscapes. The advent of Dolby Digital and surround sound technologies created more immersive and realistic auditory environments for audiences, allowing filmmakers to craft films with greater attention to detail in terms of sound placement, spatial dynamics, and emotional intensity. The digital revolution not only enabled clearer and more intricate mixes but also allowed for the integration of ambient noise directly into the score itself, blurring the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic sound.

This era also saw the rise of hybrid soundscapes, where directors and composers began to seamlessly integrate orchestral, electronic, and diegetic elements into a unified whole. The blending of these diverse sound elements has become a signature of modern filmmaking, enhancing narrative tone and emotional resonance. As Winters (2010) notes, “digital technologies have expanded the possibilities for sound design, enabling the creation of more layered and immersive soundscapes that support the storytelling process in complex ways” (p. 44). The ability to mix and match these different sonic elements allows for a more nuanced exploration of themes, character psychology, and narrative structure.

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Today, films continue to push the boundaries of what is possible in terms of sound design. The integration of surround sound systems and immersive audio formats like Dolby Atmos creates richer, more dynamic soundscapes, ensuring that the auditory experience of cinema remains just as innovative and evolving as its visual counterpart. The ongoing fusion of traditional orchestral scores with cutting-edge electronic music, sound design, and diegetic effects will continue to shape the future of film soundscapes.

### 1.7. Music's Role in Film Soundscapes

Music plays a major role in setting a film's emotional landscape. Music operates at a subconscious level, influencing spectators' perception of scenes, characters, and plot progression.

#### 1.7.1. Music and Its Role as an Emotional Enhancer

Music is often the most direct way to communicate emotion to the audience, it is a vital emotional element within soundscapes, it supports and amplifies the emotional impact of storytelling. It shapes the mood of scenes with rhythm and harmony. In *The Godfather (1972)*, Nino Rota's iconic theme, with its slow pace and sad strings, underscores the inevitability of the Corleone family's fate, even without dialogue. As film scholar Prendergast (1992) argues that music in film enhances the visual moment by providing a deeper emotional context that extends beyond the immediate framed sequence.

Emotions in film are not just accompanied by music but defined by it, in scenes where a character experiences a deep shift. Music tends to enhance the impact and makes it more poignant. A sorrowful image resonates more deeply by a haunting score, while a victorious scene is further elevated by an orchestral arrangement, adding dramatic intensity and lasting resonance.

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### 1.7.2. Psychological Manipulation Through Sound

Through the use of leitmotifs, rhythmic patterns, and harmonic progressions, music builds tension, suspense or calmness, bypassing the rational mind and engaging the emotional brain. The composer of the famous *Psycho* Bernard Herrmann (1960) said that the music in *Psycho* works as an echo of the psychological state that is not immediately visible in the characters actions and madness. That demonstrates how effective certain instruments can manipulate fear, like strings in this case.

Another example of psychological manipulation through music is the well known shark theme in *Jaws* (1975) composed by Jhon Williams, two note motif was enough to build tension and fear. Neumeier (2008) in his book *Film and Music: A History of the Relationship* explains the shark motif as a psychological marker of doom , increasing fear and unease in the audience. This use of rhythm and tempo targets the limbic system and works beneath the conscious awareness, evoking fear even before the shark appears on screen.

### 1.7.3. Internal Worlds and Subjective Space

Wierzbicki (2011) in *Film Music: A History of the Genre* claims that music often functions as a direct translation of the protagonist's unspoken thoughts and emotions. It serves as an extension of the character's internal psyche and representing their inner worlds, it also becomes as a narrative tool that reflect their journey and subconscious conflicts, this is noticeable in films where characters are unable to verbally express their feelings.

A strong example of music working as a reflection of a character feelings and thoughts in *The Tree of Life* (2011), it transitions between reflective themes to more discordant and chaotic scores, portraying the protagonist's existential questions and his search for meaning. The music here guides the viewer through the character's

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subjective experience. Rodgers (2016) observed that in a lot of cases music is the lens through which we understand the unspoken emotions of characters.

### **1.7.4. Affective Mapping Through Musical Identification**

In cinematic storytelling, music functions not merely as a background noise but as a powerful tool that leads the viewer through the characters' experiences, in addition to what visuals the audience see, music develops that bond between action and emotion. This process of mapping begins with the pairing of certain musical elements, such as leitmotifs, instrumentation, or harmonic progression with narrative cues. Claudia Gorbman emphasizes the ability of music in constructing a subconscious bond that supersedes language (Gorbman, 1987).

The use of leitmotifs in the process of mapping leads to recognizing recurring themes, which makes the viewer identify certain motifs with certain feelings or characters. Identification enhances meaning and deepens narrative interpretation, it is a necessary process that can be more powerful than visuals alone, especially in scenes where emotion is implied rather than shown.

### **1.7.5. Music and Character Development**

One of the most important aspects of good writing in film, is the character's development, it gives it meaning, purpose, and that everything that happened through the story had an effect. In filmmaking, music plays an essential role in showing progress, as characters change, their musical themes, harmonic progressions, and orchestrations tend to do the same in tandem with their own psychological growth. This association is not merely stylistic but reflects the psychological depth and emotional nuance of the characters. Through music, filmmakers can underline such transformation, leading the audience through a character's emotional experiences and making their personal growth both audible and tangible. In his analysis of film music, film scholar David Neumeier contends

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that “the relationship between sound and narrative is fundamentally reciprocal... music not only underscores a character’s arc but often defines the emotional contours of their journey” (Neumeyer, 2008, p. 92).

For example, in *Whiplash* (2014), the character of Andrew Neiman experiences a drastic psychological and emotional transformation as he evolves from a promising but inexperienced jazz drummer into a ruthless, and sometimes obsessive, artist. Composer Justin Hurwitz employs music to reveal Andrew's changing emotional landscape and to drive the intensity of his journey. As Andrew's obsession deepens, the score grows more turbulent, employing quicker tempos and dissonant harmonies to mirror his unraveling mental state.

### 1.7.6. The Power of Silence and Musical Contrast

Silence is as equally important as music in a sequence, its strategic placement and its contrast with music heightens a dramatic impact, making the sudden appearance of music striking. As Bordwell and Thompson (2013) state in *Film Art: An Introduction*, "Silence in film is an emotional tool that underscores the tension or catharsis that music, by its very presence, would otherwise diminish" (p. 284). Silence holds a unique emotional potency, especially in moments of intense psychological or deeply moving climax.

The viewer becomes more strongly engaged and aware of every visual and environmental sound when silence follows a sequence of music, and the score drops. A sudden sound or just a note can create tension and sometimes a shock that would be impossible to create if the music kept playing. The interplay between silence and sound can manipulate psychological tension and guides the audience response to the film.

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### 1.7.7. Neurological and Physiological Impact of Music

The impact of music on brain physiology is intense, as different frequencies and sound waves stimulate different parts of the brain and result in physical as well as emotional reactions. Music directly impacts the amygdala, the emotional and fear processing central processing unit, and can cause the release of dopamine, which results in feelings of pleasure or relief during climactic points. The response described has been examined comprehensively in several research works on music and its neurological impact. Daniel J. Levitin proclaims, "The brain's response to music is deeply embedded in our evolutionary history. Music triggers the same reward centers as food or sex, making it an inherently emotional experience" (Levitin, 2006, p. 191).

Frequencies are deliberately modulated to influence audience perception and cognitive engagement, low frequency sounds, such as found in horror movies, trigger feelings of discomfort, while higher frequencies, often used in action sequences evoke alertness and joy. Tomatis (2013) and Panksepp (2009) discuss that diverse frequencies have their effect on the brain's neurochemistry, creating emotional changes that are in accordance with visual. Music composition methods like binaural beats and harmonics allow for a precision in emotional experience through harmonization that makes soundscapes intense and rich and neurologically impactful.

### 1.8. Conclusion

Sound in cinema, is not merely the backdrop of the film, it is a language unto itself. It constructs atmosphere, defines space, and guides the viewer's emotional and psychological engagement with the narrative. When sound is used intentionally, it can take moving images and provide experiences. Every single creak, whisper, echo, and even silence, contributes in a purposeful way to the meaning. Sound shifts

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awareness, promotes interpretations, and connects the seen to the unseen. Music particularly thrives in meaning making when exploring ambiguous and conflicting landscapes. It speaks when the words are not adequate. It bypasses logic and races right to the emotional space. Music allows a glimpse into the complexities of a character, their unspoken joys or unheard trauma. It speaks the unspeakable in a story; it imbues a scene with emotional meaning, and it shapes moments into memories. The pulse of a heartbeat, the swell of thousands of violins, or the pause of silence before a note is struck, can communicate deeper meaning than a dozen pages of words. Through its frequencies, harmonies, motifs and repetitions, music does not simply accompany the film; it illuminates. Sound is not simply auditory: in cinema it is a multi-sensory event for the viewer experience. And, through this sensorial event, it has the potential to transform storytelling into an embodied experience, and in doing so, become memorable, enduring, and human.

**Chapter two: A Cross-  
Genre Analysis of Music  
and Emotion in *La La Land*,  
*Interstellar*, and *The Dark  
Knight*’**

## **2.1. Introduction**

*La La Land*, *Interstellar* and *The Dark Knight* are three different movies from different genres, a musical, science fiction and a thriller, yet they share an essential element: the centrality of music in shaping the story. Music serves as a driving force that reflects characters psychology and deepens emotional engagement.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how each piece of music in the three films contributes to the development of the plot, the characters arc, and the viewer interpretation. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of how music through melody, rhythm, silence, and sound design acts as a narrative engine. It also draws comparison between the three films and the ways each director and composer used music to construct meaning.

## **2.2. *La La Land* 2016: Bittersweet Melodies of Dreams**

### **2.2.1. Plot Overview and Context**

*La La Land* (2016), is a musical romantic drama directed by Damien Chazelle, that blends the glamour of the old Hollywood with the theme and style of the new Hollywood. It follows the story of Mia Dolan, an aspiring actress living in Los Angeles, juggling her day job at a film studio café with endless auditions and the constant uncertainty that comes with chasing a dream and Sebastian Wilder a pianist who is romantically attached to jazz, seeing it as a way of life not just music, wants to open his own jazz club so that he can keep that music genre alive. Their paths crossed each other many times but their relationship started when Mia confessed that she hates jazz, and as Sebastian was trying to culture her and change her mind, they fall in love and begin to support each other's dreams despite their differences.

Since both were driven dreamers, their relationship grew stronger, but also the challenges. Mia getting rejected in auditions while Sebastian joining a band for

financial stability, gradually drifting away from his original artistic vision. These actions and circumstances made them distant which led to the eventual breakup.

The film concludes with an epilogue set years later, showing Mia as a successful actress with a family of her own. When she unexpectedly encounters Sebastian performing at his jazz club, the film then presents a fantasy sequence imagining what could have been if their relationship got passed the hardships.

## **2.2.2. The Role of Diegetic Music in Character Development**

Diegetic music in *La La Land* led the story telling, Justin Hurwitz's compositions and the variety of music, from lyrics to instruments portrayed the characters development from the first sequence of the movie till the last minute.

### **2.2.2.1. Opening Sequence: Another Day of Sun**

The film opens with one shot choreography musical during traffic in Los Angeles freeway, the song is performed by unnamed dreamers, musicians, dancers and artists, stuck on their daily struggle and grind to make it in the city ambitions, showing the beauty and brutality of chasing a dream.

Musically, the piece is in B $\flat$  major with its vibrant harmonic structure that gives it that bright hopeful and optimistic vibe and evokes a sense of renewal and a brand new day to try again, exploring the tension between ambition and reality. For instruments, it combines big band brass, rhythmic clapping, Latin percussion and driving piano riffs, mixing classical jazz with pop. Layering was a perfect and necessary addition in the song, not only gave it depth but also a communal feel, a city of dreamers who share the same long road, but different dreams.

Lyrically, it tells the story of what people leave behind to chase a dream, each verse reflects a different hope and heartbreak.

"I left a small town with a suitcase in my hand..."

"And when they let you down, you'll get up off the ground..." (Hurwitz, Pasek, and Paul, 2016).

The lyrics describe the ambition and the sacrifice, foreshadowing the film's main theme, that love and dreams cannot always coexist. Mia and Sebastian do not appear in the opening, instead the camera focuses on them after the song ends, showing that their story and their struggle are among thousands in Los Angeles.

#### **2.2.2.2. Romantic Tension: A Lovely Night**

It takes place during Mia and Sebastian walk, leaving a party at the hills, it pictures the beauty of Los Angeles in the spring and the blossom of their relationship, sharing a flirtatious exchange as they walk together then it builds into a song and a dance that portrays their chemistry.

Musically, the piece is in F major, an elegant and warm note, it combines a swing rhythm, giving it that playful and bouncy vibe, that describe their relationship, while being attracted to each other, yet pretending not to be, mixing it with a kind of waltz, even if it is not literal waltz, but the romantic swaying and the smooth movements through the dancing evokes that genre. For instruments, it features a light jazz ensemble with piano, strings, brass and a soft percussion, the rhythm is gentle, to make the back and forth lyrics more clearly and up to beat. As Mia and Sebastian move in sync, the orchestra starts rising in volume and layering in richness, as if the music itself is falling in love with them.

The lyrics in this song form a conversation between them, describing the beauty of the setting, and how compatible they are, both attracted to each other but pretending not to be.

“What a waste of a lovely night...”

“Some other girl and guy / Would love this swirling sky...” (Hurwitz, Pasek, and Paul, 2016).

The song sets the ground for their first actual meaningful encounter, describing their personalities, how they are both hesitant to fall in love, distracted by their dreams, but also showing their chemistry and how perfectly in sync they are, letting the audience know the beginning of an affection without the need for a wordy confession.

### **2.2.2.3. Emotional Shifts: City of Stars**

First sung by Sebastian alone, then a duet with Mia, each version of "City of Stars" gives a different shift in their journey.

Sebastian solo version take place in Santa Monica Pier at night, by the edge of water. A quiet moment of hope and longing, wanting to make it in Los Angeles, asking if the city has anything to give him, a dream he wants to come true.

The duet version gives a deeper meaning and depth, now that they are in love, the song becomes about the uncertainty of their success, in terms of their relationship, their ambitions, and dreams.

Musically, the piece is in F# minor, a key that carries both sadness and sweetness, exactly how "City of Stars" makes you feel, the feeling of sadness with the sweet tone. For instruments, a soft piano in both versions, the melody is simple and calm, the tempo is slow and gentle, making it sound like a lullaby.

Lyrically, it describes the city of dreams, and the hope of ambition artists and musicians who moves to the city to achieve their goals, and they wait for the city of stars to give them what they want, and what they think they deserve, but also the uncertainty of that.

“City of stars / Are you shining just for me?”

“Is this the start of something wonderful and new? / Or one more dream that I cannot make true?” (Hurwitz, Pasek, and Paul, 2016).

Both performances of the same song show how the meaning of the song changes from solidarity to partnership. The use of in world music in these scenes allows us to see their emotional landscape through their shared creativity. It is not just what they sing, but when and how, that shows us who they are and how they are changing. It also creates a connection between the viewer and the characters, Sebastian first, later Mia joining, what they want and how they feel, like hearing someone's thoughts when no one else is around.

### **2.2.3. Thematic Motifs in Evolving Emotional Meaning (Mia and Sebastian Theme)**

Composed by Justin Hurwitz, like most of *La La Land* musical pieces, Mia and Sebastian theme is primarily performed on solo piano, though it is supported with strings and percussion in some versions. The music gives a delicate, ascending melody, the key often modulates depending on the mood and the emotional state of the characters. This theme functions as a musical anchor that evolves throughout the movie, offering a deep insight into their relationship. At first, the represents their first spark, but its meaning changes more deeply as the story unfolds.

The first time we hear the theme is when Sebastian plays it on the piano, in his job of playing Christmas songs, he drowned into the piano and composed one of the most passionate pieces in all the film. Playing it in a sad tone, capturing his longing, ambition and his love for jazz and keys, going against the rules to satisfy his artistic spirit of talking in musical notes. Mia hearing it gave it another interpretation, knowing Mia's hate or misunderstanding of jazz later, she went to the bar because of the piano playing, that gave her a sense of belonging, an ambitious actress trying to find her place in the world just as Sebastian. Their

theme showed how they are dreamers who found each other, hinting for a deep and long-lasting romance.

The sad piano solo then develops to a full orchestral arrangement in scenes like the rooftop dance, adding a cello and violin, giving it more warmth and richness, portraying the growth of their bond, and them reaching a romantic euphoria, thinking that love and career can coexist in a relationship, forgetting everything about their hardships and their doubts, that moment felt like it is never going to end, the music captured that exact feeling.

As any two people in love, Mia and Sebastian started facing challenges as their career ambitions pull them in different directions. The music shifts, depicting this new reality in which love and dreams are no longer harmonized, the fully orchestral arrangements are replaced with a simpler instrumentation, a slower rhythm with only a solo piano, taking longer pauses between notes, giving it a feeling of hesitation and uncertainty. The theme began to sound more fragile just like their relationship, their realization that they need to make sacrifices and that their dreams may be bigger than the love they have for each other.

The final scene gives two versions of the theme, a full orchestral including strings, brass, woodwinds, horns, trumpets, and piano, evoking a grandeur feeling. This version plays when scenes of a "what if" fantasy sequence starts playing, showing what could have been if they stayed with each other through those challenges, the love that could have been shared, the music portrays that in the use of several instruments, making the audience feel that if that was the ending it would have been the best ending for two people who managed to merge their dreams and love, fighting whatever comes in their way. But then the sad piano solo starts playing again, as of a coming back to reality, that their story is over.

Mia and Sebastian theme is a leitmotif that guided the narrative in the entire movie, a simple romantic melody captured the buildup of a relationship, the shifts of the characters, their success, and the downfall of their love.

#### **2.2.4. Epilogue As a Dialogue Free Narrative**

As a musical, La La Land relies on songs to drive its narrative. While most of the songs contain lyrics that express directly how the characters are feeling, Mia and Sebastian's theme is purely instrumental, giving the same impact as a narrative tool if not more than the lyrical songs. The epilogue delivers a powerful emotional climax, portraying how profound the narrative strength of Mia and Sebastian's theme. Without any dialogue, the theme led the end of the story, demonstrating how music can evoke emotions and delivers an unspoken message.

When Mia said to Sebastian that she hates jazz in the beginning of the movie, Sebastian tried to convince her how jazz is not just music, it is a story, he told her that jazz was first created because a group of people were staying together in a room but none of them spoke the other's language, which led them to play music as a communication tool, this story is not confirmed in any music history book , but Sebastian believes it, and it reveals later that he uses jazz to communicate.

In the final scene, when Sebastian saw Mia, he could not jump to her and say what he wanted to say, that their love was worth fighting for, that they needed to sacrifice other things instead of their connection, therefore, he played a note , than added another, giving a lot of space between every note expressing his regret and hesitation to tell this musical words to her, guiding the narrative without any word, only glances and music.

That sequence conveys the power of music in narrative immersion, how the audience can understand and feel certain emotions only relying on music, a piano solo with cinematic sequences expressed more emotions than any words can.

### 2.2.5. Jazz As a Philosophy

Jazz is a music genre of black American origin that started in the early 20s in New Orleans, it is a blend of blues and African rhythms, with instruments like piano, bass, saxophone, trumpets and drums. Jazz is known for swing rhythms, improvisation and complex harmonies, it is not only a genre, but it also expresses individuality and complex emotions, where each player can express and guide the group in a setting. That makes it the only and right genre for Damian Chazelle story to be fully felt and understood.

In *La La Land*, jazz is not only a music genre, but also a philosophy that the movie is built on, the freedom to break from the score, to play what one feels rather than what is actually written, the complexity of the plot, the bittersweet ending, all of these are jazz features and it portrays on the characters as well. Sebastian is a devoted jazz pianist, seeking authenticity and refusing commercial success. His obsession shapes his identity, not only in his artistic ambitions by refusing to compromise his musical ideals and wanting to save the "pure" jazz, but also in his relationship with Mia. Their love was not guaranteed or guided by anything, it was free and exploratory, their romance starts slowly, rises, weakens than eventually moving to a different direction, shifting like melodies in a large jazz composition.

The film does not work as a traditional romance, instead of offering a happy ending, it delivers a more emotional outcome, Mia and Sebastian do not end up together. Embracing a key feature of jazz that is dissonance, a lack of harmony between notes or chords that creates tension and the feeling that the sound is unresolved. The epilogue serves as the most compelling illustration of this aspect. The music becomes the language of the unspoken words, Sebastian feeling are portrayed in the melody he played. Emotionally and artistically, he played a wrong note to express his mourning and acceptance of the outcome of their relationship, which shows how the film does not only features jazz, but thinks like jazz.

Jazz in *La La Land* is not a background or "talking over it" music, like Mia believed, it is the soul of the film, the setting, the characters and the plot all centered on jazz, it conveys its features revealing the philosophical core of the story, that dreams are improvised, love is not permanent and beauty lies in dissonance.

### **2.3. *Interstellar* 2014: The Sound of Love Across Lightyears**

#### **2.3.1. Plot and Overview**

*Interstellar* (2014) is a science fiction film directed by Christopher Nolan, it is set in the year 2067 where earth is becoming inhabitable, due to dust storms that kills all the food crops. It follows Cooper, a former astronaut turned farmer, who has two kids, his little daughter Murph and his older son Tom. Cooper got offered to lead a mission to find another habitable planet to save humanity from the inevitable death of their planet, earth.

NASA, a secret government agency for space, found a mysterious portal, a wormhole near Saturn that leads to another galaxies, believing that other planets that are habitable for humans are beyond that wormhole. Cooper joins a team of astronauts, including Dr. Amelia Brand, on a mission to unexplored and unknown territories that orbit around a black hole called Gargantua. The team is faced with time dilation from the heavy gravitational pulls in the proximity of the black hole, where minutes on certain planets equal years on Earth. This difference in time creates a powerful emotional and narrative tension, especially in the bond between Cooper and his daughter Murph, who ages rapidly in his absence.

As complications arise during the mission, Cooper is forced to sacrifice himself by detaching from the spacecraft and falling into Gargantua. Inside the black hole, he enters a higher dimensional space called a tesseract, created by future humans where he can perceive and interact with time as a physical form. Cooper uses that to transfer quantum data to Murph in the past through a watch he gave her before leaving.

Murph, now a brilliant scientist, used that data to solve the gravitational equation that enables earth's population to escape the planet. Cooper is eventually rescued from the tesseract, reuniting with his daughter, now an elderly woman.

### **2.3.2. Zimmer's Unorthodox Scoring Process**

*Interstellar* music is scored by Hans Zimmer, a film composer who is known for his powerful, innovative, and emotional soundtracks that blends classical orchestration with experimental sound design. Zimmer has collaborated with Christopher Nolan in several movies, and although Nolan's works are complex stories with hidden messages, Zimmer consistently composes music that captures and delivers the core of each story.

#### **2.3.2.1 Writing Without Knowing the Plot**

Instead of a traditional script, Nolan provided Zimmer with a one page story about fatherhood, containing no direct connection to the plot of the film, that made Zimmer approach the composition for the film in a manner that challenged conventional norms of film music.

"If he were to write something, just write me a letter with just a metaphorical story that has nothing to do with the movie and he will never tell me what the movie is truly about, and I give him a day and I just write whatever came to me from reading the letter" (Hans Zimmer on The Jonathan Ross Show)

The creative synergy between Christopher Nolan and Hans Zimmer is profound, both are masters of their craft, Nolan for his ability to write a letter with a different story for Zimmer to deliver the exact same feeling Nolan is looking for is and achievement that speaks to their remarkable mutual understanding and artistic alignment.

#### **2.3.2.2. Scoring Based on the Father Child Relationship**

Despite being a science fiction film, *Interstellar* contains a deeper emotional narrative centered on the relationship between Cooper and his daughter Murph. Zimmer composed the music based on the short story he received, he stated that the score reflected his relationship with his son (Zimmer, Jonathan Ross Show), centering the composition on raw human emotion rather than the actual film's visual elements.

Matthew McConaughey's character, Cooper, is not a heroic figure, he is a flawed man driven by his selfish desire and ambition to leave a mark, although his intention is noble, to save humanity, but he is a bad father, leaving his little daughter for an unknown mission. The emotional rupture between them shapes the narrative arc, as Christopher Nolan said, I know where the heart of the movie is now (Zimmer, The Jonathan Ross Show)

Zimmer uses repetition and harmonic suspension to evoke unresolved tension, mirroring Murph's unresolved feelings and Cooper's internal conflict. Zimmer's music embodies the emotional undercurrent, he scores for heartache, the organ's echo, the slow building motifs, and the fragile melodies all speak to a father's failure and a child's pain.

### **2.3.3. Sound Design vs Music: Silence in space**

Richard King the sound designer and the director made a bold and scientifically accurate decision, space is silent. This decision was a narrative and emotional tool more than a technical correction. Unlike many space movies that dramatize with explosions and booming engines, *Interstellar* respects physics, sound cannot travel in the vacuum of space.

The absence of sound in certain scenes creates realism, tension, and focus. During sequences of spacewalks or spacecraft maneuvers, the only audible elements are the internal hums of the astronaut's suit or the ambient layers of

Zimmer's score. The contrast between the silence and rise of music create a sense of isolation, highlighting the vulnerability of human existence in the vast cosmos.

Zimmer uses ticking rhythms, droning organs, and swelling harmonics instead of traditional sound effects to evoke sensations of tension, detachment, and grandeur. The music here becomes the emotional voice where natural sound is absent. As Nolan noted “I wanted to approach the sound in a way that made the silence meaningful and let Zimmer's music carry the emotional reality in those moments.” (Nolan, *Empire Interview*, 2014)

In *Interstellar*, the musical score often merges with the diegetic world, it enhances sound design and vice versa. In the water planet scene, the ticking is built into the environment, each tick is a lost day on earth representing the slipping of time and connecting emotionally with the characters and scientifically with the concept of time dilation.

#### **2.3.4. Instrumental Themes and Emotional Undercurrents**

Hans Zimmer's Scores In *Interstellar* serves as a powerful tool for expressing emotional depth and reinforcing narrative themes. The use of certain instruments and minimalist repetition builds a soundscape that reflects both cosmic scale and human emotion.

##### **2.3.4.1. Cornfield Chase: Nostalgia, Innocence and the Sound of Departure**

This piece plays early in the film, Cooper drives his daughter Murph through a vast cornfield on their farm. Before the chase, they had a conversation about Murphy's law, that anything that can happen will happen, this conversation about possibility and inevitability foreshadows the emotional weight of Cooper's departure.

Musically, the C minor key gives it a realistic yet emotional note. It starts

with a repetitive piano motif as a rhythmic foundation, gradually layered with strings and a subtle synth texture adding emotional depth and guiding the audience toward the science fiction atmosphere. Zimmer then follows by a seamless transition, gently shifting from a key to another to add a layer of emotional complexity, moving from warmth to melancholy, symbolizing Cooper's internal conflict, a feeling of yearning, almost reaching but never quite resolving.

The music portrays the deep connection, innocence, hope and the beauty of the familiar, but also the melancholy of leaving. This theme is built with small musical cells repeated with variations, minimalistic and simple but also profoundly moving.

#### **2.3.4.2. Stay: The Emotional Weight of Separation**

This piece is the emotional core of the film, it is structurally used in two pivotal emotional sequences. The first part starts in the scene where Cooper must leave Murph to embark on his mission into space. During this moment, Murph pleads with her father to stay, insisting that the books falling from her shelf are a message.

Murph: I figured out the message. One word. Know what it is?

Cooper: Murph...

Murph: Stay. It stays "stay", Dad.

Cooper: Murph...

Murph: You don't believe me... Look at the books, it says "stay." Why? You're not listening! It says "stay."

This desperate plea marks a key emotional climax: Murph believes the universe is telling her father not to leave, while Cooper, torn between duty and love, is unable to explain.

The second part returns later in the film during the tesseract sequence, where Cooper was trying to communicate with Murph.

Cooper: Don't let me leave Murph.

This music carries the emotional weight of separation and longing, reflecting the pain of a father leaving his daughter in the first part, then the regret and the desperation in the second part.

Musically, this piece is slow and more atmospheric, setting in D minor that gives it that feeling of sorrow and melancholy to portray the feeling of the father and the fear of his daughter for parting ways. For instruments, it opens with deep organ tones, followed by a slow falling string creating a kind of cosmic sadness and the feeling of collapse.

#### **2.3.4.3. No Time for Caution: Musical Heroism in the Face of Chaos**

This piece emerges in the climax, after Dr. Mann dies in the explosion trying to dock, the Endurance is spinning out of control, that is when Cooper makes the life-threatening decision of matching the Endurance rotation speed to dock manually. This sequence evokes intense tension and uncertainty, leaving the audience unsure of the character's survival, a feeling that Zimmer's music mirrors perfectly.

Musically, the use of a rapidly ascending ostinato driven by the organ and string sections with the triplet rhythms creates the ticking sensation that symbolize the time slipping, the intensity of the scene, and the feeling of danger.

Zimmer's "No Time for Caution" describes the scene clearly, Cooper's living instinct, and the will to see his daughter again, drove him to make that heroic decision. The music here does not work only as a supporting tool, it is the main scene, the ascending of the action equals the rise of instruments and tone in the music, a piece that lead the narrative.

### **2.3.5. Minimalism and the Use of Organ**

Hans Zimmer approach in composing is not music to picture, but more emotion to concept. The use of minimalism, simplicity, repetition, and subtle variations allows his scores to blend with the visual and the sound design. Instead of fully orchestral compositions, Zimmer's focuses on simple musical ideas that evolves and layers gradually. In scenes of melancholy the music is mostly a repetitive set of chords or notes but then he adds layers when the scenes get intense, giving each sequence its exact theme and emotion.

The use of organ clears in the statement of the director Christopher Nolan "I really wanted him to use the church organ and I also made the case very strongly for some feeling of religiosity to it even though the film isn't religious, but that the organ, the architectural cathedral and all the rest they represent mankind's attempt to portray the mystical or the metaphysical. What's beyond us beyond the realm of every day." (Nolan Interview, 2014)

The organ was fitting for the theme of the movie, creating this sense of philosophical belonging and the existence of humanity in the vast cosmos, how small we are in this universe. The music using the church organ expresses isolation, hope and questioning what we will never understand.

### **2.3.6. Music's Role in Reframing the Story**

*Interstellar* is widely known as a science fiction centered on space, wormholes, and time, but Zimmer's music led the narrative to a more dramatic and emotional narrative through portraying the father and child relationship. The simple chords, the organ, the repetition reshaped the viewers perception on the story. In scenes of survival and tension, the music creates the feeling of the exact scene rather than overdramatizing the aspect of space with fully orchestra and an expansive auditory.

Zimmer's score in the film works as a mirror of the character's experiences, Cooper's conflict of staying or leaving, Murph's feelings of being abandoned by her father, Brand's love through space, every emotion is captured with music, focusing on the core of the movie rather than the visual aspect. In the scene of the tesseract, the music expresses Cooper's desperation to communicate with his daughter, telling her not to make him leave, instead of focusing on the tesseract itself and how time is a physical form.

## **2.4. The Dark Knight 2008**

### **2.4.1. Plot and Overview**

*The Dark Knight* (2008) is a superhero film set within the DC universe. It is the second chapter of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy*. It follows Batman (Bruce Wayne), a vigilante who operates outside the law, driven by a personal moral code to protect his city, Gotham. The film starts with a robbery scene, where The Joker presents himself as a dangerous, chaotic, and unpredictable, killing his team after stealing money that belongs to Gotham's mob, making his entrance to the city criminal's world alongside the Maroni and other Gotham villains.

As the crime in Gotham becomes unstable, Batman forms an alliance with District Attorney Harvey Dent and Police Lieutenant Jim Gordon to protect the city. Their efforts show promise by reducing corruption and increasing hope in the city. However, The Joker's calculated series of attacks cause a social disorder, manipulating public perception, turning citizens against their protectors, and pushing Harvey Dent toward a tragic downfall, making Batman face profound dilemmas regarding justice, sacrifice, and the consequences of vigilantism, challenging his moral code.

The story concludes with Batman successfully capturing the Joker, proving that he remains the enduring face of justice and will always be present and capable of confronting any dangerous threat to Gotham.

## **2.4.2. The Joker's Theme: Discomfort, Fascination, and Control**

*The Dark Knight* was the first collaboration between Christopher Nolan and Hans Zimmer, it marked the beginning of their long lasting creative partnership in movies like *Inception*, *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk*... and more.

Zimmer is a composer who breaks the traditional conventions of film scoring, creating music that challenge and unsettle the audience. In *The Joker* theme, instead of composing a memorable classic villain melody, Zimmer uses a "razor sound", a haunting, jarring two note motif, that captures the violent and chaotic nature of *The Joker*. The theme controls the audience, evoking discomfort, unease and threat, preparing the viewers for what follows.

### **2.4.2.1. Two Note Razor Sound as a Symbol of Chaos**

The two note motif, or what is often described as Razor sound, is a deep musical device that describes the characteristics of *The Joker*. Zimmer strips down *The Joker's* theme to two harsh notes, it starts with a slow quite auditory build up, crafted with the electric cello and violin, Zimmer also incorporates a guitar electronic distorted texture. The simplicity, the ascendance and the repetition of the two notes evokes *The Joker's* instability, chaotic nature, and fixation on disorder.

While film scores traditionally use motifs that provides emotional cues and resolution, Zimmer's razor sound maintain tension without relief, the minimalism forces the listener to focus on unsettling quality of these notes which do not provide comfort.

“It was like the sound of a thread being pulled tighter and tighter, you don't know when it will snap but you know it's going to.” (Zimmer, *Empire* 2008)

The sound being described as a razor is a metaphor in itself, portraying *The Joker* as sharp, dangerous, and emotionally disruptive. The sharpness cuts through the auditory environment of the film just as the character cuts through its moral

structure. This use of tension and sonic discomfort is deliberate: it reflects The Joker's worldview, one that rejects harmony and structure. Instead of functioning as a musical cue for emotional guidance, this motif becomes an embodiment of chaos.

This piece lacks the melodic complexity, it starts with an almost silent auditory, building up tension and reflecting reflects chaos, a simple two notes but powerful and disruptive, it cuts through the film's narrative, mirroring The Joker anarchic behavior and his lack of order.

#### **2.4.2.2. Manipulating Viewer Sympathy Through Music**

The human brain processes music emotionally and subconsciously. When you hear unsettling or comforting sounds, you react emotionally before you intellectually understand why. Zimmer does not aim for the joker's theme to be understood, but rather be felt, to evoke unease and fear. Manipulating the audience to feel tension but also the fascination.

The constant buildup of the theme creates a sonic expression of The Joker's psychological imbalance. But rather than framing him as a traditional villain, Zimmer offers an auditory experience of his worldview. The music becomes a character itself, speaking the language of anxiety, unpredictability, and manipulation. The score invites the audience to inhabit the Joker's chaos to feel what it is like to exist in a space where morality is blurred, and rules cease to apply. For a few chilling seconds, the Joker is not merely observed; he is embodied. The music dismantles the listener's sense of narrative safety, compelling an experience of the thrill and danger of disorder.

The score does not ask the audience to support the Joker's crimes, but it evokes the thrill of his presence. It channels his power to disrupt and disturb. In doing so, Zimmer's composition manipulates not only tension, but also sympathy, crafting a momentary emotional bridge between the viewer and one of cinema's

most notorious villains. This sympathy does not arise from condoning his actions, but from being musically situated within his psychological space. One of the score's most dangerous and brilliant achievements lies in its ability to blur the emotional boundaries between repulsion and allure, between fear and fascination.

### **2.4.3. Holding Back the Monster Within: Batman's Theme**

Interestingly, like The Joker's theme, Batman's theme is also rooted in a two note motif, but a different tone and intention. Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard who is another composer in *The Dark Knight* redefines what a superhero theme can sound like. Instead of triumph and clarity, Batman's score captures his internal war and conflict, he is not a clear hero, he operates in the shadow and his identity is not fully formed. The theme reflects Batman not as a savior but as someone who is holding back the monster within.

This piece begins with low sustained notes, often played by deep strings and horns barely rising. The use of instruments mirrors Batman's character, the synth to hint at technology and his strategic mind, and percussive rhythms to convey his run against time and doubt. The minor chords and the progression that rarely resolve create a tonal ambiguity, it reflects Batman's fight not only against crime, but also again guilt, loss, and identity.

Bruce Wayne and Batman are two halves of the same soul, this duality is portrayed in the theme. When Bruce contemplates love and peace, Zimmer allows harmonic warmth, but it is always pulled back, swallowed by the shadows, but unlike The Joker's theme, it does not explode, it seethes quietly, indicating Batman's control over his rage.

This composition is not simply a theme, it is a moral landscape. Zimmer stated that the goal was not to make him heroic but to reflect the burden he carries (MasterClass, 2023). Batman's theme is morally ambiguous because Batman

himself is, a mortal figure who chooses the path of justice not out of purity, but out of a relentless effort to rise above his darker instincts and become something better.

#### **2.4.4. Music as Moral Disruption**

Conventional film music often guides audience toward clear emotional interpretations, and a predictable structure, rising during action and softening during drama. Zimmer challenges these norms in every score he makes, his music does not serve as background accompaniment but as powerful agent that blurs the boundaries between good and evil. In *The Dark Knight*, the music embodies the tension between order and chaos, heroism and villainy, forcing the viewer to engage with the narrative on a more complex and introspective level.

The music in the film communicates with the audience, asking the question of what is right and what is wrong, it puts the viewer in this space where everything feels morally questionable, it does not portray Batman as purely heroic or The Joker just as a villain. The minimalism and the sharp textures build the tension needed for such a story, where characters are constantly dealing with inner conflicts and impossible decisions.

Zimmer's composition does not include comfort, or emotional resolution, it stays tense, which makes the experience more real. The music in the film includes the audience perception not just influence and manipulate it, challenging traditional notions of good and evil through moral disruption. The score is the message, that in the city of Gotham, morality is complicated, even for a hero.

#### **2.5. Comparative Insight Across the Three Films**

*La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight* are modern classics from distinctly different genres, musical romance, science fiction, and psychological thriller yet each demonstrates the power of music not merely to support the narrative, but to actively create it.

Jazz in *La La Land* is more than a soundtrack music, it is a character that actively shapes the story. The music mirrors the story's arc and experience it, developing alongside the protagonists, feeling their love, heartbreak, disappointment, and regret. Jazz carries everything that left unsaid, echoing the characters hidden emotions and shaping the rhythm of the story, especially in the epilogue where music communicates what Sebastian wanted to say to *Mia*. Meanwhile, Zimmer's score in *Interstellar* approaches a different angle, a dramatic and philosophical dimension. Rather than simply following the visual cues, the music operates on a deeper and more emotional level, guiding the thematic weight of a scene instead of reacting to it. The use of organ adds religiosity to a film that does not explore religious themes, instead, the music portrays the grandeur and mankind's existence in the cosmos. Additionally, silence is as important as the music in the film, it emphasizes both the physical reality of space and the emotional distance between the characters, especially Cooper and Murph.

Unlike, *La La Land* expressive jazz and *Interstellar* philosophical and emotional resonance, *The Dark Knight* music serves as a weapon, disturbing musical stability and harmonic battles through the two note razor motif. The chaotic and unpredictability of the music does not stay contained in the story's narrative, it leaks into the characters. As The Joker gains a psychological ground, Batman becomes more aggressive, doubting his moral code. Not only Batman, but Harvey Dent also, he loses his "White Knight" name and becomes the villain he wanted to defeat. The Joker actions led these characters to this change, and the music intensified this transformation by the growing chaos and tension.

Hans Zimmer displays his ability and adaptability to reinvent emotional language through sound, being the composer of both *Interstellar* and *The Dark Knight*. Zimmer leans into minimalism, using spacious textures and silence to evoke a profound sense of wonder and human vulnerability in *Interstellar*. In *The Dark Knight* his approach becomes far more abrasive, favoring dissonance and including the audience in the judgement of the characters morality. Meanwhile, Justin

Hurwitz's work in *La La Land* embraces a rich melodic style, allowing jazz to be a narrative tool and an independent character, expressing passion and loss.

## 2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how music is employed as an active narrative device in each film. Jazz in *La La Land* is theme and character, conveying states of emotion and the trajectory of artistic ambition. *Interstellar* employs a sweeping organ score and purposeful silence to reflect the boundless space of the universe and the profundity of emotions of love and sacrifice. *The Dark Knight* experiments with dissonance, tension, and rhythmic instability to reflect psychological instability and moral ambiguity.

Although varied in genre and musical style, all three movies share a deep reliance on their soundscapes to create emotional connection and narrative resolution. Music informs the emotional understanding of the viewer, creates unspoken tensions, and informs the psychological topography of each character's experience. This chapter confirms once again that music is not an accompaniment—it is a narrative energy that propels the story forward, enriches meaning, and engages viewers with the unseen aspects of the film.

# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

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Sound, long overlooked or reduced to a surface element in service of visuals, is in fact one of cinema's most powerful facilitators of narrative, emotion, and psychological depth. This dissertation has examined the sonic fabric of film, with a particular emphasis on music as a vital storytelling device. Through a comparative analysis of *La La Land*, *Interstellar*, and *The Dark Knight*, this study argues that sound especially music is not merely a complementary layer but an essential narrative component.

The research questions guiding this work have been addressed through both theoretical exploration and practical film analysis. We established how soundscapes including music, silence, and sonic contrast shape the emotional and psychological engagement of the viewer. In each film, sound design intensifies tension, communicates emotion, and immerses the audience in the film's world often more powerfully than the visuals alone. We then explored how musical techniques define genre-specific modalities: jazz as a narrative and emotional driver in *La La Land*, the organ representing cosmic and spiritual vastness in *Interstellar*, and dissonant electronics embodying moral chaos and psychological disturbance in *The Dark Knight*. These sonic languages were not just stylistic choices, but reflections of narrative tone, ethical themes, and viewer interpretation. We also examined the role of music in character development and emotional evolution. In three distinct explorations, music did more than support character arcs; it made internal conflict visible and emotional transformation felt. It expressed what could not be said and revealed psychological depth with each motif.

Our findings confirm that music is not just a storytelling supplement it is an active narrative force. It provides subtext, ambiguity, emotional pacing, and psychological depth. From the longing tones in *La La Land* that echo dreams and regret, to the transcendent minimalism of *Interstellar* that evokes vastness and human

## General Conclusion

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fragility, to the unsettling dissonance in *The Dark Knight* that mirrors inner and societal chaos music continuously works to shape meaning.

This research adds momentum to the growing recognition of sound and music as central components of cinematic storytelling. It encourages scholars, filmmakers, and critics to consider not only what is seen or said on screen, but how sound forms the emotional and psychological spine of the film. While this dissertation focused on three iconic examples, it merely scratches the surface of what sonic analysis can offer to film studies. Future research could shift the lens toward the audience's perception and cognitive response to sound and music in cinema. A promising direction would be to study how different audiences physiologically and emotionally respond to soundscapes, using tools like brain imaging, heart rate monitoring, or eye tracking. This would allow scholars to scientifically measure immersion, emotional reaction, and psychological manipulation through music and sound. Such interdisciplinary research merging film studies with neuroscience or psychology could provide concrete data on how sound creates meaning and deepen our understanding of cinema as a multisensory experience.

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