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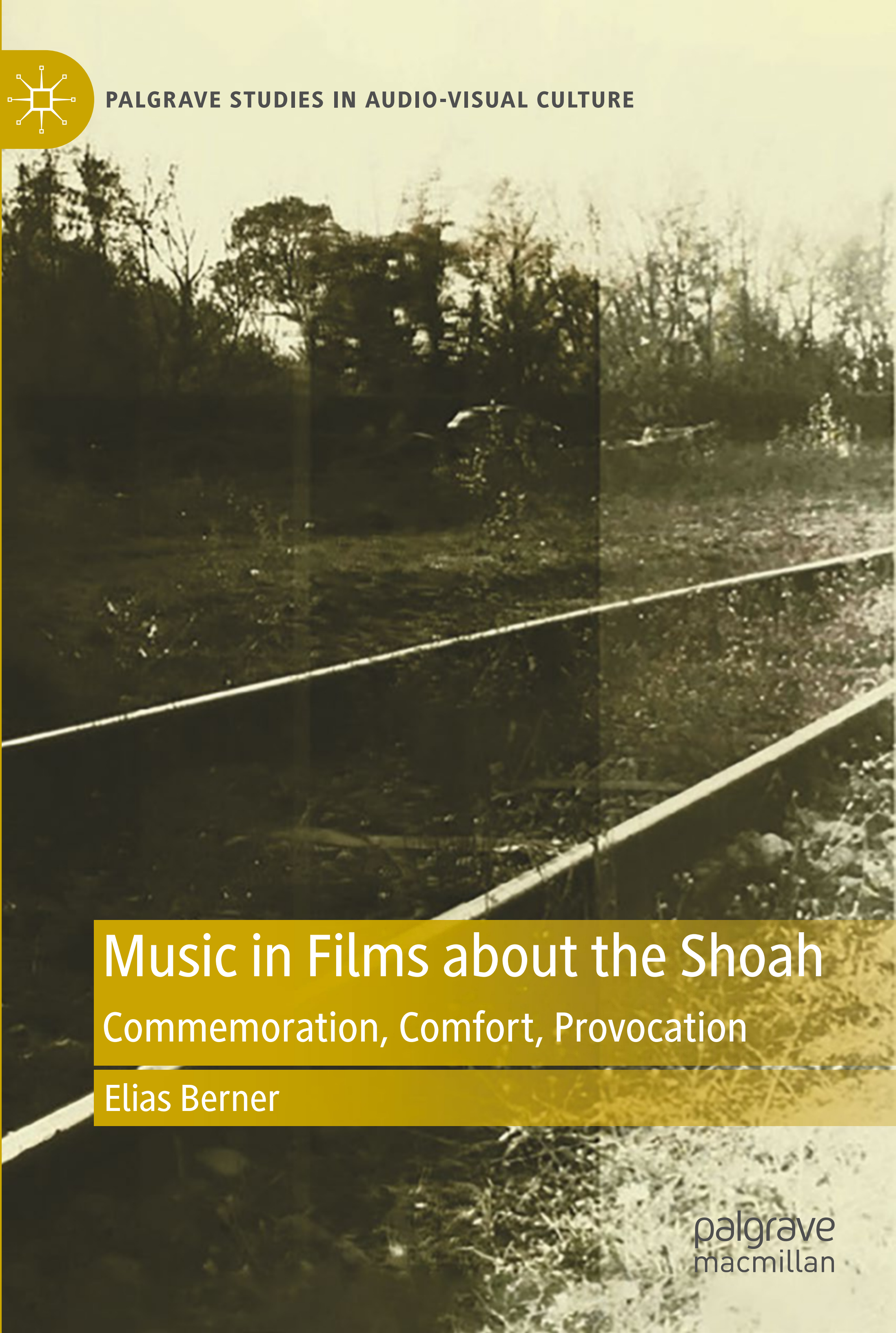

Music in Films about the Shoah

Commemoration, Comfort, Provocation

Elias Berner

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Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture

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The aesthetic union of sound and image has become a cultural dominant. A junction for aesthetics, technology and theorisation, film's relationship with music remains the crucial nexus point of two of the most popular arts and richest cultural industries. Arguably, the most interesting area of culture is the interface of audio and video aspects, and that film is the flagship cultural industry remains the fount and crucible of both industrial developments and critical ideas.

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For Astrid

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Vienna, July 2023

Praise for *Music in Films about the Shoah*

"The Shoah has moved into popular cinema, and film musicology needs to engage with this trend. Elias Berner does that in subtle and careful analyses of the music of key films from the 1990s and 2000s, analyses that do justice to what the music does in and for these films."

—Guido Heldt, Senior Lecturer, *Programme Director,*
Department of Music, University of Bristol, UK

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Of Ghosts, the Flesh of the Present, and the Singing Child in the Dark

> It is nonsense to try to depict the camps as they were. But it is almost as nonsensical to want to describe them with words, as if nothing lay between us and the time when they still existed. … Memory is conjuring, and effective conjuring is witchcraft. I am not a religious person, only superstitious. I sometimes say as a joke, but it's true, that I don't believe in God, but I do believe in ghosts. To deal with ghosts, you have to lure them with the flesh of the present. Offer up a friction surface to them to tease them out of their dormant state and get them moving.[1]

In this passage from her autobiography, Shoah survivor Ruth Klüger talks about the possibilities (and impossibilities) of representing the Shoah. In doing so, she does not focus on her testimony itself, but on the process of remembering. In order to establish access to the past, the past time must be bridged and thereby made a subject of discussion at the same

---

[1] Klüger (2007, pp. 78–79). ("Es ist unsinnig, die Lager räumlich so darstellen zu wollen, wie sie damals waren. Aber fast so unsinnig ist es, sie mit Worten beschreiben zu wollen, als liege nichts zwischen uns und der Zeit, als es sie noch gab. … Erinnerung ist Beschwörung, und wirksame Beschwörung ist Hexerei. Ich bin ja nicht gläubig, sondern nur abergläubisch. Ich sag manchmal als Scherz, doch es stimmt, dass ich nicht an Gott glaub, aber an Gespenster schon. Um mit Gespenstern umzugehen, muss man sie ködern mit Fleisch der Gegenwart. Ihnen Reibflächen hinhalten, um sie aus ihrem Ruhezustand herauszureizen und sie in Bewegung zu bringen.")

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time. In this process, the present from which a memory is recalled plays just as important a role as the traumatic past, which Klüger describes as a "ghost."

This book deals with a special form of this process of remembering the Shoah, and thus imagining the past in the present. The starting hypothesis is that music in feature films that deal with the Shoah and National Socialism takes on a function that is very close to the "flesh of the present" described by Ruth Klüger.

In feature films, at the visual level, there is often the—in Klüger's words—"nonsensical" approach of wanting to "depict the camps as they were. " "Original" filmed and photographed materials, shot inside death and concentration camps, take a central role here. In most cases these "original" materials were only filmed in the course of the liberation of the camps or were made by the perpetrators themselves for documentation purposes; in only a few exceptions were they created from the perspective of the victims.[2]

Since the immediate postwar period, this visual material has been directly incorporated into feature films about the Shoah or meticulously restaged and filmed at original locations. In the 1948 film *Ostani Etap* by Polish filmmaker Wanda Jakubowska, who herself was an inmate at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück from 1942 to 1945, the traumatic memories of a survivor were visualized and directly filmed on location. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann has shown how these specific reenactments of memory on the one hand, citations of original filmed sources on the other have formed an iconography, which feature films and documentaries about the Shoah constantly draw on to this day.[3] Both kind of images thus circulate in popular culture. Although the constant recycling and circulation of original filmed sources also involves forms of actualizations on a visual level, for example through the faces of well-known actors or a contemporary form of camera work, these images nevertheless point to a past that they attempt to document or reconstruct. The question posed in this book is where the soundtrack, especially the music, is to be located in the relation between documentation and actualization and how it relates to the images (and narratives).

The concept of the "Audio-History of Film," developed by Rasmus Greiner and Winfried Pauleit argues for a "history modelling function" of sound in film, which they render "tactile" and "pre-reflexive," which, in other words, means that the soundtrack makes the (contemporary) audience *feel* the historical world, which is projected visually on screen.[4] This corporal dimension of film sound, in particular since the invention of Dolby, is certainly important to acknowledge.

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[2] Didi-Huberman (2007).

[3] Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2014, pp. 189–192).

However, the question of the specific relationship between the sonic-musical level and the visual level in filmic representations of history I try to pose in this book bears the danger of adopting unreflected assumptions rooted in Western cultural history about the dichotomy of seeing as the sense of reason and hearing as the sense of feeling, which Jonathan Sterne called the "audiovisual litany" in his groundbreaking work *The Audible Past*.[5] In our context of historical films such an adaption would—in the most simplified and straightforward sense—result in associating the capacity *to document* only with the visual level and the capacity *to emotionalize*, and thus actualize, only with the sound level. The identification of the three emotional stances, Commemoration, Comfort and Provocation, which, I argue in my three main chapters of analysis, are implied through the way music is used in films at first glance may seems prone to reproduce this litany unquestioned. But in combining different recent theories about the soundtrack in my method of analysis I precisely stress how these stances are evoked through the *interaction* of music with the other layers of the film, most prominently the visual one. As my detailed analysis will show these interactions are far too complex to be reducible to one-dimensional straightforward relationship between depicted/shown facts on the one hand and emotionalizing music and corporal sound-design on the other.

The ton of academic work on filmic representations of the Shoah clearly has shown that in feature films, but as well documentaries, the visual level is not restricted to the integration, reconstruction, or even reinvention of visual historical sources, but most of the time constructs and invents to a certain extent "new" material, not determined by historical facts but multiple other factors like narration, genre convention, dramaturgy, which all steer or trigger the emotional involvement of the viewers. There are of course also films, which deal with the Shoah, that do without depicting, reconstructing, and integrating visual sources of the camps altogether, simply because their narrative is not set inside the camps for instance. Still, like in any other historical film, set-design and costumes are designed to depict a historical world. In any case that means my analysis on the mediating function of music in filmic representations of the Shoah cannot ignore the dynamic role of the visual level and the many analyses thereof, but instead build on them and use them as context.

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[4] Greiner (2014) and Pauleit and Greiner (2014).

[5] Sterne (2003, pp. 15–19).

Likewise historical facts and sources can not only be depicted visually, but also inform the soundtrack. There are—to my knowledge—no audio recordings available, which were made inside of concentration or death camps during the Shoah, that could have been integrated or reconstructed in soundtracks of films about the events. Nevertheless, music and sounds overall are mentioned in a lot in the testimonies of camp-survivors.[6] According to these testimonies, making music took a prominent role inside concentration and death camps predominantly as a means of harassment as it for instance accompanied selection processes in front of the gas chambers. This has been brought to the fore constantly in the history of feature films on the Shoah through the use of diegetic music much earlier than it had become a topic of research. From *Ostani Etap* in the immediate postwar period, to TV productions of the 1970s and 1980s like *Holocaust*, *Playing for Time* and *Escape from Sobibor*, and the blockbuster and milestone in the popularization of the Shoah *Schindler's List* in the 1990s, *The Grey Zone* in 2001, to a more recent production the *Photographer of Mauthausen* 2018. The approach of wanting to *depict* camps as they were, mentioned above and criticized by Klüger, through this kind of diegetic music clearly includes the sound level, thus transgresses to an approach of wanting to let camps—and in particular selection processes—*sound* as they did—according to the memories of survivors. The use of diegetic music in these death and concentration camp scenes *documents* (how music was used) and at the same time *emotionalizes.*

The intensity with which music nevertheless remains part of the depicted historical world, or projects into the present, is among a number of other factors, determined by the style of the recording to be heard, which can mark a music as a "historical," "past," or "far-away," or on the contrary as an "immediate" event. These kind of aesthetics of sound production represent an important dimension of my method, which has received little attention in analyses of film music so far.

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[6] "The Trial of Amon Goeth, Part 3, Selected parts of the Testimony." http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/goeth3.html

In most of the films that deal with the Shoah on the auditory level there is, of course, also music whose sources are not explained by the images, and which is thus called nondiegetic. Its sound is not necessarily associated with the motivation to document historical facts. This is indicated in public and academic discourses accompanying the most popular Shoah films.

When a film like *Schindler's List* is praised for its "authenticity," its film score, in comparison to the camera work, the actors, the filming on "original" locations, or even the sound design, is almost never mentioned. Contrarily, music is mentioned indeed in context of accusations of the trivialization of the Shoah due to the film's (disguised) conventional form.[7]

In more recent theories of the soundtrack nondiegetic music has ceased to be regarded as a commenting and psychologizing omniscient narrative voice from the outside only, but—at least at times—as an integral part of the filmic world itself. Guido Heldt in particular stresses the dynamic position of music on both sides "across the border" between the projected world in the film on the one hand, and the "real" world of the audience on the other, pretty much regardless of whether it is identified as diegetic or nondiegetic. Music's proximity to the filmic world is determined by its interactions with the visual layers, the other layers of the soundtrack speech and noise, and unfolds dynamically along the narrative form. But how does music relate to the other side, the "real" world?

Regardless of whether it is a preexisting piece of music, a theme composed especially for the film, a designed sound, or historical sound recordings, the music creates intertextual references to the (individual and collective) listening experiences of the viewers—at a conscious as well as unconscious and at a cognitive as well as corporeal level. Individual and collective listening experiences are heavily shaped by the previous, historical uses of music in mass-media contexts, the formation of musical stereotypes and genres. Thus, the cultural- and media-historically constructed nonstable meanings of a given piece, or even a specific sound of a soundtrack are as important for interpretation as its sonic surface and deep structure. (Through the interaction with the images, the movement of the camera, and the narrative the multiplicity and ambiguity of cultural meanings of music may are reduced to one specific, which this way in the filmic moment is naturalized and essentialized.) Applying here the concept of the "*Medienkulturwissenschaft*" of the German-speaking countries, I argue the “real” world of the audience, to which film music is understood to bridge, is itself constituted by mass media and the way it has used music before.

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[7] I will come back to these discourses found in the medial reception of the films in the respective chapters of detailed analysis.

Thus, the “border,” across which music moves dynamically can hardly be understood as a straightforward one, where fiction rests at on the one side, and reality at the other. In the case of historical films, with which I deal in this book, levels and gaps/borders between them are multi-layered. The narrative world in films about the Shoah, no matter to what extent “real” stories are reconstructed or new ones are invented, claims to depict events that happened, or at least could have happened, as part of a well-documented historical reality. Music can either belong to or link between the specific narrative world of the film itself, the historical reality it claims to belong to and the “reality” and present of the audience. These three temporal levels are related to each other in a film through music.

To what extent this temporal quality of the music is comparable to what Ruth Klüger called a “friction-surface” and “the flesh of the present,” which she deemed necessary when it is dealt “with the ghosts of the past” in order “to keep them moving”? I understand this as a metaphor for actualization: for creating an awareness for the Shoah by confronting the past with the present. But the idea that music links between the aforementioned levels of the narrative, a historical reality and the present of the audience does not necessarily mean it fosters an *actualization* of the past in the present, which would lead to an awareness. On the contrary, intertextual references to the “reality” of the audiences, which rely on retrieving genre rules and musical stereotypes, evoke familiarity. A familiarity which may serve to compensate for and sooth potentially disorienting and devastating reactions to representations of the Shoah on the visual, narrative, and diegetic sound level.

Film music’s function of “absorbing the shock”—which in this case has been initiated only visually—through familiarity, was described in one of the earlier theoretic works on film music by Theodor W. Adorno and Hans Eisler. They write of the “ghostly effect” of the disembodied two-dimensional appearance of persons in film, in face of which “motion picture music corresponds to the whistling or singing child in the dark.” Adorno and Eisler’s understanding of the relationship of the image and music is admittedly somewhat bold. The interaction of the image and music is conceptualized in much more complex ways in recent film music theories, as already indicated above, and which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

At this point, I would like to focus on confronting Klüger's and Eisler and Adorno's figures of the ghost, because I use them to define a field of tension of possible basic functions of music in relation to—not only visual!—representations of the Shoah in films: On the one hand Klüger's ghost of the past, which should be evoked, and on the other Eisler and Adorno's two-dimensional ghosts created through the moving picture, against which the child sings to itself in the dark. Both images of the ghost involve activities that have a ritual character and serve to confront something frightening. While in Klüger's work there is something defiant and provocative about this ritual, in Eisler and Adorno's work it serves to calm and distract. Within this field of tension, I locate three primary emotive stances evoked by soundtracks of feature films, commemoration, comfort, and provocation, and devote to each a larger chapter of detailed analysis of one or two soundtracks. I derive these stances from the way in which music is used to mediate affectively between the narrative itself, the reconstructed past, where it is situated and the present of the audience and the filmmakers. Key to this is music's interaction with the visual, speech, and sound layers of a film in order to construct perpetrator, victim, and bystander identities.

I combine close readings of musical analysis in media texts with a cultural studies-informed interpretation that sheds light on the construction of memory and identity. The extensive and highly diverse musical material found in the films discussed requires a multi-layered set of analytical tools. The cultural historical meanings of a given piece, or even a specific sound of a soundtrack, are as important for interpretation as their sonic surface and deep structure and the way in which both interact with the images, the movement of the camera, and the narrative. In my study, I am not concerned with asking and evaluating whether there is an "appropriate" form of music in films about the Shoah. Instead, I trace the way in which musical stereotypes are used—and how they potentially change—in the context of the Shoah, and how their development is related to the discourses around the films in question, revealing intertextual references to film and pop music history through thorough musical analysis. I understand my book as a musicological contribution to an ongoing interdisciplinary debate about filmic representations of the Shoah and how they affect the memory process.

Music's role in remembering and commemorating the Shoah has been the topic of several publications in different disciplines.[8] There have been investigations of, and attempts to reconstruct from a historical perspective, the involvement of music in the persecution and extermination processes as well as the sonic sphere of the Nazi regiment.[9] Although these studies differ in their focus from my project, both strands of research form a historical context that—as we will see—had to be taken into account for my own research question on the role of music in films about the Shoah. There is also an increasing number of publications available that deal specifically with music in films about the Shoah. There are monographs and edited volumes focusing on specific national cinemas and memory cultures and a number of articles that discuss single films on their own.[10] Recently, more comparative approaches have been introduced, for instance focusing specifically on how so-called art music has been used in different films. In my research I look at four particularly popular films on the borderline between Hollywood and European cinema around the turn of the millennium in order to determine film music's contribution to a memory process in contemporary popular culture. Reflecting upon the emphasis on art music in the context of the memory of the Shoah, I ask what relevance the often-criticized but still effective dichotomy between art and popular music has for the construction of identities and the audiovisual mediation between history and the present.

My research focus on American and European productions certainly means a restriction to a transatlantic Western/Eurocentric perspective. This takes for granted, and potentially reproduces, an American and European hegemony in a globalized popular culture in general as well as in a globalized memory culture concerning the Shoah in particular. This does not take into consideration the current discussion in postcolonial studies about the postulate of the uniqueness of the Shoah and its comparability to colonial crimes and genocides. Equally neglected is the specifically Israeli culture of remembrance, which certainly did not develop independently of globalized popular culture but nevertheless occupies a special position. The period in which the films examined here were released, between 1993 and 2010, overlaps with the digital revolution. The films are nevertheless examined in the context of a pre-digital—or at least pre-social media platform—American-dominated mainstream cinema, in which the aforementioned American/European hegemony emerged in even more unquestioned and unbroken form. The extent to which streaming services and social media platforms have destabilized and shaken up this hegemony, or at least renegotiated it, is a separate, current discourse that goes beyond the research horizon of this book.

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[8] Anderton (2018, 2019), Fisher (2021), Rásky and Pawlowsky (2015), and Wlodarski (2015).

[9] Birdsall (2012), Currid (2006), Fackler and Baaske (2009), Fackler (2000), and Wieczorek (2012).

[10] Bullerjahn (2013), Lawson (2016), and Baumgartner and Boczkowska (2020).

Nevertheless, at the end of the book I will also show how affective *stances* evoked by music and musical styles are reflected in audiovisual contexts in social media and hope to initiate follow-up research.

In the last section of this introduction, I want to give a brief overview of how the book is structured around the three aforementioned stances and formulate the main focus and purpose of each individual chapter.

Cultural Memory, Film and Music

In this chapter, I first introduce the general status of feature film in recent memory studies, and then give an historical overview of filmic representations of the Shoah. I outline key elements of the academic discourse, specifically in regard to the role of popular culture in the process of globalized memory and commemoration. I argue that music and other sounds in films take on a defining function in these processes due to their (multidimensional) temporal quality, yet have received little attention.

Drawing on key discursive elements of an ongoing "popularization of memory" debate, I present my selection of four films, whose music will be analyzed in detail: *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, *Taking Sides*, and *Inglourious Basterds.*

I introduce the theoretical framework for my detailed analysis of these films, in which I apply and combine recent and established film music theories that focus on the interaction of sound and image, the construction of identity, and the influence of popular music. I am particularly interested in the meaning of supposed dichotomies between the classical and the popular, the original and the preexisting, and harmony and noise.

Two of the four films this book focuses on (*Schindler's List* and *The Pianist*) have a mixed score, that is, a composed score, including a certain amount of preexisting music. The other two—*Taking Sides* and *Inglourious Basterds*—have a compiled score, and while the former predominantly relies on classical music from the nineteenth century, the latter mainly uses film scores and popular music of the 1960s and 1970s. The comparative analysis of these four film scores highlights the relevance of the aforementioned distinctions not only regarding the construction of identities in the context of the history of the Shoah but also with regard to how it affects music's narrative function and symbolic quality in the interaction of various media layers.

Commemoration

The first analytical chapter deals with *Schindler's List*, which, I argue, conveys a commemorative attitude. This is particularly evident in the opening and end sequences of the film, which draw on religious as well as secular rituals of commemoration. My analysis of the score, which combines a close reading of the interaction between music and the narrative, the image, and other elements of the soundtrack (i.e., noise and speech), as well as a contextualization in (film) music history, reveals that the music and its interaction with the plot are heavily linked with the protagonist's emotional life and thus serve to "authenticate" and perform his purification. The film's performance of commemoration is therefore not dedicated only to the six million murdered Jews but especially to the hero of the film. Within the scope of the book, this analysis serves as a starting and reference point for the comparative perspective of its later chapters. The particular relevance of this analysis is, in a way, prescribed by the crucial role attributed to the film in the process of popularizing the Holocaust, yet the film is similarly significant from the perspective of film music theory. The composed score by the "new symphonist" John Williams and its integration with existing classical, popular, and religious music, mostly at the diegetic level, invites examinations of the dichotomies between the classical and the popular, original and existing score, and the margins of the diegesis.

Comfort

In the chapter on comfort, I look at two European productions, *The Pianist* and *Taking Sides*, from a comparative perspective. I examine in detail how the use of music from the nineteenth century in the two soundtracks has a comforting function at various levels. Again, my argument is based on a detailed analysis of the interaction between narrative, image, and sound. Of equal importance for the interpretation of this comforting effect, however, is the media reception history of the musical works used in the soundtracks, as well as the image of their composers. At the same time, the association of a comforting effect with the music is also traceable in academic and journalistic discourses around the films, which discuss both films as "answers" to Adorno's frequently quoted (and frequently misunderstood) provocative postulate that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[11] In spite of the fact that the films are significantly different with regard to their plots, I focus my comparative analysis on their notable similarities at an auditive level, especially when it comes to the particular kinds of music used in the soundtracks and the way in which they structure the plot. The soundtracks of both films draw heavily on works of nineteenth century Romantic music, which are mostly located within the diegesis. For my analysis, the cultural-historical background of these works, and especially the history of their media reception before, during, and shortly after World War II, as well as the fact that they are diegetically performed or listened to, is of particular significance. The clear hierarchy in *Schindler's List*—between diegetic music, which served to convey the "historical world" and its milieu, and nondiegetic music, which suggested transcendence—is completely turned around in the two films discussed in this chapter. Through diegetic performances, I argue, the bourgeois identity, or the identity of the artistic genius, is upheld and defended against the dreadful experience of the Shoah, which, according to Adorno, George Steiner, and George L. Mosse, has eroded bourgeois values and ideals.[12] Despite the strikingly similar key role of diegetic music in both films, the comparative perspective shows the extent to which music as consolation is also staged as a physical experience and practice on the one hand, or as a purely spiritual, inner withdrawal on the other.

Provocation

The music in *Inglourious Basterds*, and in Tarantino's films in general, has been analyzed in various articles and books, especially in relation to the depiction of violence (e.g., Coulthard, 2012). In this context, the fact that the soundtrack consists, for the most part, of existing popular music, is interpreted as a way of creating distance and irony on the one hand, or as a way of making the violence digestible, or even enjoyable, on the other.

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[11] Adorno (1997, p. 34).

[12] Adorno (1997), Mosse (1964), and Steiner (1984).

The music's style and history have not been dealt with in a differentiated manner; instead, music is, in a slightly generalized way, associated with pleasure. In my analysis, I historically trace the use of existing popular music at the nondiegetic level (but also in the sonic foreground) back to the so-called New Hollywood era and the use of "black music," particularly in the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. In many of these films, contemporary popular music was understood as an expression of the time of their production, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and as means of emancipating and overcoming conventional storytelling and scoring of the classical Hollywood era. In *Inglourious Basterds*, the compiled music is decidedly not contemporary, being neither from the time of the film's production nor from that of its story world. It is precisely the incorporation of times "foreign" to the plot (or historically wrong and thus unrealistic) through the soundtrack which causes an emancipatory and empowering element of the film to emerge. Explicitly anachronistic popular music, such as Billy Preston's soundtrack of the blaxploitation film *Slaughter*, is used when the balance of power expected of Shoah films is reversed and "revenge is taken" through the depiction and promotion of violence against Nazis. Similar to the blaxploitation films themselves, the beat of the music empowers those deprived of rights to claim and own the (filmic) space. By "borrowing" popular music styles from various films of the 1960s and 1970s to accompany or introduce these empowering moments, the film positions the increasingly globalized popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s as an antithesis to Nazi ideology and culture. By analyzing in detail how music is used before and during violent scenes, I work out its ambivalent function between the empowering effect on the avengers and the death-wish of the committed Nazis who solemnly look forward to their downfall.

Reverberations in Contemporary Digital Popular Culture

I first sum up my core analytical findings about film music's functions in the construction of characters and the mediation between present and past and confront them with each other. Then I look at how these various analysed musical styles and sounds and the emotive stances they evoke resonate outside the context of film music in popular culture. Of particular interest is how significant parts of film scores are reused on social media platforms such as TikTok or YouTube. Finally, I show exemplary how the discussed stances evoked through musical styles reverberate in the recent streaming platform series *Hunters*.

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