

Music in film can speak to us, can have meaning for us. It does so in a straightforward and multiply effective way, though that way is still too generally discounted or decried. Irene Atkins speaks of the fortuitousness of an *unfamiliar* piece of source music. The reason: “the performance of a well-known piece would have carried with it *too many* built-in connotations.”<sup>71</sup> But it is precisely through connotation, whether specific to an individual film—Raksin’s theme comes to signify “Laura”—or more general, that film music has meaning. As we will see in upcoming chapters, “too many” is precisely the advantage, and even the nature of musical meaning.

Bob Last, a pioneer in the use of precomposed music in motion pictures, notes that usual ways of using and thinking about film music fall short of the actual ways it functions. It doesn’t just accompany, it means, and ambiguously.

Film resists single responses, and of course music does too. Within the visual domain it’s difficult to be multivalent, but music inherently works that way. But it works underneath, subconsciously. You can theorize about the way music means, but ultimately it’s intuitive. Even lyrics don’t quite make music concrete. It doesn’t exist as a sign system. It retains its ineffable qualities.

Which music means most, or best? Last feels that source music is most valuable because of its previous exposure, and the dense associations it brings. “After the mundane reasons—the director liked the song—enter the intangible emotional ones, and specific historical references, or a combination of the two. Source music crosses all genres, and brings them together too.”<sup>72</sup>

Accounts that speak of music as simply congruent or contrasting artificially limit its real effects. For and against are only the most obvious ways that film music works. We will develop the idea of how music works on points of meaning, moving away from the problematic, insistent reality that in practice and discussion the point of meaning is almost invariably reduced to binary logic, to a one-way interpretation. We will counter this by asserting and illustrating the fact that after discord, or concord, comes *conceptual* counterpoint, in which the various implications and possibilities, both tonal and discordant, both parallel and perpendicular, start to sustain and echo and resonate in the spectator’s mind.