Stone on Bishop, 'The Presence of the Past: Temporal Experience and the New Hollywood Soundtrack'

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Over an introduction and five chapters, Daniel Bishop, a musicologist, examines the sound design of seven canonical titles from one of the most storied epochs in American cinema. It is a project that could conceivably compel Bishop to wade through a myriad of academic discourses, from film history to memory studies, from film music history to the historiography of the sixties and seventies, from musicology to film philosophy, from film theory to the literature on the historical film. It is unreasonable to expect one scholar, especially one so early in his career (Bishop adapted The Presence of the Past from his dissertation) to master each of these fields. Consequently, Bishop made choices, choices that will help determine what readers will find to be most rewarding and instructive in this volume.

The Presence of the Past opens with an extended introduction that positions itself within multiple literatures and theoretical frameworks. It certainly speaks to the depth and breadth of Bishop’s secondary research when it comes to film music and film philosophy—the fields most central to his project. As Bishop notes, his book enjoins and contributes to two recent trends in film music scholarship. The first focuses on a film’s complete soundtrack, that is, its music and sound design, recognizing that both elements act on the other, convey meaning, and warrant critical scrutiny. The second trend seeks to embed film theory within musicological analysis to “contest the traditional visual biases of film theory with aurally sensitive readings” (p. 13).

The introduction also highlights areas of omission. Three silences feel particularly relevant. First, Bishop ignores memory studies and takes no interest in working through the highly contentious position of the sixties (and the fifties, its usual antithesis) in American discourse. As he muses: “I am less interested in validating or invalidating any particular narratives of the sixties, and more interested in the effect of such narratives upon the cultural imaginary and its understanding of the past” (p. 8). Second, Bishop does not engage the historiographies most relevant to his topic, which can yield a bum note or two. For example, he asserts that scholars have struggled to conceive the 1970s as something other than an uninteresting lull between the Age of Aquarius and the Age of Reagan. However, over the last two decades, studies such as Bruce J. Schulman’s The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics (2001), Edward D. Berkowitz’s Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies (2006), Jefferson Cowie's Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class (2010), Judith Stein's Pivotal Decade: How the
United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies (2010), and Thomas Borstelmann’s The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality (2012), have challenged and undercut this “nothing happened” view of the seventies. Third, Bishop does not address the literature on historical films in any sustained fashion and largely waves it away with an endnote (p. 198).

While Bishop does not meaningfully engage the scholarship on historical films, he does recognize that most scholars analyze such productions as either re-creations of the past or primary sources from their time of production. Neither of these approaches occupy Bishop’s study. Indeed, aside from the first chapter, he devotes little attention to the broader cultural and political context in which his films operated and never contemplates how they interact with the historical record (and with what motives and implications). What Bishop tries to capture is how film, especially through its soundscape, creates and contains a sense of “pastness.” For Bishop, pastness goes beyond dressing actors and sets. It exists in film’s ability to create a sense of “the then” in “the now.” He contends that music underscores the inherent tensions within this concept. Period songs and scores that draw on past idioms help transport viewers “emphatically into a time other than their own, while on the other hand pushing them outside of the representation, reminding them of their own temporal distance from what is being depicted” (p. 23).

The concept of “pastness” pervades the first chapter, one of the volume’s strongest, with an examination of the musical cues, purposeful silences, and interplay between sound and image in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). The film’s soundtrack creates meaning in sundry ways. It uses “We’re in the Money,” as performed in Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933) as an ironic commentary on the chasm between the Barrow Gang’s precarious reality and Hollywood fantasies of affluence. Yet most of its period songs are less recognizable and mixed low. They originate from radios and other diegetic sources and serve as world-building, past-reconstructing background noise. *Bonnie and Clyde*’s soundtrack also features pregnant silences. The absence of music in an abortive sex scene, as Bishop notes, accentuates the fumbling and awkward nature of this encounter. The title sequence also initially features no music; the only sound is a loud “click” that accompanies the rapid succession of black-and-white photos of rural Americans in the style of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange—an opening that establishes the film’s physical and chronological setting, while also symbolizing time’s fleeting nature. Bishop also charts the multiple uses (and shifting meanings of) “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” the piece most associated with the film and a historical anachronism when placed in the 1930s, an irony lost upon contemporary reviewers.

Film critics fare even worse in the second chapter, which is an analysis of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Bishop largely frames his discussion around the rejection of two critical notions. The first dismissed both films’ reliance on contemporary pop composers (Burt Bacharach for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and Leonard Cohen for *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*) as inauthentic and nakedly commercial. The second favorably casts the knotty *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* against the lightweight *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Bishop fares better with the former rebuttal, especially in terms of Altman’s film. Here he proffers useful analysis of how the filmmakers tailored tracks such as “The Stranger Song” (1967) and “Winter Lady” (1967) to create specific synch points and anticipate future narrative developments, while still retaining a degree of ambiguity via Cohen’s dense imagery. As is his wont, Bishop also excels at highlighting the film’s broader sound design, including the ever muttering, belching, grunting McCabe as well as Altman’s penchant for overlapping conversations. However, Bishop’s second
rejoinder, which tries to graft his emphasis on pastness with musings on myth and the Western genre, never fully congeals.

The third chapter, a consideration of Chinatown (1974), continues Bishop’s interest in myth. Here Bishop draws on a book chapter by Dana Polan, who argues that among “paranoid thrillers” of the 1970s, Chinatown stands out for its historical rather than contemporary setting, as well as for its commitment to a deeply mythic story about “civilization” and the corruption, amorality, and patriarchal lust involved in its creation and expansion. From there, Bishop links the film’s thematic, visual, and aural investment in images of wetness and dryness (especially the desert versus the ocean) to the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard and its emphasis on the centrality of the four elements in shaping creative imagination. Bishop employs this philosophical framework in analyzing Jerry Goldsmith’s score.

The next chapter shifts the focus from myth to nostalgia as it explores The Last Picture Show (1971) and American Graffiti (1973), films that rely almost entirely on diegetic music. Bishop emphasizes the degree to which these soundtracks forge a “conceptual space constituting collective identities, memories, dreams, and fantasies,” while self-consciously positing nostalgia as a theme, especially through its employment of radio broadcasts (p. 130). A single disc jockey, Wolfman Jack, seen by his teenage listeners as a mysterious, ethereal figure, essentially scores American Graffiti. He curates an extensive playlist of pre-British Invasion hits (“Golden Oldies” for 1973 audiences) and never replays a track, fostering a sense of dynamism, excitement, and possibility. In contrast, radio stations in The Last Picture Show replay the same tune multiple times. In the case of “Cold, Cold Heart” (1951), the film contrasts Hank Williams’s original and Tony Bennett’s cover to illustrate class differences, but in the case of “Lovesick Blues” (1949) and “Rose, Rose, I Love You” (1951) the film relies on the same recording. In all cases, characters never engage these songs, and the filmmakers never foreground them. They are just part of the film’s soundscape and reflections of commercial radio’s regimented and abbreviated playlists. If such uses speak to the film’s effort to create an experiential past, a past that feels lived-in, Bishop also argues that this repetition works to underscore the film’s ennui, a frustration and restlessness born from growing up, living in, and feeling tethered to a dying backwater.

The Presence of the Past, which boasts no formal conclusion, ends with a chapter on Badlands (1973). Bishop concedes that some readers may find its inclusion puzzling. It is a film, after all, that contains few signifiers of the past. For Bishop, however, the film offers a chance to cojoin the film’s philosophy, especially its emphasis on “play,” which he defines as the “spontaneous manipulation and reworking of material reality” (p. 160) that can express itself, as the film’s main characters frequently do, through destruction and violence to a very close read of George Tipton’s score and its references to the work of Carl Orff, Gunild Keetman, and Erik Satie.

Daniel Bishop largely achieves the objectives set forth in the introduction, which makes The Presence of the Past a valuable read for scholars who specialize in film music and film philosophy. Scholars with a more general interest in film or who focus on the historical film may find Bishop’s more musicological passages difficult. These scholars, however, can still benefit from The Presence of the Past, especially the first and fourth chapters. These chapters highlight ways to think more deeply, subtly, and profitably about the role of music and sound design in cinema, especially in terms of historical films.

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