

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SONIC MOVIE MEMORIES: SOUND,
CHILDHOOD, AND AMERICAN CINEMA

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English Literature

Though the trend rarely receives attention, since the 1970s many American filmmakers have been taking sound and music tropes from children's films, television shows, and other forms of media and incorporating those sounds into films intended for adult audiences. Initially, these references might seem like regressive attempts at targeting some nostalgic desire to relive childhood. However, this dissertation asserts that these children's sounds are instead designed to reconnect audience members with the multi-faceted fantasies and coping mechanisms that once, through children's media, helped these audience members manage life's anxieties. Because sound is the sense that Western audiences most associate with emotion and memory, it offers audiences immediate connection with these barely conscious longings.

The first chapter turns to children's media itself and analyzes Disney's 1950s forays into television. The chapter argues that by selectively repurposing the gentlest sonic devices from the studio's films, television shows like *Disneyland* created the

studio's signature sentimental "Disney sound." As a result, a generation of baby boomers like Steven Spielberg comes of age and longs to recreate that comforting sound world. The second chapter thus focuses on Spielberg, who incorporates Disney music in films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Rather than recreate Disney's sound world, Spielberg uses this music as a springboard into a new realm I refer to as "sublime refuge" - an acoustic haven that combines overpowering sublimity and soothing comfort into one fantastical experience.

The second half of the dissertation pivots into more experimental children's cartoons like *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1951) - cartoons that embrace audio-visual dissonance in ways that soothe even as they create tension through a phenomenon I call "comfortable discord." In the final chapter, director Wes Anderson reveals that these sonic tensions have just as much appeal to adults. In films like *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), Anderson demonstrates that comfortable discord can simultaneously provide a balm for anxiety and create an open-ended space that makes empathetic connections between characters possible. The dissertation closes with a call to rethink nostalgia, not as a romanticization of the past, but rather as a reconnection with forgotten affective channels.

SONIC MOVIE MEMORIES: SOUND, CHILDHOOD, AND AMERICAN
CINEMA

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my partner, best friend, and spouse, Rachel Vorona Cote. Rachel was with me from the project's early gestation stages to its final revisions, and she offered reassurance, critical feedback, and a receptive, supportive ear throughout. Thank you Rachel – for everything.

I would also like to dedicate the dissertation to my parents, Maria Martin and Michael Cote, as well as my siblings, Ben, Eric, and Justine Rae Cote. Their love and encouragement has been a crucial source of inspiration and support throughout this process.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	vii
Introduction: Sound, Film, and Moving Beyond Childishness.....	1
i.i. Sleepy Hollow and the Sonic Pull Towards Childhood	1
i.ii. Argument and Central Question: What Role Do Children’s Media Sounds Have on Adult Listeners?.....	2
i.iii. Theoretical Scaffolding and the Limitations of Current Work on the Subject..	7
i.iv. Chapter Summaries.....	10
Chapter 1: Repurposed Fantasies and Patchwork Nostalgia: Sound in Disney’s Television Programs.	17
1.1: Prologue: Uncle Walt’s Gentle-Sounding Menace.....	17
1.2: Disney Sound Scholarship and Television	22
1.3: Brief History of Disney’s Television Transition	26
1.4: “When You Wish Upon a Star” and The Disneyland Story	34
1.5: Bambi, Mars, and Disney Impressionism	46
1.6: The Disarmingly Reassuring Voice of Walt Disney	55
Chapter 2: Encountering Childhood Sounds: Spielberg and Acoustic Disney Fantasies.....	69
2.1: Prologue: Pining for Childhood Sounds in The Sugarland Express	69
2.2: Spielberg Scholarship and the Director’s Relationship With Childhood	71
2.3: Sublime Refuge and Spielberg’s Paradoxical Fantasies.....	79
2.4: Close Encounters of the Third Kind	80
2.5: Reclaiming the Fantasy: Close Encounters’ Legacy	111
Chapter 3: He Doesn’t Speak Words – Comfortable Discord in Mid-Twentieth- Century American Animation.....	113
3.1: Alternatives to Disney: Comfortable Discord	113
3.2: UPA and Gerald-McBoing-Boing	117
3.3: A Charlie Brown Christmas.....	152
Chapter 4: Irresolvable Empathy: Revisiting Comfortable Discord in the films of Wes Anderson.....	167
4.1: Prologue: Mark Mothersbaugh and Barnaby’s “Funny” Sadness	167
4.2: Wes Anderson Finds New Channels of Empathy in Comfortable Discord..	169
4.3 The Royal Tenenbaums	176
4.4: Moonrise Kingdom	179
4.5: The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou	196
Conclusion: Towards a New Outlook on Nostalgia	210
Bibliography	220

Introduction: Sound, Film, and Moving Beyond Childishness

i.i. Sleepy Hollow and the Sonic Pull Towards Childhood

In an interview with Rick Clark in 2001, composer Danny Elfman discusses the origins of a theme in his score for Tim Burton's 1999 horror film, *Sleepy Hollow*:

I wrote a kind of a child's theme for Ichabod Crane, which in fact would play when he was a child, on flashbacks [sic]. For reasons that I don't understand and never questioned, that theme kept coming in the middle of the Horseman's theme. This bit of innocence would just happen, and I remember thinking, "What is this doing here?" ... that innocent theme juxtaposed against that monster just worked for me. (qtd. in Clark)

For Elfman, the idea that a piece of music intended to represent childhood innocence should somehow function when juxtaposed against the murderous Horseman is an idea that defies logical explanation. Why, after all, should feelings associated so strongly with safety and comfort make any sense paired with grisly bloodshed and decapitation? What would compel Elfman to look upon the sight a faceless nightmare - a figure who, at varying points in the film, brutally murders several main characters, one child, and one unborn fetus - and respond with unironic, wistful innocence?

Elfman is understandably not interested in pursuing actual answers to these questions - he simply brings up the anecdote to illustrate the mysteries of artistic intuition. But if we spend a few moments watching and listening to *Sleepy Hollow*,

Elfman's impulse towards childlike innocence seems much less haphazard. Though the film is an R-rated horror film that few parents would permit their children to watch, Burton nevertheless saturates the film with auditory references to children's films and television shows. Sometimes he does this subtly - as when characters mimic the speaking patterns of animated heroes in *Scooby Doo*. Other times, the references are more overt - as when frogs and insects croak Ichabod's name in a direct auditory allusion to the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" portion of Disney's *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949). In writing music that is so suggestive of childhood, Elfman is simply following the lead of a larger soundtrack that seems insistent on triggering audience members' memories of cartoons they watched and listened to as children. In Burton's film, violent horror only serves as window dressing for the film's primary appeal: offering the adult listener the opportunity to re-experience cherished childhood texts.

i.ii. Argument and Central Question: What Role Do Children's Media Sounds Have on Adult Listeners?

Sleepy Hollow will not return elsewhere in this dissertation, but I lead with it here because Elfman's comments unwittingly gesture towards a trend that many composers, directors, and sound designers have been following since the late 1970s - taking sound and music associated with children's media and threading those sonic fragments into films made for ostensible adult audiences. For though it goes largely undiscussed, this phenomenon recurs throughout a wide array of films across the American film industry. We see (and hear) it in Spielberg's early blockbusters like

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), where music from Disney cartoons serve as the sonic backdrop for an unhappy suburban man's rejection of his family. We witness the trend in smaller independent films like *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), where music from 1960s *Peanuts* television specials plays as a backdrop for adult disappointment. We hear the devices in films like *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), where music from *Popeye* (1980) underscores an unstable man's descent into despair. We find these sonic devices in romantic comedies like *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008) and *The Five Year Engagement* (2012), where characters grapple with their relationship problems by adopting the exaggerated voices of Jim Henson's Muppet characters, or in salacious comedies like *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), where mimetic music styled after Warner Brothers cartoons augments scatological humor. Each of these films draw upon auditory fixtures from children's media for different ends, but all have a similar baseline effect - they re-engage adult audience members in memories, emotions, and desires that have in many cases have lain dormant since childhood.

This dissertation is, at its core, my attempt at understanding both where this impulse comes from and what it tells us about ourselves, not just as film spectators, but as film listeners. Why are we drawn to these acoustic tokens from childhood? Is it simple nostalgia, a desire to retreat into romanticized childhood memories? Is it a matter of regression, a symptom of some larger cultural unwillingness to mature out of childhood? Certainly, we have heard critics and cultural commentators lamenting what Pauline Kael called the "infantalization" of the American cinema audiences (qtd. in McBride 512) for at least as long as American films have been drawing upon

children's media. It is not a coincidence that the filmmakers who draw most frequently on sonic tropes from children's films and television programs are the same filmmakers who seem to face constant criticism for their perceived immaturity. As I demonstrate in the second chapter, Steven Spielberg more or less single-handedly initiated the trend of incorporating music and sound effects from children's cartoons in his 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In turn, scholars like Robin Wood and Robert Kolker spent the better part of the following decade disparaging him for transforming Hollywood into a peddler of expensive childish fantasies¹.

Similar criticism continues to fall on contemporary filmmakers, even those who do not produce blockbuster behemoths that supposedly crowd out smaller independent films. Wes Anderson, who comes into focus in the fourth and final chapter, makes comparatively intimate films, but he nevertheless receives near-constant criticism from those who view his aesthetic as overtly "twee," a derogatory term indicating overbearing childish sentimentality².

To be sure, these critics and scholars rarely focus their attacks specifically on the filmmakers' use of children's sound tropes - Spielberg is far more likely to be derided for his sentimental narratives and visual spectacle, just as Anderson is more likely to receive criticism for his meticulous doll's house aesthetic. Were one so inclined, however, it would not be difficult to extend those critiques to include the films' incorporation of Disney songs, *Looney Tunes* sound effects, or *Peanuts* music and reach similar conclusions - that in pushing these sonic tropes on their audiences, the directors are fostering some sense of unhealthy immaturity, a juvenile desire for

¹ See the second edition of Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness* and Wood's *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond*.

² See Mark Spitz's *Twee: The Gentle Revolution in Music, Books, Fashion, and Film*.

simplicity and sentimentality over the ostensibly more challenging and mature forms of cinema.

This sort of moralistic reading is exactly what I wish to avoid in this project. For as frequently and vociferously as these variations on “childishness” stand as monikers for perceived problems in Hollywood, such criticisms tend to cut off substantive discussion of what childhood actually entails in these films. Though directors like Spielberg and Anderson may foster varying degrees of fondness for childhood memories, neither director romanticizes childhood as an idyllic, harmonious period – rather, child characters in these films vividly experience sadness, anxiety, and trauma. When these directors draw upon auditory fragments that the adult audience is likely to remember from childhood, they are not simply inviting us to wax nostalgically about our youth - they are using these devices to trigger the complex and often unpredictable emotions that each audience member associates with childhood. In the process, the films enable new modes of feeling, new networks that connect our past and present-day selves. Sometimes, in the case of someone like Spielberg, making that connection through children’s media leads to a fuller, blunter understanding of our present-day desires. Other times, as with Anderson, re-assessing texts from childhood leads to new ways of re-engaging with the coping mechanisms we turned to in childhood.

It is crucial that these references play out primarily through sound, for sound carries unique qualities that makes it particularly apt for engaging with the audience’s early childhood associations. For one, sound - and music in particular - carries a distinctively powerful connection with memory. As Daniel Levitin explains in *How*

Music Works, specific music cues leave memory traces in the human brain, traces that grow stronger the longer we go without hearing that music. While a song that plays consistently on the radio every year will likely not attach itself to any particular memory, “as soon as we hear a song that we haven’t heard since a particular time in our lives, the floodgates of memory open and we’re immersed in memories” (166).

In many of the films in this study, the scattered songs from Disney films and *Peanuts* cartoons carry so much impact because many members of the adult audience have gone for so long without hearing these pieces of music. When a 45 year old woman who has not heard “Christmastime is Here” since she was a child suddenly hears that song in a Wes Anderson film, associations from that specific moment in her childhood are far more likely to overwhelm her.

Just as significant, however, is the fact that sound is frequently able to affect the film listener without drawing that listener’s conscious attention. Because film has been regarded for so long as a predominantly visual medium, auditory cues like music and sound effects are frequently designed to work over the listener subliminally. Max Steiner, composer of early Hollywood scores like *King Kong* (1933) and *Gone with the Wind* (1937) once famously claimed that the best film music “should be felt and not heard” (qtd. in Darby 18), and the quote echoes the film industry’s prevailing attitude towards sound even to this day - that the audience should not consciously notice sound and music, but instead only passively “feel” its dramatic directives. With audiences conditioned to focus primarily on the filmic image and ignore the soundtrack, sound provides an apt channel for sneaking these children’s references

past the adult listener's potential critical defenses - defenses that might otherwise reject these acoustic touchstones as a childish indulgence.

i.iii. Theoretical Scaffolding and the Limitations of Current Work on the Subject

Establishing a theoretical framework for this project has not been a simple task, as by focusing on music and sound from children's media, I have been working in a field that does not yet exist. Certainly, fields directly adjacent to this subject — film music and film sound studies, both of which were virtually non-existent thirty years ago — have flourished in the twenty-first century. Scholars like Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson, Carroll Vernassis, and David Neumeyer have pushed film music and sound studies into illuminating new directions, adapting at each turn to the changing media landscape and its ramifications on our traditional understanding of film sound³. Yet however diverse their reach, we still have not seen a focused study specifically devoted to sound in children's cinema or television.

My response has been to create a Frankenstein's monster of theoretical scaffolding, stitching together different strands of scholarship as needed on a case-by-case basis. Often, this has meant focusing specifically on scholarship devoted to individual filmmakers or production studios in my study. In many cases, scholars in these fields do take note of the various children's media references at play in these directors' films - they just do not explore the sonic dimension of these references.

Film scholars have well established that for a large number of filmmakers who came

³ See Gorbman, Richardson, and Vernassis's edited collection, *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, as well as David Neumeyer's edited collection, *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*.

of age with and after the Baby Boomers, cartoons, comics, and other media associated with childhood has long been a wellspring of inspiration. Lucas and Spielberg have rarely been coy about borrowing from *Flash Gordon* serials, or lifting sequences from Carl Barks's *Uncle Scrooge* comics, just as Tim Burton takes his inspiration from Rankin and Bass, or Anderson from Bill Melendez – references that are nakedly visible on the screen. But apart from a passing reference, few scholars researching these filmmakers have gone explored the extent to which sound, and not narrative references or visual homage, has played a role in these films. That oversight is significant, because sound often functions as a more consistent and slow-burning indicator of tone. A visual nod to the Uncle Scrooge story “Seven Cities of Gold” in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) may momentarily remind a small pocket of viewers that Indiana Jones is about to set off the same rolling boulder trap that plagued Uncle Scrooge. But sonic tropes - be they from the musical score, vocal delivery, or sound effects - can permeate the film at large. They frequently work to not simply remind audiences of a passing image, but to recreate and extend old feelings and memories that the visual reference can only fleetingly suggest.

Part of the challenge, however, lies in the fact that children's media is itself a slippery concept. The qualifiers we use to designate films, television programs, and songs as children's texts are constantly in flux. Ian Wojcik-Andrews identifies part of the issue when discussing discrepancies in the concept of “children's films.” That term, he explains, can encompass everything from “G-rated films made for children ... PG-13-rated films made about children and childhood ... and R-rated films children see, regardless of whether or not they are children's films” (6). To this, I would also

add the further complicating factor that many films we now view as children's films were not always regarded as such. Theatrical cartoon shorts in the 1940s could just as easily play before an audience of adults waiting to see *Casablanca* (1942) as an audience of children awaiting a reissue of *Pinocchio* (1940) - it was only when studios like Disney and Warner Brothers later moved those cartoons to television in the 1950s that audiences came to specifically regard these texts as icons of children's entertainment (a topic I will discuss in more depth in my first chapter).

These shifts mean that when we label a film, a television show, or any other piece of mass media as "children's media," the title is always going to come with qualifications. For the purposes of this study, when I refer to a film, cartoon, television show, or piece of music as "children's media," I am making that distinction based primarily on how the current audience in discussion is most likely to regard that text. When a piece of music from a Charlie Brown cartoon plays in an Anderson film like *The Royal Tenenbaums*, I am not concerned with whether or not the cartoon was initially intended for children, or whether its overriding themes of depression and ennui are child-friendly. Rather, I am concerned with whether or not Anderson's target audience is likely to associate this cartoon with childhood - whether or not hearing that music is likely to trigger childhood memories in Anderson's prototypical adult audience member. This is not a strictly empirical method, but it keeps the primary object of this project in focus - discovering ways in which ways in which these acoustic associations can reengage the audience with fantasies and coping mechanisms left behind in childhood.

i.iv. Chapter Summaries

But fully exploring these trends has entailed more than a simple look at films incorporating sonic references to children's media - it has also entailed spending just as much time studying the children's media in question. In order to appreciate the full extent to which Spielberg repurposes Disney's sound world in films like *Close Encounters*, for example, we need an equally thorough understanding of Disney's sound world in the first place. For this reason, I have structured the dissertation in two halves, each comprised of two chapters paired together. Both halves begin the same way, with a chapter that explores an important and influential sonic concept from mid-20th century children's media. I then follow that chapter with an exploration of that same sonic device as it re-appears in films made for more adult-centric audiences in the later 20th and 21st century. In this sense the dissertation is as much about the crucial trends that have shaped sound in 20th century children's media as it is about the adult-centric films that would later appropriate those trends.

In the first chapter, "Repurposed Fantasies and Patchwork Nostalgia: Sound in Disney's Television Programs," I turn to the most prominent creator of children's media texts: Walt Disney. In this chapter, I explore sound in Disney's early forays into television in the 1950s, a period that played a pivotal role in transforming the studio into the massive media empire that it remains today. I argue that by selectively recycling and recontextualizing sonic devices from the studio's archive, television shows like *Disneyland* actually created the "Disney sound" that would remain the studio's sonic signature for generations to come. In the decades that have followed

those first television programs, the Disney brand has cultivated a sonic identity associated with wholesome sweetness, an aura that offers reassuring comfort for children and nostalgia for adults. Variations on romantic, sentimental melodies from songs like “When You Wish Upon a Star,” non-threatening orchestrations that merge lush strings with soothing choirs, patient and friendly narrators, playful sound effects, and high-pitched “cute” animal voices have all blended together to create the auditory equivalent of a fantasy utopia. These sonic tropes might not have originated in television, but they cohered there. With programs like *Disneyland* and *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color*, Disney melded together the most harmonious sounds from the studio’s diverse archive of animated films, de-emphasizing any of the violence, sexual suggestiveness, or subversive irony that frequently cropped up in the films themselves. In the process, Disney created a sonic web that ultimately became so powerful, it could imbue virtually any accompanying footage - no matter how unremarkable, historically inaccurate, cheap looking, or even terrifying - with the sheen of wistful nostalgia.

The next chapter, “Encountering Childhood Sounds: Spielberg and Acoustic Disney Fantasies” delves into the work of a director who learned to repurpose that wistful auditory nostalgia for an adult audience. Spielberg was part of a generation that grew up with Disney’s sentimental fantasies in film and on television, and his early films frequently express a longing to return to those magical universes that Disney’s films and television shows once seemed to promise. This is particularly the case for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* - here, we see Spielberg baldly reappropriating music from Disney’s films. In this film, Spielberg and composer

John Williams use orchestral variations on “When You Wish Upon a Star” as an auditory lure that draws the unhappy protagonist away from his family and toward some distant extra-terrestrial safe-haven. But Spielberg recontextualizes the music so that it invokes more than the original Disney films - it suggests that the oversized fantastical worlds that Disney once promised are suddenly accessible again. I refer to this type of impossible world as a “sublime refuge,” an intentionally oxymoronic term meant to suggest an impossible sensation that combines both overpowering awe and terror with soothing comfort. That this space is impossible is not lost on the director; *Close Encounters* is just as much about the dangerous ramifications of fleeing into film fantasies as it is about their actual pleasures.

In the second chapter pairing, we return to animation and explore a less direct means of eliciting pleasure from the listener. The third chapter, “He Doesn’t Speak Words - Counterintuitive Soundtracks in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Animation,” examines two animated films - Bobe Cannon’s *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1951) and Bill Melendez’s *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965) - that pioneer alternative approaches to the types of sentimental sound found in contemporaneous Disney cartoons. Both films employ counterintuitive methods that do not produce clear relationships between sound and emotion, ultimately finding their appeal with a phenomenon I refer to as “comfortable discord.” These films triangulate image, sound, and emotion through unorthodox means, creating scenarios where conflicting sensations clash in ways that should be unnerving. These are moments where sound effects vanish unexpectedly or appear where they are not supposed to, when music follows developments that seem unrelated to on-screen events, or when a tonal

disconnect emerges between the content and the delivery of a character's speech. Yet somehow, rather than disturb, these clashes conjure up a form of open-ended emotion that comes across as uncannily appealing. Because the open-ended tension never actually resolves, the films invite a sense of peace within that tension, a comfortable stasis within conflict. The soundtracks in both *Gerald McBoing-Boing* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* take the audience's engagement in roundabout circles, compelling cognitive connections that are rarely easy to process. But the work devoted to following those circles often replicates the animated characters' unique states of mind, provoking empathy that might not have been possible through more conventional means.

In the fourth and final chapter, "Irresolvable Empathy: Revisiting Comforting Discord in the films of Wes Anderson," we see how that tonally ambivalent approach to sound can impact adult listeners. Anderson draws upon the comforting discord of cartoons like *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and he invents scenarios that demonstrate the appeal of that irresolvable audio-visual tension. In Anderson's films, that appeal frequently lies in the ways that these children's works recreate the tumultuous emotion that characters face in their everyday lives and miniaturize those feelings so that they become approachable and manageable. Yet while the comforting discord of children's media can function as a coping mechanism, it can also open characters up to new empathetic connections. The sound worlds that Anderson's characters turn to might be tense, undefined spaces where emotion is constantly unresolved. But in being so open-ended, these sonic landscapes can also leave Anderson's characters more emotionally accessible to each other. Comforting discord turns into an

affectively flexible and capacious space with no pre-determined narrative, no fixed emotional response that must result from hearing Vince Guaraldi's *Peanuts* music in the Tenenbaum household or Mark Mothersbaugh's offbeat synthesizer in Zissou's submarine. As a result, characters that encounter each other in these spaces have the opportunity to set their emotional responses on their own terms and forge new empathetic connections with one another.

Because so many of the concepts I discuss in these chapters relate to early childhood fantasies, it might initially seem logical to connect these readings to certain strains of psychoanalytic theory. One might, for example, be tempted to read Neary's desire to escape into a void of soothing, pleasurable sound in *Close Encounters* as a desire for what Kaja Silverman refers to as "an imaginary return to the sonorous envelope" of the mother's voice in *The Acoustic Mirror* (87). In this theoretical context, a character's desire for comforting sound represents a hidden desire to regress into infancy and reunite with the lost mother⁴. In the earliest stages of this project, I attempted to read the films through this lens, performing all manner of mental gymnastics to make scholars like Silverman relevant to my readings. Yet I soon came to realize that psychoanalysis, for all of its value as a therapeutic tool, is an extremely limiting framework for the concepts I wished to explore in this project. Every time I attempted to read these films through psychoanalysis, I found myself reducing each film to the same set of symbols and foregone conclusions. Applying psychoanalysis to these films entailed assuming that children's media was only

⁴ A key difference, of course, is that Silverman is speaking exclusively of the solo female voice - to make this claim, one would need to extend Silverman's argument to the phantasmagoria of orchestral and vocal sounds we hear in *Close Encounters*.

significant to the characters in these films when it offered up metaphors for their actual fixations on Oedipal conflicts, lost maternal objects, and womb fantasies.

Conversely, much of what I find so fascinating about the films in this study lies in the way they use children's media sound in ways that resist clear and direct symbolic connections. Spielberg and Anderson make very different films, but both share a focus on characters who use the soundscape of children's media to create new experiences of feeling, not to simply replicate imagined experiences from early childhood. They are looking for alternatives to their real-world childhood experiences, not surrogates for those experiences. One might listen to the soothing, choral tones and Disney music allusions at the end of *Close Encounters* and conclude that we are listening to some masked desire to return to the womb, but doing so means ignoring the rapturous ecstasy that accompanies those feelings of comfort. Sound in this context is functioning and more than a placeholder for some buried desire to reunite with the lost mother or vanquish the father - sound is instead pushing for new experiences that cannot be answered by regression alone.

Thus when I use a term like "fantasy" throughout these chapters, I do not mean it in any Freudian sense - rather, I am speaking of the alternate emotional universes that these characters are trying to access. For Spielberg, that fantasy involves escaping into an alternate universe where comfort and terror coexist in some all-consuming void of sustained pleasure. For Anderson, the fantasy entails pulling an alternate universe into this world, using the soundscapes of children's media to transform everyday life into a plane where anxiety and tension can nevertheless produce their own form of comfort. Both directors, in other words, use children's

media to carry the audience into a soundscape where contradictory emotions can coexist and still produce some form of pleasure. And though they reach very different conclusions about these tonally conflicted fantasies, both ultimately demonstrate that re-accessing the media we absorbed as children actually leads us to more multifaceted approaches to our emotional lives as adults.

Chapter 1: Repurposed Fantasies and Patchwork Nostalgia: Sound in Disney's Television Programs.

1.1: Prologue: Uncle Walt's Gentle-Sounding Menace

Midway through “The Plausible Impossible,” a 1956 episode of *Disneyland*, host Walt Disney walks the audience through a lesson on sound effects in the studio’s animation. The demonstration offers revealing insight into the Disney studio’s approach to sound, though not in any way that Walt Disney⁵ or his employees likely intended. In the sequence, Walt demonstrates various sound effects, using an animated Donald Duck as his increasingly less-than-willing assistant. As our host lectures on the notion of “plausible impossibilities,” an offscreen animator begins drawing various heavy objects and dropping them on Donald’s head, each triggering a key sound effect. As a lesson on sound effects, the sequence tells us little - Walt is generally vague on how the studio chooses and produces these sounds, and the sequence on the whole is much more invested in pummeling Donald for the audience’s amusement than in teaching anything concrete. Yet this interaction between Donald Duck and Walt is nevertheless instructive, for it demonstrates just how intensely Disney’s 1950s television programs had come to rely upon sound.

⁵ Walt Disney is a name that can mean many things depending on the context, given that Walt Disney is simultaneously the name of a person, an animation studio, and a global corporation. To avoid confusion going forward, I will be referring to the man himself as “Walt Disney” or “Walt,” the animation studio that produced films and shorts as “The Disney Studio,” and the larger Disney brand and corporation simply as “Disney.”

The nominal purpose of this segment is to demonstrate that even when the sounds in Disney cartoons are technically physically inaccurate, they will still seem “plausible” to the audience as long as they match the more general feelings that the images suggest. Comprehending that thesis from Walt’s cryptic presentation alone, however, requires meeting our host more than half way. Throughout the presentation, Walt does not explain the concepts so much as he states them as self-evident. “We all know that a head isn’t hollow,” he tells us, “But it is this idea that lends plausibility to a sound like this” - at which point a pencil raps Donald Duck on the head, cueing the sound of a hollow wood block. Walt’s lesson leaves more questions than answers - after all, how could the “idea” of Donald’s head being hollow make the wood block noise seem plausible when that woodblock noise created the hollow head idea in the first place? To all appearances, this is a piece of cartoon slapstick along the lines of Warner Brothers’ competing *Looney Tunes* series⁶. Pedagogical pretenses notwithstanding, the sequence seems primarily designed to provoke mildly sadistic glee at watching an animated character’s comic misfortune.

Yet unlike those Warner Brothers cartoons, the Donald Duck sequence in “The Plausible Implausible” somehow never comes across as violently as its premise would indicate. For all of the damage the duck takes, the scene nevertheless maintains a consistently sweet tone. That gentle quality comes across, almost exclusively, through the soundtrack. The Donald Duck scene follows a formula that by 1956, the Disney Studio has fine-tuned into an art, a formula wherein every element of the soundtrack works to soften the audience’s impression of the content

⁶ Indeed, the sequence bears surface similarities to Chuck Jones’s Daffy Duck cartoon *Duck Amuck* (1953), another short when an unseen animator (ultimately revealed as Bugs Bunny) proceeds to manipulate cartoon reality in order to heap abuse on a cartoon duck.

on-screen. In this instance, the soundtrack softens the material so much that even would-be cartoon mayhem comes across as calm reassurance. The audience may be witnessing a callous host subject his creation to a series of violent pratfalls, but because the host sounds friendly, because the music sounds amiable, and because even the sound effects themselves sound playful, any mean-spiritedness dissipates into sundry comfort.

These qualities come through most overtly through Walt's voice. If we were to look at his part as written, it would seem as though Walt is playing the part of a wry provocateur, a Bugs Bunny-like figure who uses educational "demonstrations" as thinly veiled excuses to heap torment on hapless characters like Donald. Walt never apologizes for the pain he's inflicting upon his duck, and he responds to each of Donald's outraged quacks by calmly announcing a more severe sound effect to test on the duck's head. Of course, Donald Duck is only a fictional cartoon character, and we can only take the "pain" he experiences so seriously when he bounces back from each bopping unharmed. But even if these experiments are only temporary annoyances, Walt is nevertheless remarkably callous towards subjecting Donald to these displeasures simply for the audience's amusement. After a safe flattens Donald to a roaring "clang", Walt even goes so far as to demand a repeat of the demonstration, announcing, "let's run the film back and hear that interesting sound again." In this instance, the educational pretense of the demonstration fades away entirely, for replaying the action serves no purpose other than an additional laugh at Donald's expense as he panics before getting clobbered again.

Yet however cruelly he seems to be treating his animated celebrity, our emcee's signature "Uncle Walt" voice ensures that Walt never comes across as mean-spirited. His steady baritone register suggests calm, paternal wisdom, while his mild mid-Western drawl - particularly noticeable when he elongates his vowels, or peppers his speech with a casual "uh" - gives him the air of a folksy man of the people. No trace of winking impishness seeps into his voice, no indication that he is aware he is part of a comedy routine. Walt's soothing voice creates the impression that we are witnessing something friendly and wholesome, even as he has a cartoon duck pummeled for our amusement.

And though less overt, the rest of the soundtrack follows Walt's lead in making what should by all logic be a standard appeal to schadenfreude seem cute instead. As is common for cartoon music in the 1950s, Oliver Wallace's orchestral score "Mickey Mouses" Donald's actions, mimicking the duck's physical movement with corresponding musical phrases. Yet where one might expect such mimetic music to exaggerate the violent sight physical gags, Wallace draws our attention away from these intense moments by focusing on Donald's smaller, "cuter" actions. When Donald gives a cherubic smile and waggles his tail feathers at the start of the sequence, flutes make sure we notice by fluttering in time with his feathers.

Conversely, when a floating pencil proceeds to bop Donald on the head, the music underplays the action; as the pencil winds itself up, an obviously amiable melody plays. The music only acknowledges the physical impact with a slight crescendo that cuts off right before the pencil hits Donald's head. The genial music effectively tells us that however much Donald may look discomforted, everything is still in good fun.

After all, were Donald in actual pain, how could his bodily movements create such serene music?

One could argue, of course, that the music only downplays the physical comedy to stay out of the way of the sound effects, the ostensible purpose of this demonstration. But even the featured sound effects work to soften the impact of Donald's mishaps. Uncle Walt tests three sound effects on Donald's head: a hollow woodblock plays when the pencil hits him, a gong sound plays when a mallet smashes him, and a noise Uncle Walt describes as "letting a steel tank drop ten feet onto the concrete floor of an empty swimming pool, with reverberation added" plays when a safe lands on Donald's head. Walt justifies each of these effects based on their loosely-defined "plausibility," but the true impetus for these noises seems to be their mildness. Plausible or not, the light, hollow rap we hear as the pencil hits Donald's head sounds more playful than painful. And when larger objects strike Donald, heavy reverberation dampens what might otherwise have been piercing auditory effects. There is no particular reason why adding reverb to the sound of steel hitting concrete should make the falling safe sound more plausible, but that reverb does dilute what would otherwise have sounded like a bombastic crash. Rather than exaggerate the physical impact of various objects coming into contact with Donald's head, reverberating sounds like this - sustained past the moment of impact - strip the violent actions of their visceral immediacy.

All of this should lead to a tonally confusing cartoon, an extreme bout of cognitive dissonance where the audience sees gleeful slapstick yet hears a mild, reassuring soundtrack. But what is remarkable is that Disney in 1956 has fine-tuned

its auditory formula so precisely that it can push this soothing blanket of music, voices, and sound effects over nearly any scenario and still leave the audience convinced they are witnessing something wholesome and innocent. The disarming combination of Uncle Walt's folksy voice, Wallace's amiable score, and gentle sound effects are not in conflict with the tone of the animated slapstick - the soundtrack determines the tone of the animated slapstick, insisting so emphatically on the fundamental sweetness of what we are witnessing that watching a grown man torturing a cartoon duck somehow registers as sentimental. And as I will demonstrate in this chapter, overpoweringly disarming⁷ soundtracks for Disney television programs like this played a crucial role in turning the Disney brand into the single most pervasive force in 20th century children's media.

1.2: Disney Sound Scholarship and Television

One might be forgiven for doubting my above claim, given how little attention scholars and historians have paid to sound from Disney's early television programs. This is understandable to a point, as so many of Disney's most famous sonic innovations came through the cinema, not television. Indeed, between releasing the first fully synchronized sound cartoon with *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the first film to produce an official soundtrack album with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)⁸, and one of the first films to experiment with stereophonic sound with *Fantasia*

⁷ Because the term "soundtrack" has grown ambiguous in the wake of score albums marketed as "soundtracks," I should clarify here that by "soundtrack" I am literally referring to a film or television program's entire soundtrack - that is to say, all of the recorded dialogue, music, and sound effects - and not an album of music featuring music from the program.

⁸ As Jon Burlingame explains, prior to *Snow White*, any time a studio would release music from a film's soundtrack in another medium, they would re-record it - often with musicians and performers who did not even appear in the film itself. *Snow White* was the first time that that a studio pressed music from the film's actual soundtrack onto an album in a new medium (Burlingame 2-5).

(1940)⁹, a list of the studio's cinematic accomplishments during its Golden Age¹⁰ often reads like a history of watershed moments for sound in the American film industry. And not without reason, these accomplishments have received significant (if less than ample) scholarly attention over the past several decades. Most of this scholarship has focused exclusively on music - particularly through studies by Daniel Goldmark and Ross Care, who have put crucial work into both historicizing and theorizing the studio's film music¹¹. And even when Disney historians are not devoted to sound exclusively, they often spend significant time discussing sonic elements of Disney's films. J.P. Telotte, for example, devotes significant attention to the technological development of sound in the studio's early animated shorts in *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (23-41), while Michael Barrier devotes a lengthy portion of his Disney history chapters discussing the importance of voice acting in the studio's early sound cartoons in his animation history tome, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (119-121). While there is still much work to be done on the sound from Disney's films, academia has at least scratched the surface.

⁹ Fantasound, a form of stereo that Disney attempted to have installed in theaters screening *Fantasia*. The technology proved too impractical and costly for many theaters to incorporate, but it paved the way for contemporary uses of stereo sound in Hollywood films. See Gabler (346-347).

¹⁰ Generally speaking, Disney historians who refer to the studio's Golden Age are generally referring to the span of time that begins with 1928's *Steamboat Willie*, and concludes with 1942's *Bambi*, the last film to enter production before the animator's strike, war effort, and extensive layoffs permanently limited the level of scope and ambition that Walt Disney was willing to pursue in the studio's animated films. See Gabler (399-400).

¹¹ See Care's "Make Walt's Music" and Goldmark's "Drawing a History of Animated Film Music," for studies in the studio's musical history. For more theoretical work, see Care's musicological analysis of the score to *Bambi* "Threads of Melody: The Evolution of a Major Film Score - Walt Disney's *Bambi*" and Goldmark's theoretical work on Disney (and Warner Brothers) composer Carl Stalling in *Tunes for Tunes* (10-43).

Conversely, the same critics and scholars have virtually ignored sound from Disney's television programs in the 1950s and 1960s. Ross Care, for example, elides the television programs almost entirely in his otherwise thorough history of the studio's music, acknowledging the program only with a brief parenthetical mention of "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" from *Disneyland* (Care 34). The impact of Walt Disney's voice as *Disneyland*'s host receives more attention, but even in these instances, authors are more focused on Walt's visual screen presence than they are on his voice. For example, in his book *Disney TV*, Telotte briefly touches on the way Walt's self-consciousness over his midwestern "twang" made him reluctant to host the program (16). Rather than take this anecdote as an opportunity to discuss the way Walt's accent impacted his persona as a host, however, Telotte instead treats Walt's reservation as a mental hurdle that he needed to overcome in order to realize the evidently more important "power of the image" (16) and become what Telotte calls "a visual emblem of the show" (16)¹². Imagery, in other words, dominates discussions of Disney's television programs even when the conversation seems to invite sound.

Again, to a certain extent, this neglect is understandable. After all, where Disney's films featured innovation after innovation in nearly every aspect of film sound, the television programs primarily recycled those innovations. In some cases, they literally recycled sound from the films - shows like *Disneyland* and *Walt*

¹² In fairness, Telotte does not entirely ignore sound in his study. While arguing that Disney applied the same innovations to television that the studio applied to film, Telotte credits Disney for offering "one of the first commercial stereo sound broadcasts with 'The Peter Tchaikovsky Story'" in 1959 (*Disney TV* 25). Even here, however, Telotte does not go into any further detail on the impact stereo sound had on this episode (or for that matter, how many families actually had stereo-capable television sets that could notice the difference).

Disney's Wonderful World of Color were anthology programs that frequently repurposed clips and segments from the studio's earlier films. A typical episode - such as 1955's "The Story of the Silly Symphony" - might consist of little more than Walt Disney introducing a handful of animated shorts from the 1930s. Why, then, would a Disney music or sound scholar see fit to discuss a program like this when he or she could simply discuss the original cartoons that make up the anthology? For even when the television programs were not literally repurposing older material, the soundtracks still frequently consisted of material that originated in the studio's films. Throughout its first several years, *Disneyland's* theme music was an arrangement of "When You Wish Upon a Star" from *Pinocchio*, and the score for much of the original footage created for the show typically consisted of variations on other popular songs from the studio's archive. Walt's voice as the show's emcee may have been a newly refined addition to Disney soundscape, but the voices of other regular characters on the programs - such as Donald Duck or Jiminy Cricket - were already known entities who had been well established in cartoon shorts and feature films. Even sound effects - such as those featured in Walt's "Plausible Impossible" demonstration - originated in film before they migrated into television¹³. With all of this repurposed material in mind, it is little wonder that scholars have not bothered with the sound from Disney's television programs - after all, why waste time analyzing recycled film music in episodes of *Disneyland* when, presumably, one could more fruitfully study the same music in its original cinematic context?

¹³ We can hear the bops and reverberating crashes that land on Donald's head in a wide range of Donald Duck cartoons that ran in theaters throughout the 1940s and early 1950s.

Yet as I will demonstrate, all of this repurposed material is precisely what makes sound from Disney's early television programs so crucial. For by selectively recycling and recontextualizing sonic devices from the studio's archive, the television shows actually created the "Disney sound" that would remain the studio's sonic signature for generations to come. In the decades that have followed those first television programs, the Disney brand has cultivated a sonic identity associated with wholesome sweetness, an aura that offers reassuring comfort for children and nostalgia for adults. Variations on romantic, sentimental melodies from songs like "When You Wish Upon a Star," non-threatening orchestrations that merge lush strings with soothing choirs, patient and friendly narrators, playful sound effects, and high-pitched "cute" animal voices have all blended together to create the auditory equivalent of a fantasy utopia. These sonic tropes might not have originated in television, but they cohered in television. With programs like *Disneyland* and *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, Disney melded together the most harmonious sounds from the studio's diverse archive of animated films, de-emphasizing any of the violence, sexual suggestiveness, or subversive irony that frequently cropped up in the films themselves. In the process, Disney created a sonic web that ultimately became so powerful that it could imbue virtually any accompanying footage - no matter how unremarkable, historically inaccurate, cheap looking, or even terrifying - with the sheen of wistful nostalgia.

1.3: Brief History of Disney's Television Transition

Before moving forward, however, context on the studio's move into television itself is necessary. The Disney studio entered television at a pivotal transition period. Throughout the 1940s, the studio struggled through a near-unending series of financial and creative setbacks; between lost foreign markets due to the war in Europe, a series of expensive commercial failures like *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942), an acrimonious animator's strike in 1941, and American audiences' general waning interest in animation, the studio spent most of the decade financially hobbled. The studio thus entered the 1950s prepared to undergo a massive brand reinvention. As Christopher Anderson explains, all of the prior decade's struggles compelled Walt and Roy Disney to transform the studio from a comparatively modest "independent producer of feature films and cartoon short subjects" into a massive "diversified leisure and entertainment corporation" (137), a network encompassing nearly every marketable product and medium.

While the studio had been reaping profits from merchandising since the early 1930s, the Disney brothers had up until this point been content to simply license most the studio's character likenesses and music to third parties¹⁴. Now, Walt and Roy began expanding into new media on their own; over the course of the decade, the company established its own theatrical distribution subsidiary¹⁵, created its own in-house record label¹⁶, constructed the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, and

¹⁴ This is not to understate the impact of those licensed products. As JP Telotte argues in *Mouse Machine*, the studio's success in using licensed products to advertise for its films and shorts throughout the 1930s and 1940s provided a working template to follow when the studio moved into television and other mass media in the 1940s (98-99).

¹⁵ In 1954, the Disney brothers decided to sever ties with their distributor, RKO, and instead release their films with the studio's own distribution arm, Buena Vista (Anderson 137).

¹⁶ Though Disney had licensed its songs and scores to various record labels and publishers since *The Three Little Pigs* in 1933, Disneyland Records was the first actual record label founded and owned by Disney itself (Collins and Ehbar 20).

produced multiple television series. Guiding this cross-promotional offense was an ethos of extreme synergy; as Anderson explains, every product “stamped with the Disney imprint,” would feed into a “vast commercial web, a tangle of advertising and entertainment in which each Disney product ... promoted all Disney products” (134). Merchandising created a feedback loop, a system where each new product both created and fostered warm associations with every other product with the Disney brand.

Television lay at the center of this cross-promotional empire. As Anderson explains, the anthology program functioned as “the beacon that would draw the American public to the domain of Disney” (134), a platform with unprecedented reach where all of the studio’s major projects and products could coexist and reinforce each other. Walt and Roy Disney were significantly ahead of the rest of the film industry in their attitude towards television. In an era where nearly every other Hollywood studio regarded the new medium as a threat to its livelihood, the Disneys were eyeing television for its promotional potential¹⁷. In 1950, they hired the research firm of C.J. LaRoche to study the studio’s prospects for television (*Telotte Disney TV* xvii), and later that year, they gave the medium a trial run by producing a Christmas special for NBC, “One Hour in Wonderland.” Staged as a Christmas party at the Disney studio, the special anticipated what would soon become Disney’s television formula by combining clips from the studio’s cartoons, fictionalized “behind the scenes” antics with animators and their characters, and preview footage

¹⁷ Anderson speculates that one possible reason for the studio’s early television embrace may have been that unlike other Hollywood studios that thrived throughout the decade, the Disney studio struggled so much throughout the 1940s that it had comparatively less to lose from a new medium (134).

from *Alice in Wonderland* (due to be released the following year). The special was a ratings success (Telotte 99), and it demonstrated to both Disney and the networks that the studio could attract large tv audiences - even while presenting what often amounted to an elaborate commercial for the studio's past and upcoming films.

Walt Disney used that success for leverage when he set about selling his first television series to the networks. For Walt, this series was a means to a very specific end. For over a decade, he had been drafting plans for a Disney theme park, a grandiose project that kept ballooning far past the studio's financial resources.

Knowing that networks were eager for a Disney television series after the success of the Christmas special, he proceeded to develop a package that would bind a new Disney anthology series with the upcoming theme park. He and his employees developed the concept for the *Disneyland* anthology series, conceived in its initial form as the televised embodiment of the Disneyland park. As Walt explained in his pitches to the networks, the theme park would be "the format of the show. It becomes a real place springing out of what we present on the TV screen. The public is going to see it on TV and actually feel they are a part of it" (qtd. in Gabler 510). Any network that purchased this show would have vested interest in making sure the audience felt like part of that park; in order to buy the show, the purchaser would also need to put in \$500,000 for a 35 percent share of the theme park and guarantee up to \$4,500,000 in loans towards the park's construction (Telotte, *Mouse Machine* 100).

While NBC and CBS balked at the terms, ABC, then mired in third place in the ratings, agreed to the package (Gabler 507). Several months after the deal was finalized, the first episode of *Disneyland* aired on October 27, 1954.

The program was an immediate commercial and critical success; in its first year alone, *Disneyland* provided ABC with its then-highest-ever rated program, won critical raves¹⁸, landed Emmy and Peabody awards (Telotte, *Mouse Machine* 101), and made Walt Disney an even more extensive household name than he already was. The program quickly proved its effectiveness as a marketing tool for the theme park - through early episodes that giddily invited audiences to look in on the park's construction, the show created a level of demand and anticipation that, as Anderson claims, effectively "called the park into existence (134). *Disneyland* collapsed the boundary separating fictional television programs from tangible physical locations in the real world, creating a sphere where the studio's animated fantasies, documentary films, and real-world physical parks all shared the same diegetic space. For these reasons and others, numerous Disney and culture scholars, including Anderson and Telotte, regard *Disneyland* as the most crucial turning point in the company's history. Anderson suggests that he is only making a "slight exaggeration" when he claims that "Disney mounted an entertainment empire on the cornerstone of this first television series" (135) while Telotte credits the show for transforming Disney "into the very cultural air we breathe" (*Disney TV* 15). By telling millions of viewers each week that the park and show were one and the same, *Disneyland* created the impression that all Disney products were extensions of the same universe that simply took different forms - that the "happiest place on earth" could be readily accessible from each product that bore the Disney name.

¹⁸ As Neal Gabler notes, by April of 1955, when the show had only produced 20 episodes, *Newsweek* was already trumpeting the program as "an American institution" (qtd. in Gabler 511).

Quite how the show elicited such a rapt response is a more complex question. As Neal Gabler notes, early episodes of the show had a decidedly “jerry-built” quality that often verged on incoherence. Gabler observes that the premier episode, which consisted of Walt describing the upcoming park to the camera, previews of future episodes, and clips from the studio’s *Plane Crazy* (1927), *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Song of the South* (1946), “looked as if it had been tossed together randomly” (511), and that ramshackle quality never entirely left the show. How then, did a program that often seemed like a such a disorganized mix of recycled content and naked advertising win over audiences so powerfully?

Scholars offer a variety of answers to that question, but they tend to rest on the idea of nostalgia. Anderson, for example, reminds us that while the show recycled content, viewers in 1954 would have regarded the chance to re-watch cartoons and films that disappeared from theaters decades ago as an exciting prospect. *Disneyland*, Anderson argues, gave viewers the opportunity to “halt the flow of mass culture by remembering relics from the Disney vaults” (146), giving viewers the chance to nostalgically re-experience texts that had once seemed ephemeral. If this is the case, *Disneyland* entered at a particularly well-timed cultural moment - in 1954, the people who were children at the start of the studio’s Golden Age were now adults in the midst of the baby boom, quickly producing new child viewers of their own¹⁹. Jason Sperb follows this line of thinking and argues that in producing a show that children could view “alongside their sentimental parents” *Disneyland* “stumbled upon a kind of generational nostalgia.” Just as the show was compelling parents to reminisce over

¹⁹ Anderson notes that “as a result of a postwar baby boom, Disney’s target audience of children between the ages of five and fourteen grew from 22 million in 1940 to 35 million in 1960” (134).

fond childhood memories, it was also planting “the seeds for a future nostalgia” in their children, creating a cross-generational scenario with “remembered pasts coexisting with anticipated futures” (105). *Disneyland*, under this reading, succeeded so thoroughly by creating a nostalgic feedback loop, an innocent fantasy that was constantly in the process of being rediscovered, even for younger generations who were experiencing that fantasy for the first time.

Yet however well-reasoned these arguments may be, I would argue that scholars like Anderson and Sperb overlook a crucial point when they attribute *Disneyland*'s popularity to nostalgia: many of the films and shorts that *Disneyland* excerpted were largely unpopular upon release. Nostalgia may explain why adult audiences were excited to see clips from popular Mickey Mouse shorts like *The Band Concert* (1935) or massive hits like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), but what can we make of the show's frequent habit of repurposing material from films that never fully reached audiences in the first place? Multiple episodes of *Disneyland* draw from films like *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942), all films that were financially costly commercial failures that struggled to find audiences in their initial release.

In many of these cases, for that matter, the films failed to find audiences due to jarringly dark or challenging passages that now seem like the antithesis of Disney's signature tone. Neal Gabler, for example, suggests that *Pinocchio* (1940) with its nightmarish sequences of naughty boys transforming into donkeys, failed to find an audience in its initial release because it too frequently served as a “reminder of the travails of the Depression and the war in Europe” (308). He later supposes that

Bambi, a film that features multiple sequences where beautiful woodland critters get brutally gunned down by faceless hunters, similarly failed at the box office because it fixated on “harsh reality and seriousness” when audiences were already experiencing more than enough harsh reality with the ongoing war in Europe (398). As I stated earlier, the studio struggled to connect with audiences throughout the duration of the 1940s - why then, would so many audience members in 1954 suddenly feel nostalgically inclined towards the same films that many of them rejected a decade ago?

The answer, I argue, lies in sound. As easy as it may be to overlook, sound is the reason that *Disneyland* came across not as a jumbled mess of unrelated fragments - often from films few people liked in the first place²⁰ - and instead came across as a unified entry-point to an alternate world where nostalgia’s fantasies became realities. For by selectively drawing from the studio’s catalogue of songs, melodies, voice, sound effects, and other auditory tropes, *Disneyland* created an auditory tapestry that could effectively rewrite the audience’s emotional associations with past Disney works. Stripped of context and any attendant baggage, these sound fragments conjured up an alternative history for the studio, one where even the most troubling, audience-alienating commercial disappointments of the 1940s came across as innocent memories to be cherished. By emphasizing the pure and joyous elements of

²⁰ One caveat; it is true that many of these films were more successful upon reissue. After finding financial success in bringing *Snow White* back into theaters in 1944, the studio embarked on a regular reissue strategy, returning films like *Pinocchio* and *Bambi* to theaters roughly every 5-7 years. Through these reissues, most of these films gradually turned a profit (For example, Janet Wasko tells us that by 1973, reissues of *Pinocchio* had brought in an additional \$13 million to its original box office (137)). It is likely that by the time *Disneyland* premiered in 1954, many of these initially poorly-received films had accumulated at least partially more receptive audiences. At the same time, Anderson claims that these reissues were “unpredictable” and that by and large, Disney’s archive was “virtually inaccessible to the general public” before *Disneyland* (146), indicating that audiences for these reissues were somewhat limited.

the studio's past so emphatically, sound in *Disneyland* managed to create the impression that feelings of uncomplicated innocence always had and always would be Disney's defining qualities.

1.4: "When You Wish Upon a Star" and The Disneyland Story

That dynamic comes through most dramatically through *Disneyland's* treatment of a song that would soon metamorphosize into Disney's auditory calling card. "When You Wish Upon a Star" has been synonymous with Disney for so long now that it can be difficult to imagine a time when the company did not use the song as its anthem. But Leigh Harline's ballad from *Pinocchio* did not always receive such favored treatment. According to Ross Care, Walt Disney was displeased with Harline's songs and score for the film, and reportedly responded to the song's Oscar win by grouching "Maybe it wasn't so bad after all" (qtd. in Care 28)²¹. The fact that the song won an Oscar could indicate it was at least critically acclaimed, but according to Robin Allen, reviewers in 1940 regularly singled out *Pinocchio's* songs for criticism (77). In fact, so many critics apparently disparaged the film's songs that the one film critic who *did* like the songs, Richard Mallet of *Punch*, felt compelled to acknowledge the unpopularity of his opinion, writing, "I will not follow the others in making remarks about the alleged regrettable inferiority of the tunes in *Pinocchio*"

²¹ To a certain extent, we should take such a claim with a grain of salt, especially as Care leaves his source anonymous. Knowing what we know about Walt Disney's meticulous control over all aspects of his films during this period, it is hard to imagine him signing off on music that he was, to use Care's words, "not especially fond of" (28). This is especially puzzling considering that the songs would have needed to be locked before animation even began, fairly early in the production process. Later in the same piece, Care includes excerpts from a story conference with Walt and Harlene that demonstrates just how exacting Walt was on his composer (Care 29). That said, given that Walt also had *Fantasia* and *Bambi* in production at the same time, it is plausible that his divided attention led him to sign off on music simply to keep the production moving forward.

(qtd. in Allen 77). “When You Wish Upon a Star” was not, in other words, a song that many in 1940 could have predicted turning into Disney’s most prominent musical icon, and the studio virtually ignored the song over the course of the next fourteen years²².

Yet when *Disneyland*’s pilot episode, “The Disneyland Story,” premiered in 1954, “When You Wish Upon a Star” featured prominently as the theme music for the show’s opening credits. The reasoning behind the decision is unclear - indeed, it is not even clear whether Walt himself had a change of heart and personally decided to use the song, or if the idea came from somebody else on the show’s production team. When listening to the ballad in retrospect of course, the reasoning seems obvious - taken in isolation, “When You Wish Upon a Star” comes across as a promissory note for wish fulfillment, a shimmering, mystical melody that assures listeners that a pure-hearted wish upon a star will make their “dreams come true.”

What better anthem could one find for a television show designed to convince viewers to share Walt Disney’s own outlandish dream? Disneyland, after all, was to be an idealized fantasy land that somehow could also exist in our material world.

And as Walt Disney himself promises viewers later in the episode, the show not only introduces viewers to that dream, but also “invites [the viewer] to see and share with us, the experience of building this dream into a reality.” Throughout its first year, the

²² Indeed, the song’s appearance in *Disneyland*’s pilot may actually be Disney’s first new recording of the song since the film’s release. According to Michael Murray’s *The Golden Age of Disney Records, 1933-1988*, Disney only licensed two covers of the song in addition to the original recording, both in 1940 (167). Even Disney features and specials that otherwise incorporated extensive new arrangements of pre-existing Disney music - such as the *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) or *One Hour in Wonderland* (1950) - seemingly pulled from every signature Disney song *except* “When You Wish Upon a Star” (“Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” from *The Three Little Pigs* (1933) and “Whistle While You Work” from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) both feature prominently in the film and special).

show would present viewers with footage of the park under construction, allowing viewers to witness the fulfillment of the song's central promise; if the Disneyland park was the dream, the *Disneyland* show allowed viewers to watch that dream come true.

Yet while the song may seem like an obvious fit for the show, using a song from a fourteen-year-old film as the theme music for an entirely new project was a loaded prospect. For in order to function in this setting, the song needed to jettison all but a bare fragment of its original context. In its initial form, "When You Wish Upon a Star" is not simply a standalone ballad, but rather one theme in Harline's larger score for *Pinocchio*. The studio produced the film during a period where Walt Disney was pushing his composers to give the songs in his films more emphasis on narrative and story²³, and Harline's score treats songs less as standalone numbers than as leitmotifs - melodic signifiers for specific characters and ideas throughout a film score that develop in tandem with the narrative. Songs in *Pinocchio*, in other words, are not simply self-contained moments where characters pause the story for entertaining diversions; they are rather statements of themes that will evolve and take on new meaning as the film progresses.

This is especially the case for "When You Wish Upon a Star," which Harline uses to trace the narrative's progression from starry-eyed innocence to stern responsibility. The melody functions as a theme representing not a specific character,

²³ According to Neal Gabler, he voiced these concerns most emphatically during the production of *Snow White*. Frustrated that the film's musical numbers acted as distractions from the story, Walt grumbled that he wanted to free his films from "that influence from the musicals [Hollywood studios] have been doing for years" and instead come up with "a new way to use music; weave [musical numbers] into the story so somebody doesn't just bust [sic] into song" (qtd. in Gabler 254).

Pinocchio's songs do not entirely fulfill this organic approach either ("High Diddle Dee Dee" comes the closest), but Harline's leitmotif-based approach to the score does follow Walt's proposed story-driven method in spirit.

but rather the ramifications of divine fate granting wishes in the first place. To be sure, when the song first plays over the film's opening credits, it comes across as a lush, unreservedly innocent lullaby. Cliff Edwards' gentle tenor voice maintains a soft, reassuring tone even when the singer hits the high notes, and angelic choral accompaniment gives the song a near-spiritual sense of purity. That sense of uncomplicated benevolence also holds for the lyrics, which promise the listener that "Fate is kind" and "gives to those she loves/the sweet fulfillment of their secret longing," framing the act of wish-fulfillment as a simple gift that Fate bestows upon her favored subjects. Yet the story that follows quickly demonstrates that Fate does not simply give these wishes as gifts - they must be earned, and at an often steep price. Though the Blue Fairy partially grants Geppetto's wish by animating his puppet, that puppet will need to endure the trials and tribulations of a cruel, corrupt world and prove himself worthy of Fate's gifts before he can hope to truly transform into a flesh and blood "real boy."

Thus when Harline uses the song's melody as a motif in the film, he frequently does so not to create an aura of uncomplicated innocence, but rather to underline that any wishes granted must come through the trials of experience. When, for example, the Blue Fairy first visits Geppetto's shop to bring Pinocchio halfway to life, the theme plays while she gently-but-sterly informs the puppet that he is not yet a real boy, nor will he be until he proves himself "brave, truthful, and unselfish." The music itself is just as warm and romantic here as it was during the opening credits, with a rich string arrangement echoing actress Evelyn Venable's calming, maternal voice as the Blue Fairy. But by playing this theme beneath what amounts to a set of

rules, the melody accumulates more serious associations. What initially seemed like a gift freely given now comes across as a goal the puppet can only reach if he demonstrates maturity and outgrows childish vices.

The theme then effectively vanishes for most of the film, absent as Pinocchio encounters the real world, runs afoul of wheedling con-men, falls for the temptations of vanity and dishonesty, and ultimately finds himself imprisoned by a bullying puppeteer. Only when Pinocchio has fallen to the depths of despair in Stromboli's cage does the theme make a brief re-appearance, accompanying the Blue Fairy as she makes one final visit to rescue the puppet. Though the melody and arrangement sound much the same here as they did earlier in the film, the music has taken on a grimmer context; it now stands in relief to the trials Pinocchio has undergone, a reminder of an innocence that, within a day, the puppet has lost. Harline underlines that point by playing the theme, not when the Fairy first appears, but rather when she warns the puppet that he will not receive a second chance, for "a boy who won't be good might just as well be made of wood." In the process, the theme takes on judgmental overtones, reminding listeners that while Fate may be "kind," she also sits in stern judgment over her subjects.

Indeed, before Fate is finally willing to grant that wish, the puppet will need to cast away all childish vices and demonstrate almost super-human commitment to selflessness, bravery, and sacrifice; he must plunge to the depths of the ocean, allow a whale to swallow him alive, and finally do no less than sacrifice his life to save his father. Thus, by the time the film finally reprises the song version of "When You Wish Upon a Star," the song no longer only signifies the childlike hope for wishes

coming true - the song now carries the weight of the grim journey into maturity that must come as the price of any wish.

By repurposing “When You Wish Upon a Star” as the show’s theme music, however, *Disneyland* jettisoned all of that weight. As part of the score to *Pinocchio*, the song might have resonated with stern themes related to maturity, stoicism, and sacrifice. But as the studio learned in the aftermath of *Pinocchio*’s release, such themes were not particularly effective at garnering the goodwill of audiences. Strip that song of context, however, and what remained was a romantic ballad that suggested precious, yearned-for fantasies made material and never hinted at any caveats. In *Pinocchio*, the song established a mood of innocence that was designed to fade over the course of the film; *Disneyland* created a new context for the song where that innocence would never fade, never receive a challenge that might puncture Walt Disney’s soon-to-be constructed fantasy paradise.

The animated opening credits to “The Disneyland Story” (as well as the next several seasons of the program) transform the song for this new setting in ways both subtle and overt. After an offscreen announcer pitches the show’s sponsors and announces the title of the show, we hear the same Cliff Edwards recording of the song that opened *Pinocchio*. Yet even when the song remains unchanged, the images supporting the music change its meaning. Immediately before the song begins, we see Tinkerbell (herself a newly recontextualized character from the previous year’s *Peter Pan*) fly into the frame and light the center of the screen with her wand. As a curtain peels back to reveal the Disneyland title at the top of the screen, the light from Tinkerbell’s wand begins to resemble a shimmering star. This means that when Cliff

Edwards begins the song's opening lines and sings "When you wish upon a star," we actually see the star in question. And as the song continues, that star gradually dissolves into a long shot of some distant fairy tale metropolis, a cityscape that combines turn-of-the-century architecture from America's "gay 90s" with the castles and turrets of medieval Europe. In other words, we are looking at a representation of the actual Disneyland park that the show will be promoting. And though the star itself fades, its rays of light do not - they simply turn into beacons and spotlights emanating out of the park, creating the impression that both the star and the park are one and the same.

The Disneyland park, in other words, *is* the star that the song is referring to. You, the viewer, are not simply wishing on a night star like Geppetto - you are wishing upon Disneyland - both in its televised and physical-world manifestations. All of the emotion in the song - the wistful crooning from Cliff Edwards, the heavenly choir that accompanies him - no longer gestures towards any divine "fate" or spiritual higher power towards whom people and puppets must prove themselves worthy. Instead, those pure and sublime feelings gravitate towards a world that Walt Disney himself has created, a would-be heavenly kingdom that is nevertheless accessible to audiences here on earth. Disneyland, the music now tells us, is the source of all of our dreams, the entity we should wish upon if we want to see them realized.

Disneyland is also, incidentally, the object of all of our dreams in this formulation; we are both wishing "upon" Disneyland and "for" Disneyland. Unlike the original version of the song that played in *Pinocchio*, our individual desires as

audience members do not factor into this equation. Here, Cliff Edwards does not get a chance to finish the song; after he croons, “makes no difference who you are,” the music segues into a new instrumental version of the theme. Missing is the idea that “anything your heart desires will come to you,” a line that suggests a near-infinite number of possible desires, unique to each individual listener. Missing too is the idea that fate will fulfill anybody’s “secret longing,” a line that indicates these longings are personal and unique to each listener. For such idiosyncratic desires are no longer relevant in this formulation - with Disneyland, viewers can now feed their energy into a universal desire, a paradise designed to serve as everybody’s happiest place on earth. In *Pinocchio*, the line “makes no difference who you are,” refers to the idea that every person has access to a unique starlight wish. In *Disneyland*, that same line now indicates that every person desires the same starlight wish. We no longer receive an assurance that we will receive “anything” we desire - we simply see an image of a glorious new kingdom that we all should desire.

Yet this opening sequence does not just transform “When You Wish Upon a Star” by changing the context - as the sequence progress, the music itself begins to transform and adapt to the new setting. After Cliff Edwards cuts out, the narrator announces, “Each week as you enter this timeless land, one of these many worlds will open to you.” Then, while Tinkerbell gives a visual demonstration, the narrator proceeds to introduce us to Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland, and Fantasyland. Series composer George Bruns creates a new instrumental arrangement of the song for this sequence that adapts to the idioms of each setting. When the narrator announces “Frontierland, tales tall and true” and Tinkerbell begins

pantomiming the war-whoop of a Native-American stereotype, the music takes on the standard Hollywood tropes designed to represent Native Americans²⁴; woodwinds play the melody's first verse while tom-tom rhythms pound beneath it. When the narrator announces, "Tomorrowland, promise of things to come," and Tinkerbell creates an atom with her wand, cascading arpeggios swirl around the melody like electrons swirling around the nucleus. For Adventureland, "the wonderland of nature's own realm," a rousing brass chorale plays in counterpoint to the melody as the camera zooms in on an image of the globe. For Fantasyland, "the happiest kingdom of them all," plucked strings and harp delicately finish the melody while shimmering stars light along Cinderella's Castle.

With each new variation, "When You Wish Upon a Star" moves further from its original context and grows more subsumed into the fabric of Disneyland. Bit by bit, the song sheds its original singer, its original orchestration, and its original arrangements, until all that is left is a bare melody that the show can morph and adapt to suit the needs of this new fantasy. At the same time, the song maintains just enough of its original melodic identity to function as a much-needed tonal throughline for these fast-changing images. In a manner of seconds, the show has jerked the audience across vast gulfs of time and space - from past to future, wilderness to metropolis, and history to fantasy - all while informing us that each of these regions are somehow still part of "Disneyland." Yet because the same melody from a Disney film plays throughout this whirlwind, the show fosters the impression that each of these disparate realms still "belong" to Disney. Though the arrangements may adapt to suit each new locale, the fundamental reassuring and familiar qualities of the

²⁴ See the scores in films like *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941) and *Fort Apache* (1948).

melody remain intact; the music asserts those qualities over the images, making them all of the sub-worlds “feel” the same, however different they are in other respects.

Disneyland emerges as the idea of a place defined, not by time or space, but rather by fond feelings associated with Disney films.

Of course, in 1954 it is difficult to say with any certainty how familiar audience members would have likely been with “When You Wish Upon a Star” in the first place. As I noted earlier, the studio had done precious little to promote the song in the years since *Pinocchio*, a film that underperformed in its initial release. That audience members tuning into “The Disneyland Story” would immediately have recognized the song over the credits is not a given. At the same time, *Pinocchio* had not entirely faded from the public eye (and ear) - the film saw two reissues in 1942 and 1950, and the film and its music also maintained a presence through various experiments in soundtrack and storybook albums throughout the 1940s²⁵. While it is doubtful that these reissues and record albums somehow made the song a household name, they may have kept the song in the ether just long enough to render it vaguely familiar to 1954 audiences. And for the show’s purposes, audience members did not need to remember the song vividly - indeed, faint recognition was the ideal reaction to the song.

For if we watch this sequence, it often seems as though the animation is doing little to make the audience recall this song’s origins. There are no visual signifiers to remind of us *Pinocchio* in this sequence - in fact, the central character onscreen, Tinkerbell, is from a different film. Even if audience members were inclined to

²⁵ For a detailed catalogue of the studio’s various album experiments in this period, see pages 3-9 of Michael Murray’s *The Golden Age of Disney Records*.

remember *Pinocchio* vividly, between Tinkerbell's energetic costumes changes and a background that is constantly morphing into different far-flung settings, there is so much constant motion onscreen that there is scarcely time for the audience to gather its bearings and reflect on *why* they remember this music. This is the ideal state of mind for a *Disneyland* audience, for vague memories are easy to influence.

Remember *Pinocchio* in too much detail, and one is prone to remember all of the darker moments that run counter to the notion of Disney as a uniformly happy ideal.

But remember simply that this pleasing music is related to Disney in a more general sense, and it is all the easier for a show like *Disneyland* to fill in those missing details with new memories of uniformly positive emotions.

This, I argue, is the key to the overriding sense of nostalgia that scholars like Anderson and Sperb refer to when they talk about *Disneyland's* appeal. By both taking advantage of and obscuring the audience's memories of pieces of music like "When You Wish Upon a Star," the show created a scenario that fostered nostalgia for both Disney's past and future. By stripping the song of its ties to *Pinocchio's* specific narrative details and instead presenting the music in a context that offers uncomplicated innocence and yearning, the show encourages audiences to retroactively remember *Pinocchio* as a film defined by uncomplicated innocence and yearning. The audience's newly warm feelings about the music turn *Pinocchio* into a fond memory of a more innocent time - even if the actual experience of sitting through *Pinocchio* from start to finish would quickly complicate that memory. At the same time, by playing a song that the audience already vaguely recognizes as Disney music over grand new images promoting the park, the show makes *Disneyland* come

across as a place audience members already recognize and desire. The show creates an environment where the music's reassuring, familiar aura can affix itself to these new images unfolding onscreen, making the Disneyland footage seem reassuring and familiar by association. Disneyland - as a park, a show, and a larger ideal - becomes a lost childhood dream, a mythical realm that audiences feel they have somehow always yearned for - even if, for audiences watching in 1954, Disneyland does not even exist yet.

By reconceptualizing the song so thoroughly, *Disneyland* turned "When You Wish Upon a Star" into the studio's defining musical signature. The theme would continue to introduce the program throughout the duration of its run on ABC. It would serve as the primary means of underscoring Walt Disney's own television appearances right up until his last filmed appearance in the 1966 episode of *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, "Disneyland Around the Seasons." In the years following Walt Disney's death, the theme would even become the studio's fanfare, the default music that would play over the Disney logo in the majority of the company's animated features. To a very large extent, *Disneyland* used the song to set the musical framework for the Disney sound. In most variations, the song took on a conservative, sanded down quality - in the place Harline's billowing choirs and thick, string-heavy orchestrations, the show gave the theme delicate, unassuming arrangements. Even when scores for various segments in the show did not directly quote the song, the music still frequently mimicked the song's central qualities - romantic, ballad-like melodies. A piece of music designed to represent a moment in

one film ended up suspended in time, a period of innocence that would never mature, corrupt, wisen, or fade into experience.

In instances like this, Disney's television programs used actual songs from earlier films to construct an all-purpose identity for Disney and its worlds. But the television shows also drew inspiration from Disney's vast studio archive in less direct ways. Over the course of its history, the studio's composers appropriated and absorbed a wide range of musical styles and idioms, from vaudeville in early 1930s shorts like *Orphan's Benefit* (1934) to jazz in shorts like *Through the Mirror* (1936), swing in *Make Music Mine* (1946), light operetta in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Tin Pan Alley in *Cinderella* (1950), late Romantic concert music in *Pinocchio* (1940), and even contemporary forms of modernism in *Fantasia* (1940).

And while the gentle romanticism set the general template for Disney's use of music in television, all of these idioms were also fair game if they could contribute to the larger sense of blissful purity that was quickly becoming Disney's hallmark.

1.5: *Bambi, Mars, and Disney Impressionism*

One of the most intriguing reinterpretations of the studio's musical history for television came through Disney's use of art music idioms from 1942's *Bambi*. The film was in many respects similar to *Pinocchio*, in that it too centered on a coming-of-age narrative that moved from doe-eyed innocence through traumatizing terror on the path to maturity. Like *Pinocchio*, it did little to win over audiences upon release, turning into yet another costly commercial failure that only recouped its money and reputation through decades of reissues (Gabler 398). Also like *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*

opened with music that beamed with an air of blissful purity, then gradually faded way to starker, less forgiving music as the character experiences life's horrors and learns to grow up in the process. In many respects, Disney television would use this music as much as it used "When You Wish Upon a Star," stripping away traces of the story's darker ramifications and instead, rendering those feelings of euphoric childlike wonder - temporary in the film - indefinite in television. Yet *Bambi* also featured a uniquely complex Disney score, an organic tapestry of songs and score that flowed seamlessly into one another, mixing popular music and concert hall aspirations in ways that no other Disney film of the era would even attempt. Drawing from that well gave the makers of Disney's television programs a rare chance to evoke both nostalgia for the studio's past and uncertain wonder towards the new worlds it promised to create.

Bambi's score was the result of unusual production circumstances. When the film entered its early stages, the studio was still high off of the momentum from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, an enormously popular film that featured a simple, light operetta score by Frank Churchill, Disney's then-leading composer and songwriter. Churchill, Ross Care tells us, had "little formal training" and his abilities were limited when it came to more complex composition and orchestration (Care, "Make Walt's Music" 28). As Disney animation director Wilfred Jackson explains, Churchill's music was "melodic and uncomplicated, and you could hum it easily," but it featured little of the complex "countermelodies" or "harmonic structure" that characterized the music of Disney's other primary composer of the 1930s, Leigh Harline (qtd. in Care, "Make Walt's Music" 28). Churchill was, in other words, more of a talented popular

songwriter than an accomplished orchestral composer, and when Walt Disney assigned him to *Bambi* in 1937, this was likely exactly what Walt wanted²⁶.

But as production on the film stalled, and Walt's attention drifted to other projects, his attitude regarding music began to change. As he entered production on the concert music anthology that would eventually turn into *Fantasia*, Walt began taking on aspirations for high art in his film scores. Where he once was happy with simple tunes, he now grew excited over the prospect of setting contemporary concert hall composers like Stravinsky and Debussy to animation (Gabler 307-308). As a consequence, he began demanding that *Bambi* take on, to use Care's words, "a 20th century concert idiom sound" ("Threads of Melody" 88). In a 1940 story meeting, he criticized the simple Churchill score for its "monotony" (qtd. in 84) and recommended that his music staff experiment with pieces like Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (85) and spend more time focused on the details of orchestration and choral arrangement (84). He did not, however, order an entirely new score. Rather, he ordered his music team to "completely reconstruct the score" without "throwing away any of the themes" (qtd. in 83), leaving the Churchill melodies intact but radically altering their harmonic and instrumental foundations.

Whether or not Churchill would have been capable of writing the new score Walt envisioned remains unknown - he tragically committed suicide in 1942, half a

²⁶ Precisely why he chose Churchill as the film's primary score is unclear. In fact, according to Ross Care, initial story meeting notes for the film list Leigh Harline in attendance, indicating that Walt initially may have considered giving the film to his more sophisticated *Pinocchio* composer (Care, "Threads of Melody" 81). The circumstances of the switch have not been recorded, but the fact that Walt was evidently choosing between the two and went with Churchill indicates that he was at least initially looking for a score with Churchill's simplicity.

year before the film's release²⁷. In his stead, a team of orchestrators and composers - most prominently, Edward Plumb, Charles Henderson, and Alexander Steinert - were left to transform a simple set of popular melodies into a towering impressionistic and modernistic tone poem. The result turned into a unique meeting point between the Disney studio's earlier popular music and its later art music ambitions.

Those two worlds meet most dramatically in the opening sequence during the score's treatment of "Love Is a Song," the Churchill ballad that ended up serving as the film's main theme. Deployed most famously over the film's opening tracking shot through forest at dawn, the theme typically occurs whenever the film presents the forest as an idyllic paradise, a secluded safe space where cherubic animals nestle against their mothers. Strip the melody to its core, and it would likely resemble similar sentimental, lighter operetta-style ballads that Churchill made so popular in his score to *Snow White*. But Plumb, Henderson, and Steinert adapt the melody in ways that suggest a much more textured and surprising tonal landscape. As Ross Care explains in his analysis of the score, the composers create an impressionistic setting for the theme; the melody drifts through a sea of instruments and voices making "purely phonetic sounds," with no one section or instrument dominating or indulging in "individual showcasing" (90). The result is an organic, euphoric musical landscape that is "similar in effect," Care observes, "to the mythic, pantheistic orchestral-choral textures of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* and Ralph Vaughan William's *Flos Champi*" (90-91), two early-twentieth-century works famous for

²⁷ Gabler speculates that the suicide and the problems with *Bambi*'s music were related, claiming that the alcoholic composer "had no doubt been further depressed with Walt's ongoing dissatisfaction with his work on *Bambi*" (307). That said, there does not appear to be anything other than circumstantial evidence to support this theory.

breaking from the Romantic tradition of prominent melody in favor of texture and atmosphere. The light-opera sentiment of Churchill's original theme still lies at the heart of the pieces, but the evocations of early 20th century ballet and concert music imbues the music with a sense of mythic atmosphere, rendering the forest an innocent, sentimental space and a vivid, mysterious new world at the same time.

Bambi's score represented an ambitious new path for the studio's music department, a path that ended abruptly when *Fantasia* and *Bambi* both underperformed at the box office. From that point on, Walt Disney seemed to lose any interest in pursuing music that had any connection to the "high art" of the contemporary concert hall²⁸. For the rest of the decade, the studio's films would try instead to chase popular music trends - in fact, in 1950, the studio temporarily ceased using in-house composers to write its songs all-together, turning directly to proven hit songwriters from Tin Pan Alley instead (Tietyen 91). But while the studio quickly moved past *Bambi's* score, the Disney television programs in the 1950s found new uses for the film's Disneyfied version of impressionism.

The idiom became particularly beneficial for Disney's treatment of its Tomorrowland-themed segments. The future and science-based Tomorrowland posed a particular challenge for the television programs. As Telotte reminds us, "science fiction was not part of the studio's prior fantasy vision, and the genre's typical themes did not lend themselves to the sort of family-oriented narratives that were Disney's strength" (105). Shows like *Disneyland* were, again, programs that thrived on fostering nostalgia, an overriding familiarity that could make audiences

²⁸ Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, adapted for a segment in *Make Music Mine* (1946), was the lone notable exception.

feel as though Disneyland were always one of their cherished memories. This was easy enough for Fantasyland, which could draw upon Disney films that audiences actually encountered as children, and for Frontierland, which played to America's own sense of nostalgia for the tall tales and folk icons of its history. Even the nature-based Adventureland often played into the idea of the idealized natural world, unspoiled by modernity. How though, to make audiences nostalgic for the future-based science and science fiction?

To a certain extent, one might argue that Disney simply did not bother. *Disneyland* itself avoided Tomorrowland-based episodes through its first season, and ultimately only produced a handful that even attempted to take on the region's science-fiction themed realm. The few episodes that did commit fully to the Tomorrowland theme - "Man in Space" (1955) "Man on the Moon" (1955) and "Mars and Beyond" (1957) - were in many ways deviations from *Disneyland*'s standard embrace of nostalgic sentimentality, and instead attempted to strike a balance between cold scientific authority and more fantastical pulp-based science fiction. Even sonically, these episodes were often anomalies, with the stern, monotone voices of German scientists and often outright atonal underscore setting a colder tone than was customary. But even in these instances that ostensibly turned away from sentimentality, key auditory links to past Disney films like *Bambi* still sometimes tethered the science-fiction material *Disneyland*'s requisite mood of glowing nostalgia.

One of the most significant instances of this phenomenon does not actually happen in an episode of *Disneyland*, but rather in the live televised special, *Dateline*:

Disneyland in 1955. A live broadcast of the park's grand opening, the special is notorious for chronicling the disorganized series of mishaps and technical glitches that plagued both the park and the broadcast²⁹. But one brief segment in the Tomorrowland wing of the park nevertheless demonstrates sound's power to color even the coldest regions of the park with Disney's signature mood. When host Art Linklater takes the viewer to the ride "Rocket to the Moon," he begins interacting with "Captain Martin," the fictional "pilot" of the ride. In a pre-taped segment that would also play for park visitors, Captain Martin speaks to the audience from inside the ship, dryly informing the audience of the ship's features. In this early segment, the soundscape is about as far from the warm Disney ideal as is possible - while the captain speaks to the audience with a dry, monotone voice, various electronic noises beep and ping throughout the room. A staggered high-pitched noise, similar to the standard radio morse code sound effect, vibrates throughout the captain's speech, while distorted voices from a far-off loudspeaker echo in the background. The combined effect is a cold, clinical mood, seemingly designed to create the air of hard, scientific verisimilitude. This is Disneyland stripped of its ties to fantasy.

Yet when the camera cut to live-action footage from the rocket in takeoff, music enters and moves this emotionless tone back into the realm of warm sentiment. As the rocket takes off, the audience views the earth from a "camera" that the captain tells us has been placed at the bottom of the rocket. As the planet disappears, ethereal music for a choral and orchestral ensemble begins playing, painting luxurious, evocative colors while the camera lifts out of the stratosphere. While the music does

²⁹ See Gabler (531-532) for a more detailed description.

not directly quote from *Bambi*, the composers³⁰ clearly draw from the same well. As with *Bambi*, moaning voices and delicate instrumentation create an organic soundscape based on mood and texture, with no one section taking clear precedence over the others. And while this music never develops into melody as catchy or long-winded as “Love is a Song,” the music nevertheless drifts into simple romantic phrases that harken to the Churchill era of the studio. Like the score to *Bambi*, in other words, this “Rocket to the Moon” sequence creates a sonic mood that feels both familiar and comforting but new and unpredictable.

We hear a similar technique during one of the brief segments of the *Disneyland* episode, “Mars and Beyond.” As with the Rocket Ship segment, this episode is by and large distinguished by how much it strays from the Disney template. Part a comic history of mankind’s relationship with Mars, part a surreal exploration of possible outlandish life on Mars, the episode pushes Disney further into the avant garde than any other episode of the program. Musically, George Bruns follows suit, scoring the animated Martian planet sequence with near *musique concret* levels of sound collage. But again, one segment of the episode harkens back to a more familiar soundscape and establishes a tether, however brief, to the warmer Disney ethos. After a comic parody of science fiction pulp magazines, the episode segues into a more serious meditation on life in the universe. As the camera drifts through a vast cosmos, narrator Paul Frees, his deep baritone resonant with solemn gravity, informs the audience, “as modern science seeks to understand the miracle of creation, it sees an infinite universe. Cold and dark, inconceivably vast - without

³⁰ The actual composer of this particular piece is unclear. While special itself credits Walter Schuman as musical director, it is unclear if he or somebody else from Disney’s music staff was responsible for this particular piece.

beginning, without end.” Here, again, we seem to be as far from the comforts of Disney as possible, set adrift in an overwhelmingly vast and unfeeling universe.

But once more, music in the *Bambi* template counteracts that sense of futility. To be sure, it is a much more stripped-down variation on that template; George Bruns removes the orchestra altogether, reducing the ensemble to an acapella group of female singers. Yet even with lower registers and non-vocal textures eliminated, the music still harkens back to *Bambi*’s atmospheric use of choir. Alto and soprano voices shimmer in a homophonic setting, with soothing harmony and alienating dissonance passing seamlessly back and forth between the vocal sections. Again, the music features nothing as hummable or developed as any of Churchill’s themes, but the music touches upon soothing melodic fragments just often enough to harken back to those familiar scores.

In some respects, the music in both sequences functions much as “When You Wish upon a Star” functions elsewhere in the television series. Here too, the music draws upon listeners’ vague memories of an early Disney film without getting specific enough to trigger any negative feelings listeners might associate with the film’s darker overtones. The Tomorrowland-themed segments obscure those musical reference points even further, given that the music in both cases is not actually quoting from *Bambi*’s score directly. Rather, these scenes are quoting from a more general musical aesthetic that *Bambi* adapted to suit Disney’s purposes, impressionist art music mixed with the familiar melodic sentiments of light operetta. The results may be several degrees removed from any Disney film, but the music is just familiar enough as Disney music to pull the far reaches of outer space back to the loving tone

that encompasses Disneyland in its many forms. It would be an unfair simplification to say that this music suggests uncomplicated, uniform happiness, as subtle dissonances and melodic fragmentation do lend the music in both scenes a mysterious, unsettled tone. But that sense of mystery merges soothing comfort, conveyed both by the gentle timbre of the soothing voices, and by the regular hints of romantic melody. The music creates a tone that can maintain a steadfast sense of warm nostalgia while simultaneously plunging into the uncertain unknown. Science and science fiction lose their cold veneer and find themselves wrapped back into the Disneyland fold.

1.6: The Disarmingly Reassuring Voice of Walt Disney

In these instances, we see the Disney studio using music to cast a tone of warm, sentimental nostalgia over genres that would otherwise seem antithetical to that Disney ethos. Yet music was not the only form of sound that could cast such an overpowering spell. Just as crucial in establishing the overriding tone for the Disney brand was the human voice itself - more specifically, the voice of the show's erstwhile host: Walt Disney himself. Every episode of *Disneyland* (as well as the show's later iterations, *Walt Disney Presents* and *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*) began and ended with Walt Disney, in genial "Uncle Walt" mode, introducing and concluding the episode's material with a friendly, avuncular bit of wisdom.

Many episodes featured him more extensively, introducing clips and segments after each commercial break in episodes like "The Story of the Silly Symphony" (1955), narrating over behind-the-scenes looks at animation production in episodes like "The

Tricks of Our Trade” (1957), or even entering the narrative himself in episodes like “I Captured the King of the Leprechauns” (1959). But whether he was present for five minutes or fifty in any given episode, Walt cast an air of assured, benevolent authority that seeped into every crevice *Disneyland* staked out for itself.

As indicated earlier, Walt Disney was initially reluctant to host the show; Neal Gabler reports that he was insecure over his acting skills and bashful over his “nasal twang” (512). But executives at ABC were insistent, believing that such a diverse anthology program would require Walt’s presence if the show was to have a consistent identity. Under pressure, Walt relented and began filming various bookending segments and interstitials for the episodes (512). As others have noted, his self-consciousness was largely unfounded - as a screen presence, Walt conveyed confident, affable charisma in front of the camera. Gabler describes him as “calm, modest, unprepossessing, homespun, curious, charming, and of course, avuncular,” a figure who “conveyed reassurance” just as his creations did (512). As Gabler explains, Walt’s appearances on *Disneyland* turned him into “the country’s great national uncle,” an idea so pervasive that people began referring to his tv persona as “Uncle Walt” (512).

I find all of these superlatives difficult to dispute, and evidently so did the millions of viewers who tuned in every week. But as I noted in the introduction, it is curious that so much of this attention on Walt Disney’s television performances focuses on the actor’s physical appearance and not his voice. Just as Telotte emphasizes Walt Disney’s significance as a “visual icon” (*Disney TV* 15), Gabler devotes the bulk of his assessment of Uncle Walt’s appeal to his visual appearance -

his height, his “huskier” frame, and his “physically imposing” figure (512). Yet while his visual appearance obviously played an important role, I argue that it was primarily through his voice that Uncle Walt conveyed all of those “calm,” “homespun,” and “avuncular” qualities. As a physical actor, Walt did relatively little performing - in most of his appearances, he maintains the same stiff posture, the same unchanging facial expression (eyebrows slightly raised, eyes slightly squinted), and the same slight lean toward the camera. While his minimalistic body language was certainly effective in conveying stability, most of his warm, affectionate means of expression came through his voice. The midwestern “nasal twang” that caused him so much self-doubt proved to be one of his greatest assets, making his otherwise deep, commanding voice also seem folksy and down-to-earth.

On one level, it might initially seem that in using Walt’s dominating vocal persona to drive the series, *Disneyland* was drawing upon tropes from radio programs that television had only recently begun to eclipse (it would certainly not be a stretch to connect Walt’s confident, guiding vocal persona to FDR’s paternal, reassuring voice during his radio fireside chats of the 1930s and 1940s). Indeed, the prominence of sound in these episodes calls to mind Michel Chion’s definition of early television as “illustrated radio” (157), a medium in which images only function “to illustrate or to decorate” sound - particularly the “sound of speech” (157). Chion argues that in most cases, television is so dialogue-driven that most images could be eliminated altogether without losing anything crucial (158). And indeed, many early episodes of the show initially seem to bear this out, as Walt narrates offscreen while footage from

his models, blueprints, production videos, or animated cartoons themselves play in response to his voiceover.

Yet it would not be accurate to say that the imagery in *Disneyland* is strictly illustrative, or that the episodes would somehow function if we were left with only the soundtrack. For as I demonstrated at the start of this chapter, as a narrator Walt's role was not necessarily to provide information itself - in the case of his "Plausible Impossible" routine with Donald Duck, the dialogue he speaks arguably confuses more than it clarifies. Little of Walt's narration would make any sense without reference to the visuals; contrary to Chion's observations about television, the image was still crucial to meaning in this particular program - even when the image itself was lackluster. But these images only found meaning in relation to Walt's voice and the rest of the soundtrack. Walt's voice in *Disneyland* functioned primarily as a tone-defining device; his role was not to replace the image but rather to transform it. As a narrator, Walt served as a gentle vocal force that could render any footage benevolent.

In this regard, the Uncle Walt persona was the apotheosis of a trend that began dominating the studio's films in the late 1940s - using amiable narrators and host figures to set a tone that was otherwise lacking in the images themselves. The studio went through most of the 1930s with very little use of the human voice at all - though Disney characters could technically talk, between Mickey Mouse's falsetto squeak and Donald Duck's incomprehensible quack, these characters rarely spoke more than a few words at time. Images and music typically carried the bulk of the narrative and tonal weight of the studio's animation, a trend that continued even when the studio

moved into bigger budgeted features like *Snow White* and *Bambi* (*Pinocchio*, with its comparatively verbose cast of characters, is the biggest exception in this period).

This began to change, however, when the studio began releasing more cost-effective films in the aftermath of several costly box office failures in the early 1940s.

Beginning with *Make Music Mine* in 1946, Disney began holding back on ambitious feature-length animation and instead released a series of “package features” - feature films comprised of multiple, loosely related animated shorts, packaged together to resemble full-length films³¹. And whether coincidentally or not, these compilation films increasingly featured prominent roles for offscreen narrators.

One can only speculate on the studio’s official reasons for moving so heavily into voiceover in these films. It may be that, barring fully developed stories or innovative new animation to offer audiences, the studio was attempting instead to use celebrity voices as a hook for audiences. Films like *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947) and *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* (1949) might not be able to advertise groundbreaking new sights on the level of *Fantasia* or involved storytelling on the level of *Snow White*, but they could advertise celebrity storytellers like Dinah Shore, Edgar Bergen, Basil Rathbone, and Bing Crosby. Within the films themselves, however, these narrators seemed to serve an even more important function: distracting viewers from possible shortcomings in the story or animation. The studio typically employed celebrities with friendly, gentle speaking mannerisms, voices that

³¹ Though “package feature” seems to be the term that most Disney biographers use to describe these films, it is unclear whether the studio actually officially used this phrase to describe the films. However, Michael Barrier does quote Walt referring to these films as “package things” in 1956 (190), which may be where the term originated.

could establish a genial tone and pull the audience's attention away from potentially uninspiring animation.

For example, *Bongo*, a half hour short that makes up the first half of *Fun and Fancy Free*, may be, as Michael Barrier puts it, little more than “a heavily padded short subject” (*Hollywood Cartoons* 393). The story of a circus bear who escapes into the wild, *Bongo* suffers from being both too leisurely to qualify as zippy cartoon slapstick and too cheaply animated for the gravitas of a full Disney feature. Yet with Dinah Shore providing the film's affectionate, enthusiastic voiceover, the film at least approaches a tone of soothing comfort lacking in the animation itself. From a narrative standpoint, Shore offers the film little, and is often reduced to describing actions that the audience can clearly see for themselves; if the bear runs around in a circle, Shore tells us that “he felt so good he just had to run around,” and if he then pauses for a full two seconds to jump over a log, Shore confirms this drawn-out action by announcing, “and jump!” The voiceover is narratively redundant, but the text in this case is less important than the tone of comforting security Shore's voice brings to the film. With the right voiceover, in other words, Disney films could tap into a source of affect potentially powerful enough to make even lackluster animation feel loving and wholesome.

By the time Walt began appearing in *Disneyland*, this trope - the affable, assuring, yet commanding narrator - had become a familiar device from the studio's animated films. Walt Disney was not so much creating a character as he was stepping into a role that nearly a decade of animated projects had been getting ready for him. This means that while the first episode of *Disneyland* may have been the first time

many audience members actually heard and saw Walt Disney³², he was still stepping into a role that audiences could recognize from recent Disney films. Like narrators from the package features, Walt's role was often less to tell audiences new information and more to cast a friendly, familiar pall over Disney's domain.

And make no mistake, much as with those package features, his voice also often functioned to cast a fanciful air over footage that was often less than remarkable on its own. This was particularly crucial in *Disneyland's* first year when the show was trying to promote a park that did not yet exist. Throughout the show's first season, the Disneyland park was still under construction - while the program could show audiences models, blueprints, and footage of the construction itself, the show had severe visual limitations on how convincingly magical it could make the park seem. Yet when Walt took command of the footage and spoke confidently and warmly of the precious dreamworld that all of these models and blueprints signified, that unremarkable footage took on the semblance of treasured fantasies.

That quality comes across in *Disneyland's* first episode. Early in "The Disneyland Story", the camera takes us to the "Disneyland Plans Room," where Uncle Walt greets the audience with a warm "welcome" and introduces his plan for the park. First, however, he makes moves to establish the studio's history as a site of nostalgia. Standing beside a portrait of Mickey Mouse, Walt looks to the camera and tells viewers, "I guess you all know this little fella here - it's an old partnership.

Mickey and I started out that first time many, many years ago." Immediately, Walt

³² Walt had of course made other public appearances in promotional films, radio spots, and television specials prior to *Disneyland*, but he had never been featured so prominently and never for an audience of this scale.

establishes a personal relationship between the viewers, himself, and his fictional character. Though Mickey Mouse is only an inanimate portrait in this scene, Walt's address turns him into a living being, a friend whom audiences already "know" personally, and a partner, rather than a creation, of Walt Disney himself. Walt's delivery further fosters this sense of personal familiarity. His Midwestern accent conveys a folksy, down-to-earth quality, making him sound like the sort of unpretentious person for whom the phrase "little fella" comes naturally. This is not the accent of a glamorous Hollywood businessman, but rather the sort of person who could easily be the prototypical audience member's next-door neighbor. Moreover, he pitches his voice at a soft, intimate volume that one typically reserves for friends and family. In the process, he establishes a long-standing personal relationship between himself, his characters, and his audience. The history he and Mickey share is a history that the audience also shares, a series of fond memories.

Music further reinforces that sense of fond reminiscence. Beneath Walt's monologue, a delicate orchestral variation on "When You Wish Upon a Star" plays, building upon the ties the theme established over the opening credits. Here as before, the music draws upon general positive associations with Disney films while glossing over specific connections with *Pinocchio* itself. As the backdrop to Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse, the song further establishes its identity, not as the song for one Disney film, but rather for the larger heritage of the Disney studio itself. Uncle Walt builds upon this newly evolving context for the song by referencing its lyrics in his next line. "We've had a lot of our dreams come true," he tells the audience, ending this sentence right as the melody ends the phrase that would have hosted the line,

“your dreams come true.” In this manner, Walt shifts the warm feelings tied to the song onto the studio’s larger archive of films. All of those past animated shorts and features cease to be simply films - they are now “dreams,” cherished wishes and desires that Walt and Mickey have seen realized over the past 16 years. Rather than a series of individual films that sometimes won over and at other times alienated audiences, the studio’s entire history washes out into a more mystical stream of cherished fantasies made real.

Having encouraged audience members to think back on their fond relationship with the studio’s past, Walt proceeds to extend those feelings towards the studio’s future. “Now we want you to share with us,” he quietly announces, “our latest and greatest dream.” Here, Walt’s wording works to eliminate any distinction between the studio’s past films and this upcoming park; just as *Steamboat Willie* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are not “films” but “dreams,” Disneyland is not a park but “dream.” In this scenario, the park is less a new project than an extension of the same long-cherished fantasies that Disney as an institution has always represented.

As with the opening title sequence, both Walt and the music subtly compel audience members to take up these fantasies as their own, to sublimate personal individual dreams into this larger Disney dream. Unlike the original song’s lyrics, Walt is not promising that “your” dreams will come true. Rather, he is inviting the audience to “share” *his* dream - or rather, his and Mickey’s dream. Disneyland emerges as everyone’s dream, a universal fantasy born of collective nostalgia.

Because his voice sounds so assuring and familiar, because the music that accompanies him so romantic and soothing, it is easy to overlook the scant visual

evidence he has to back up these grandstanding claims. When the camera cuts to overhead footage of the park currently under construction, Walt describes the park as all things to people: “a fair, an amusement park, an exhibition, a city of Arabian nights, a metropolis of the future, a city of hopes and dreams, facts and fancy, all in one.” Yet while we hear promises of this hybrid future metropolis and mythical Arabian kingdom, the park we actually see from this bird’s eye view resembles little more than a large patch of dirt, speckled here and there with trees and partially-constructed buildings. The black and white photography does the footage no favors, rendering both plants and buildings as near-indistinguishable black blobs. If this unremarkable imagery generates wonder in spite of itself, it is because sound makes up the difference; Walt’s voice and the music establish an overriding tone of sentimental nostalgia and hopeful yearning that is so overpowering, it renders even the most mundane footage magical.

That segment in particular provided the show’s producers with a formula that would grow more and more refined with each episode. Each episode would begin and end with Walt’s voice of genial authority, reinforced by comfortably sentimental music. Even when episodes themselves featured more challenging content that strayed from this formula - as in the aforementioned Tomorrowland-themed episodes - Walt’s bookending segments continuously returned audiences to this familiar sound-world. That combination of voiceover and music became the unofficial “sound” of Disney, a safe space from which all other sound tropes were only temporary deviations.

Indeed, that sonic combination, so powerful in its ability to render nearly any footage innocent and sentimental, occasionally produced outright bizarre sites of nostalgia. At the start of the chapter, I explored one such instance – by applying that gentle Disney sound forcefully enough, Walt can seem kind and benevolent even when he is torturing Donald Duck. At times, however, the show could apply that tone to outright ghastly material and somehow still create the sensation of innocent merrymaking. For the most extreme instance of this phenomenon, look no further than the “Pirates” segment of the 1965 episode of *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color*, “Disneyland 10th Anniversary.” Here, Walt walks Julie Rheim, the young “Ms. Disneyland Centennial,” through the various concept drawings and models for the park’s upcoming attraction, “Pirates of the Caribbean.” Though what follows is certainly a heavily-sanitized version of nineteenth-century high-seas piracy, the images Walt displays are still far more gruesome than one would typically expect of a Disney attraction. We see pirates walking victims off the plank, plundering treasure, and torturing the residents of a Caribbean town. Yet to hear Walt speak of these pirates, and to listen to the music that accompanies him, one would think he was talking about adorable woodland critters, making merry in the forest.

In fact, when Walt introduces the segment he practically frames these pirates as though they are themselves fictional characters from one of Disney’s many fantasies. “You believe in pirates, of course?” he ask Rheim, as though pirates are mythical creatures like fairies or leprechauns that live only in the imaginations of Walt’s most whimsical viewers. Throughout the segment, he discusses the pirates’ actions the way one might describe a group of particularly mischievous imps,

chuckling good-naturedly as he refers to pirates “ransacking” and “carrying away loot and everything.” His fanciful attitude towards this ransacking might be understandable if the pirates in question were the cartoonish, childlike characters from past Disney films like *Peter Pan*. Yet the pirates we actually see are menacing and lifelike, their actions remarkably grim for a family-friendly ride. The imagery at least attempts some version of historical realism - that realism is just at odds with the mandated whimsy of the soundtrack.

For example, as the camera begins tracking through the town, we see a band of glowering pirates staring down a man they’ve tied up and repeatedly tortured in a well; the man is now spitting out water, clearly struggling for life. Walt however, narrates this scene as though he were reading a gentle bedtime story to his children. “Now here, you see the pirates dunking the mayor in the well, trying to get him to reveal the hiding place of the town treasure,” Walt explains. Throughout, he keeps his delivery gentle, softly emphasizing sonorous vowels in words like “ma-yor,” and “well.” As the camera continues tracking through the town, we see a group of pirates drunkenly sprawled across the town square while blood-red streams of rum pour down the steps of the square. Walt simply gives a hushed chuckle, and tells us that “These fellas have found the town’s rum supplies,” giving the ominous image a “boys will be boys” veneer. All the while, tender music - clearly drawn from the same stylistic well as “When You Wish Upon a Star” - plays gently beneath Walt’s voice, with soft strings and flutes furthering the sensation that these untoward images might as well be wholesome pictures in a storybook.

Easily the most jarring moment in this scene, however, occurs in the final portion of this shot. As the camera tracks across the river, we see a line of struggling women tied together with a long rope, guarded over by pirates. At the end of this line, a portly woman stands on an auctioning block while a pirate raises his hand looking for bidders. It quickly becomes clear that the pirates have imprisoned the women of the town and are selling them into prostitution. Walt, however, only jovially remarks that the pirates are “auctioning off the town’s beauties,” as though these imprisoned women were voluntarily competing in a beauty pageant. He even pauses to make a joke at the expense of the portly woman: “And there’s the biggest bargain of them all,” he demurs, as the music subtly swells. It is difficult to exaggerate how unsettling this moment is - Walt Disney is revealing his plans to include a blatant rape scenario in this ride - a scenario that, whatever its historical veracity, is possibly the least appropriate site for wholesome nostalgia. Yet to hear Uncle Walt’s explanation, the whole scenario is little more than a charming diversion, as well as an opportunity to make a light-hearted joke about a woman’s weight.

What is perhaps most unnerving, however, is that he is almost successful. Even with queasy references of torture and rape onscreen, it takes conscious effort to break the spell of gentle music and voiceover and instead see the models as the horrifying scenes they actually are. With Walt and the score telling us how to interpret the images, even the ugliest passages of history emerge as wholesome fantasies waiting to be pined for. As that scene demonstrates, through television, Disney emerged with a soundscape that could make virtually *any* material come across as a loving, genial portrait of blissful nostalgia. One could turn on a Disney

program and find oneself taken behind the scenes at the studio, witnessing anarchic cartoon mayhem, immersed in the historical horrors of piracy on the Caribbean, or left drifting in the far reaches of the cosmos, and still come away feeling some longing pangs for a distant fantasy world that always *sounded* just within reach. For children growing up on these programs, soundscapes like this would continuously foster desires for these immaculate, perfect worlds that often existed only through sound. As we will see in the following chapter, some of those children would grow into filmmakers themselves and continue chasing those desires well into adulthood.

Chapter 2: Encountering Childhood Sounds: Spielberg and Acoustic Disney Fantasies

2.1: Prologue: Pining for Childhood Sounds in *The Sugarland Express*

Midway through Spielberg's debut feature film, *The Sugarland Express*, a Warner Brothers cartoon offers a beleaguered couple a brief moment of respite. In an ill-advised attempt to reclaim their infant son from social services, husband and wife Lou-Jean and Clovis have stolen a police car, kidnapped a patrolman, and led a convoy of policemen on a cross-country chase through the desert. Now, having temporarily evaded their pursuers, they camp out for the night in an R.V. park. As fortune would have it, a drive-in theater next door is playing Chuck Jones' 1958 *Road Runner* short, "Whoa, Be-Gone!" The couple has, as Lou-Jean puts it, a "free movie." Discovering the film compels them to giggle like children, for the cartoon triggers feelings that both Clovis and Lou-Jean evidently associate with childhood memories. The cartoon offers the couple access to a fantasy haven, an imaginary space where they can hide from their bleak prospects in the real world. Or it would offer this haven, were it not missing one crucial component: "I wish we had sound," Lou-Jean sighs. It does not matter that the cartoon does not contain any dialogue – without the crashing sound effects and manic music, the fantasy is not complete. While the image may carry the narrative, the emotional associations – the triggers that tie the film to Lou-Jean and Clovis's early memories – come through sound. So Clovis improvises a soundtrack, providing familiar sound effects that he has internalized through a youth spent watching cartoons. And with the addition of

sound, Clovis and Lou-Jean temporarily escape their plight and enter into a more blissful imagined space of sounds from childhood films.

Yet this sonic enclosure can only provide solace for so long before it backfires. As Clovis imitates the sounds of explosions and pratfalls, the cartoon's actual soundtrack takes over *Sugarland's* soundtrack - now the audience can hear the frantic Carl Stalling music and the crashing sound effects. Though Clovis and Lou-Jean cannot physically hear the sound from the drive-in theater, the change on Clovis's face indicates that he is listening too – that what we are hearing is Clovis's vivid memory of the cartoon's soundtrack. In drawing on traces of childhood memories of the short, Clovis has willed a new world into being, one in which the sounds of crashes and pratfalls are no longer a mere by-product of visual slapstick, but an independent force that envelops both him and the audience. Yet when these sounds wrap themselves around Clovis, they do not provide him with respite from his problems outside. Instead, Clovis grows apprehensive, his smile fading into a look of fear. Carl Stalling's music, with its violently abrupt Mickey-Mousing, grows deafening, suffocating Clovis in a blanket of auditory anxiety. Re-experiencing the essential instability that inhabits this sonic world forces Clovis to recognize the futility of his own situation. Like Wile E. Coyote, Clovis's life from now on also will consist of a series of futile chases punctuated by violent failures. What initially seemed like an attractive escape into a childhood fantasy only amplifies his fears from the real world, for he is now forced to experience those fears from an even more vulnerable, childlike state.

2.2: Spielberg Scholarship and the Director's Relationship With Childhood

The Sugarland Express is a minor film in Spielberg's canon, but that scene at the drive-in is a key instance of Spielberg using sound to simultaneously answer and problematize his adult audience's desire for childhood fantasies. Spielberg is arguably the most commercially successful director in Hollywood history, and much of his success comes from his awareness that adults often desire the imaginary worlds that populate children's films as much as their children do. Such Spielberg films as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) are all targeted toward adult audiences, but they focus on characters who yearn to escape into fantasies that his audiences commonly associate with childhood – imaginary worlds where one can feel taken care of without feeling helplessness and experience thrilling sublimity without actually feeling fear. And while vision undeniably plays a significant role in these fantasies, sound drives this special form of fantastic escape. Spielberg's characters create their new worlds primarily through sonic memories from children's media – from fragments of Disney songs, sound effects from Daffy Duck cartoons, and melodies from *Sesame Street*. In sound, Spielberg's fantasists find sensations that are abstract and full of possibility on the one hand, yet tethered to specific emotions remembered from early childhood on the other. Both are qualities that prove essential for unhappy individuals who wish to use vague memories of childhood as an escape route without bringing back all of the specific trauma that comes along with childhood.

That this is an impossible goal is not lost on the director, however emphatically his detractors might claim otherwise. Despite Spielberg's reputation as

a proponent of infantile pleasure, his films are just as much about the dangerous ramifications of his characters' fantasies as they are about the pleasure of fantasy itself. But that desire to recapture the imaginary worlds that seemed possible in childhood is so powerful that Spielberg's promise to deliver those worlds attracts mass audiences even when the films themselves openly criticize that impulse.

Spielberg's astronomic commercial success comes in part because, prior to the director's emergence in the mid-1970s, few other directors in Hollywood were catering towards that adult desire for childhood nostalgia. True, Walt Disney most certainly intended to draw parents along with their children to his fairy tale utopia when he made his most famous films in the 1940s and 1950s. As the decades passed, for that matter, Disney and his company even began taking advantage of new adult viewers who saw his films as children and now wanted to return to that world with their own children. Yet Spielberg was one of the first filmmakers who actually went so far as to target that desire in films that were ostensibly made for adults. This is in part because Spielberg emerged in Hollywood at roughly the first point in American history where it would even have been feasible to expect a mass audience of adults all reared on the same popular children's entertainment on television. As a baby boomer, the director was part of the first generation that grew up in the Disney television landscape that we explored in the previous chapter. Spielberg grew up in an America where Disney features and other animated cartoons initially designed for movie theaters migrated onto television, transmitted continuously into the living rooms of millions of suburban middle-class children. For Spielberg and the many of the other children who grew up with such programs as *Disneyland* and the *Bugs*

Bunny and Road Runner Show in the 1950s and 1960s, these animated films were not just events that took place in the theater – they were a constant presence in the household. Not all of these films and shorts were initially intended for children, but once they became a mainstay in television programs targeted at kids, they became a fixture of middle-class suburban American childhood.

These programs and films contained an appeal that clearly lingered past childhood, but prior to Spielberg and his peer George Lucas, few if any filmmakers in Hollywood thought to take advantage of that appeal. Certainly other directors in the New Hollywood batch of filmmakers – iconic figures such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola – displayed little interest in anything associated with childhood fantasy. They drew their inspiration from the more adult-oriented European cinema from their film school educations, and their films were far more interested in amplifying the traumatizing realism of adult life than providing any relief for it. In recognizing that his fellow Baby Boomers craved still craved the escape from trauma - an escape that Disney's films and television programs once seemed to promise - Spielberg and Lucas instituted a paradigm shift that radically changed the way Hollywood approached attracting its mass audiences.

Perhaps because the overwhelming success of his fantasies was a crucial factor in Hollywood's move towards escapist spectacle in the ensuing decades, Spielberg has been subject to an unusually high level of critical and academic vitriol over the past several decades. Very frequently, this criticism takes the form of accusing Spielberg of romanticizing childhood and regression. These practices have purportedly led to what Pauline Kael once referred to as “an infantilization of the

culture” (McBride 512), though many critics like Kael use the term “infantalization” to speak of a looser concept that collapses infancy into childhood in general. The most outspoken of these detractors have likely been Robin Wood and Peter Biskind. Wood holds Spielberg and Lucas responsible for steering Hollywood away from the most ostensibly challenging and radical films of the 1970s and towards mindless exercises in wish-fulfillment that only succeed because they appeal to their adult audiences’ most childish desires. He refers to this development as the “Lucas-Spielberg syndrome,” a “curious and disturbing phenomenon of children’s films conceived and marketed largely for adults – films that construct the adult spectator as a child, or, more precisely, as a childish adult, an adult who would like to be a child” (145). The films are so successful with audiences, Wood explains, because they appeal to the average adult’s “urge to evade responsibility – responsibility for actions, decisions thought, responsibility for changing things” (147). After all, he reasons, “children do not have to be responsible” for “there are older people to look after them” (147). The central implication in Wood’s argument is that Spielberg presents childhood as a state that is easier than adulthood, devoid of the obligations, hard decisions, and introspection that are apparently exclusive to adult life.

Peter Biskind echoes this line of thinking when he accuses the director of wanting to “return the boomers to the sandbox” (342) in the late 1970s, though in his view Spielberg’s version of childhood is primarily nostalgic. He describes the director as someone who caters to “our sentimental view of our better self as the inner child, the innocent youth we used to be” (363), indicating that Spielberg’s films succeed with audiences because they tap into a larger desire to romanticize childhood

as an idealized space of purity. But whether they attribute the appeal to nostalgia or adult anxiety, the critics who accuse Spielberg of childishness tend to do so by assuming that Spielberg's fantasy worlds are only substitutes for the audience's supposed true desire – to re-experience childhood.

Because they are so quick to equate depictions of children's worlds with an endorsement of childishness, however, critics like Biskind and Wood overlook the decidedly negative attitude that Spielberg's films frequently take to the actual experience of childhood. As Lester Friedman notes in *Citizen Spielberg*, the children in the director's films are rarely "particularly happy. Their environments often mirror their stressful, chaotic, and lonely lives." Far from the "idyllic paean" that the director is often accused of constructing, "Spielberg's suburbia is characterized by dissonant chaos, flat landscapes, tract housing, tasteless interiors, battling siblings, mindless television programs, and polyester clothing ... they debilitate the imaginations of the inhabitants" (33). It is certainly difficult to witness the screaming toddlers and bickering parents of the Neary household in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or the lonely, neglected children in *E.T.*, and feel any desire to return to this early point in human development. Childhood in Spielberg's films tends to be an unstable and disillusioning world, one where both mother and father figures constantly fall short of providing the reassurance and security that their children crave. Wood acknowledges this to a point, when he grants that the first part of *E.T.* "quite vividly depicts the oppressiveness of life in the nuclear family, a life comprised of "incessant bickering, mean-mindedness, one-upmanship" (157). But rather than allow that Spielberg's films might actually have a more complex view of this nuclear

family life, Wood treats those darker scenes as though they were accidents that somehow made it into the film without the director's knowledge. "All [Spielberg] can do," Wood insists, "is reassert the 'essential' goodness of family life in the face of all the evidence he himself provides" (157). The question rarely addressed in these critiques is why, if Spielberg were making a case for the "essential goodness" of the nuclear family, he would bother to provide so much evidence that detracts from that case.

This is not to say pleasure is never associated with childhood in these films. Though the actual child characters in his films often have unhappy experiences, the potpourri of references to popular children's films and entertainments do trigger nostalgia for some aspect of early youth. Yet this is a different form of nostalgia than the version that Frederic Jameson famously speaks of when he discusses George Lucas in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." When Jameson refers to films like *Star Wars* as "nostalgia films" because they evoke the aesthetic and narrative tropes of films from the adult audience's childhood, he surmises that these tropes serve the purpose of enabling a "deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and live its strange old aesthetic artifacts once again" (8). In this context, the old aesthetic artifacts are simply a means for achieving the audience's real desire of returning to childhood. But while this may hold for Lucas's films, I argue that iconic Spielberg films like *Close Encounters* evoke a different desire. The nostalgia generated by fondly remembered childhood artifacts in these films is not nostalgia for childhood itself, but rather nostalgia for the fantasies that once made it seem possible to escape *from* childhood. Spielberg deploys nostalgia for children's

fantasies in order to recreate that early point in the audience's lives when it still seemed possible to enter the imaginary worlds that sprawled behind the film and television screens. This point in childhood is brief, and it ends once the child discovers the real-world artifice that makes up this media - that Mickey Mouse only exists as a series of drawings, or that Oz is only a series of set pieces in a sound stage. From that point on, the ability to believe that these films are windows into worlds that can actually be escaped into dissipates, and the boundaries that separate fantasy from reality firmly cement themselves. But when Spielberg films spark emotions associated with childhood escapism, they do so to bring the adult audience back to a state of mind that has neither learned nor accepted the difference between the real and the impossible. Upon bringing the audience back to this state, he renders them receptive towards the idea of finally entering these spectacular new worlds that were constantly promised and ultimately withheld in actual children's fantasies.

Sound is integral to this process, for two important reasons. First, because Western culture typically regards hearing as a sense that is less physical and more abstract than vision, sound remains open to the sensation of vast limitlessness that is necessary for Spielberg's fantasies. Second, because sound also has the ability to trigger vivid memories of specific emotions, a sonic fragment from a film or television program that an adult saw as a child has the ability to rekindle the initial feeling of experiencing that film as a child. In some respects, those acoustic references are even more effective in reigniting those early feelings than actually returning to the original children's films themselves. In revisiting *Pinocchio* as an adult, for example, one's attention is likely to linger on animation effects that now

seem awkward or narrative inconsistencies that now seem distracting. Though elements may bring back fond memories, the film is never again going to hold the adult viewer rapt with the idea that she too can walk down those Italian streets or explore Pleasure Island.

But when Spielberg takes a well-recognized melodic fragment from that film and works it into the fabric of the protagonist's final escape into fantasy at the end of *Close Encounters*, he triggers the memory of what it feels like to experience *Pinocchio* as a young child without an adult's awareness of the film's limitations. At times, Spielberg incorporates specific auditory reference points, such as the maniacal laughter from *Duck Dodgers in the 24th and a half Century* (1953) or the orchestral reprisals of "When You Wish Upon a Star" that appear in *Close Encounters*. Other times, the acoustic association is subtler, as when John Williams evokes *Bambi*'s romantic-impressionist music during key scenes in *Close Encounters* and *Empire of the Sun*. Throughout, however, he uses sound as a means of rekindling the adult's earliest interaction with film and television. And upon bringing both his characters and his audience back to that receptive state, he creates a scenario where the fantasy worlds in his own films almost seem like tangible alternatives to reality.

In discussing films that use sound to evoke spaces that seem separate from the real world, I am to some extent entering into recent discussions in cinematic sound studies on the connection between sound and the otherworldly in Hollywood films. For example, Robert Spadoni argues that Universal horror films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931) took advantage of the disconnect between voice and body in early synchronized sound film to create a sense of the uncanny (54). More

recently, Michael Slowik discusses ways early sound films used non-diegetic music to evoke refers to as “other worlds,” a term that evokes both “physical location[s] far removed from familiar reality” and “internal world[s] of fantasies, dreams, and desires” (10). In a sense, this description might seem to fit Spielberg’s sound fantasies as well, as they too are both removed from familiar reality and tied to internal fantasies and desires. Yet the concept I am speaking of in Spielberg’s films is more specific than these “other worlds” – they come from a very particular desire for escape, one that is intimately tied to fantasies from childhood.

2.3: Sublime Refuge and Spielberg’s Paradoxical Fantasies

In the pages that follow, I will be referring to this type of impossible world as a “sublime refuge,” a term meant to convey the nearly paradoxical sensations that come into play inside Spielberg’s fantasies. “Sublime,” because these worlds are often designed to thrill and awe the listener, often creating a sensation akin to ascending into some magnificent unknown. Yet the terror that comes associated with high Romantic notions of the sublime as defined by Kant or Burke is mitigated here by the gentle comfort inherent in Spielberg’s fantasies. For while these worlds offer fantastic excitement, they also function as refuges from any negative affect, safe-spaces that offer complete and unending security. It is tempting to view these soothing havens as substitutions for the mother’s womb, but in Spielberg’s films, the inverse is actually the case – where the mother’s womb promises comfort and only offers more instability, the sublime refuge provides the true comfort that the subject

has been seeking all along. And where those feelings of pure comfort seem like they should conflict with the feelings of overpowering sublimity, the two sensations somehow never clash – they provide all the pleasure inherent in the sensations without any of the negative ramifications.

They are also, as the films illustrate, problematic. As much as Spielberg's characters – and his audience – would like to fully escape into this best-of-all-possible worlds scenario, reality's ugly traumas always lurk in the world outside. Moreover, reaching these fantastic havens often entails engaging in behavior that makes things worse for the people left to linger in the real world. To varying degrees, Spielberg attempts to explore these darker undercurrents, showing the damage that his characters often bring upon themselves and their loved ones in order to ascend into these euphoric dream-spaces. Yet for better or worse, the sheer visceral appeal of his musical fantasies is often so overwhelming that it drowns out any ominous undercurrents. It is perhaps for this reason that, despite the often cautionary subtext in the director's films, audiences constantly seem to embrace him as a director of uplifting sentimentality.

2.4: Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Nowhere is this complex relationship more prominent than in what is arguably the director's most influential film. Though Spielberg first illustrates his craft with *Duel* and his prowess for blockbuster spectacle with *Jaws*, he makes his first recognizable "Spielberg" film with 1977's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. This film marks the first time that all of his signature elements are on full display: the

search for feelings vaguely remembered from childhood, the excess of otherworldly spectacle, and the reverential awe towards the fantastic. Moreover, *Close Encounters* is the first Spielberg film to explicitly explore the extent to which his target audience craves an escape into that fantastic spectacle. In this case, that target audience is the prototypical suburban male of the late 1970s, the Baby Boomer who is settling uncomfortably into the patterns of adulthood. The audience surrogate in *Close Encounters* takes the form of protagonist Roy Neary, a middle-class family man who lives in the suburbs of Indiana and resents his wife, children, boss, and all of the responsibilities that these parties impose. Neary wants to flee this life, and for much of the film, he tries to avoid adult anxieties by becoming a child again. Early scenes depict him playing with toy trains, tinkering with music boxes, and fixating on films from his childhood, all while attempting to shut out noise from his family and work obligations. Neary seems, on the surface, like the exact sort of figure Spielberg's critics accuse the director of championing: a man-child who avoids facing difficult realities by retreating into some sentimental ideal of his early youth.

But contrary to what such an interpretation might suggest, Neary does not actually find pleasure or escape in his pursuit of childish pastimes; if anything, his attempts at recreating childhood only exacerbate his anxiety. When Neary finally does manage to discard his adult life and fully retreat into fantasy, that retreat is not a fantasy of childhood – it is something much less tangible, a world that merges blinding light with soothing music from Disney films. Spielberg has claimed in interviews that the song, “When You Wish Upon a Star” served as the film's initial inspiration, and that he “pretty much hung my story on the mood that song created,

the way it affected me emotionally” (qtd. in McBride 262). He accordingly directed composer John Williams to incorporate the song’s melody into the fabric of the film’s score (Mcbride 287). In a sense, Spielberg’s desire to create a film based on the song’s “mood” functions as an extension of Disney’s own use of the song “When You Wish Upon a Star” through the *Disneyland* anthology series. As I discussed in the prior chapter, the television show largely transformed the song from a narrative musical number into a sonic entry-point into Disney’s elaborate imaginary universe. To an extent, Spielberg’s film is the story of one adult’s efforts to recapture that mood and live in it. Though the film literally ends with Neary entering an alien spacecraft and travelling to the stars, the rhapsody of music derived from *Pinocchio* and *Bambi* that accompanies this finale creates an even stronger impression that Neary is escaping into a void of Disney music itself.

At the same time, it would not be accurate to simply say that Neary is returning to the fantasy world depicted in *Disneyland*. The realm that Spielberg and Williams construct using this familiar music is more than just a reprisal of Disney’s fantasy kingdom - it is an attempt to create an even more fantastical universe on that song’s foundation. By transforming the music in ways that mesh nostalgic comfort with rapturous ecstasy, the film posits a reimagined version of children’s media that offers more than gentle reassurances - it offers thrilling ecstasy as well. The film delivers Neary into a sublime refuge, a new world where feelings like comfort and sublimity that should stand in stark contrast instead merge into a singular, all-encompassing source of pleasure.

While the contrast between Neary's suffocating life in the real world and the ecstasy he experiences in his fantasy world is clear from the narrative itself, the film renders the contrast most vividly through its soundtrack. Neary's "real world" primarily favors cacophony, overlapping sounds taken from the household that gradually build to an unnerving fever pitch. In his spectacular alternative world, the soundtrack is built primarily on more serene and pleasurable sounds, on soothing wordless choirs and melodies drawn from children's films. Spielberg situates the audience so that it primarily occupies Neary's point of audition – because the listener is also immersed in the agony of the real-world's sonic chaos and the ecstasy of the fantasy's relief, that listener is presumably more inclined to desire the escape the film is offering. The film in this sense becomes both a depiction of and an attempt at embodying a sublime refuge, propelling the audience along with the protagonist into its blissful dream-space.

Yet does embodying that fantasy necessarily mean that the film is also endorsing it? Certainly, the film ends with such an overpoweringly joyous depiction of its sonic fantasy that it would be tempting to assume that the film favors this form of escapism as an alternative to reality. This is the view that Bob Kolker takes when he refers to Spielberg's world as one of "simple desires fulfilled, of reality diverted into the imaginary spaces of aspirations realized, where fears of abandonment and impotence are turned into fantasy spectacles of security" (265). At first glance, it can seem as if the director offers simple, easy, and dangerous solutions to the complex realities of adult anxiety. A closer look, however, reveals that *Close Encounters* depicts escapism with more tonal ambiguity than scholars like Kolker acknowledge.

The boundary between the film's two sonic worlds is not hard and fast; the pleasurable sounds from which Neary constructs his fantasy originate in his real world cacophony, and that cacophony constantly threatens to spill into the fantasy.

The film never goes so far as to present a clear warning against escapism, but it maintains a conflicted relationship with both the pleasures and dangers of fleeing into fantasy that remain uncomfortably unresolved when the film closes.

The film establishes both the oppressive world of adulthood and a possible means of leaving it in the first scene with Roy Neary and his family³³. From the start, Roy is a character whose half-hearted attempts at playing traditional masculine roles – husband, father, and breadwinner – result in sonic discord. In an early domestic scene that presumably represents a typical evening in the Neary household, Roy tries in vain to seclude himself in childhood pleasures while the incessant demands from his wife, children, and employer assault him from all sides. His oldest son lethargically moans, “Dad, do my problems for me,” referring to a school assignment that has somehow become his father's responsibility. His youngest son repeatedly bashes a broken doll's head against its crib, seemingly for the pure pleasure of the crashing noise it creates. His wife nags him not to leave his things on the breakfast table, reminds him of promised family outings, and scolds him for his irritated

³³ Or rather, the first scene with Roy and his family in the Special and Collector's Editions of the film. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is a film that has gone through several different widely available cuts, none of which can strictly be said to be the “official” version of the film: the original 1977 theatrical edition, the 1980 “Special Edition,” and the 1997 “Collector's Edition.” While most discussions of the different cuts center on the addition and subtraction of the key “inside the mothership” sequence that Spielberg added for the 1980 Special Edition and then removed for the 1997 Collector's Edition, in truth each version of the film contains a wide range of exclusive small but crucial moments. In this instance, the initial 1977 cut of the film leaves key footage of Neary's family. Spielberg evidently initially wished to include it in the film but left it on the cutting room floor because he was pressed for time to deliver the film. Indeed, much of his original inspiration to release a “Special Edition” in 1980 stemmed from his desire to reinstate this footage (see McBride 291)

reactions to his children. His boss harangues him on the telephone with demands to report for work in the middle of the night. None one of these layers of dialogue or sound ever appears in isolation – much as with Robert Altman films like *The Long Goodbye* and *Nashville*, voices and sounds overlap and frequently drown each other out (this is particularly true of the child banging the doll, which creates a relentless pulse for nearly the entire scene). These sounds, each tied to some aspect of Neary’s role as an adult suburban male (father, husband, and employee), combine to create a nearly impenetrable wall of acoustic agitation.

Because every layer of this suffocating noise comes from his various obligations as an adult, it is perhaps unsurprising that Neary seeks an escape by reverting to childlike behavior. We first see him playing with a train set, actively attempting to shut out the sounds of his shrieking children by playing with toys.

When his son harangues him for help with his homework, Roy distractedly snaps, “I graduated so I don’t have to do problems,” acting less as a father figure than as a fellow child unwilling to homework. Yet rather than provide him with a refuge from the surrounding dissonance, reverting to childlike behavior only compels him to contribute to the noise. As the scene progresses, he begins responding to the noise by growing more temperamental. He shouts, “Toby, you are close to death!” when the toddler’s incessant banging grows unbearable, an eruption that amplifies the tension in the room. Soon after, he responds to what he perceives as his family teaming up on him by snapping, “All right fine, I’m wrong! I’m Wrong –Roy!” The mocking alliteration in the nickname he gives himself resembles insults that children exchange

at the playground, and his outburst turns him into yet another voice in a room full of screaming children. Childlike behavior only loops him back into sonic anxiety.

But he does see one possible way out of this aggravating din when he discovers that a nearby theater will be playing the 1940 animated film, *Pinocchio*. Even as his children display a pointed lack of interest, dismissing the film as “a dumb movie, rated G for kids,” Neary frantically insists that the family go to see the Disney movie. *Pinocchio* is a film from Neary’s childhood, and the prospect of seeing it again now seems to promise a temporary respite from his howling home life – a retreat from the pressures of adulthood into the fondly remembered fantasies of his early youth. Yet, Neary also seems to recognize that the act of viewing the film will not itself allow him to re-enter the imaginary worlds that this film once represented. As an adult, he will inevitably see the artifice of Disney’s fantasy if he returns to the film himself. This is why, despite their protests, he needs his children to see *Pinocchio* with him – he needs them to re-experience that feeling of watching the film for the first time vicariously. “I grew up with *Pinocchio*, and the kids are still kids, they’re going to eat it up,” he explains to his wife as he tries to rally her to his cause. In emphasizing that his children will “eat up” the film’s imaginary world because they are “still kids,” he also implies that he can no longer muster the same level of excitement for the film himself; he, despite his best efforts, is not still a kid. The best he can hope for is to relive that sensation through his own children’s excitement for the film, an unlikely scenario given their blatant lack of interest. While Neary recognizes that a fondly-remembered film like *Pinocchio* might offer solace from the noise that surrounds him, he does not yet understand how to achieve that solace.

He receives his first insight into what achieving sonic sanctuary might entail shortly after that domestic scene, when he makes contact with the extra-terrestrials that give the film its title. Lost on a backcountry road, Neary is fumbling with a map when an alien spacecraft hovers directly above him, rattling his truck and exposing him to blinding light so intense it leaves him sunburned. More than with light, however, the aliens communicate with Neary by appealing to what he seems to know best – noise. As the ship hovers overhead, loose change and scraps of metal in the truck begin clattering. The train signal outside makes high-pitched dinging noises. The truck’s radio switches on and moves back and forth from static and fragments of popular songs. And then, just as abruptly, this wall of sound falls away, replaced with a warm, pure hum from the spacecraft. For a few moments, we and Neary hear its soothing vibrations, a pointed respite from the racket that rattled through the car only moments earlier. However subtly, the ship is setting up a comparison between two sonic worlds for Neary to consider. In one, the clanging, riotous noise of his adult existence batters him about – every noise that the aliens trigger is a noise that already belongs to Neary’s everyday reality. In the second, the glowing, uninterrupted hum from the spaceship offers an auditory alternative, a comforting escape from the unnerving dissonance that seems to follow Neary everywhere he goes.

It will take Neary time, however, to determine what that comforting escape might actually entail. From this point on, Neary’s attempts at coming to terms with what he experienced result in erratic, unstable behavior that eventually drives his wife and children out of his life. To an extent, the film posits Neary’s breakdown as the

aliens' doing. They do plant mental images and a five-pitch musical phrase in his head, and much of Neary's behavior involves trying to bring one of those images – a mountainous shape that turns out to be Devil's Monument in Idaho – into material reality. But a closer look indicates that Neary's emotional breakdown is first and foremost an extension of his earlier attempts at escaping into childhood. Presented with the possibility of sonic relief, Neary responds by amplifying his childlike behavior, ultimately regressing into behavior more associated infancy. He begins playing with his food at the dinner table, behaving, as Spielberg biographer Joseph McBride notes, "like a toddler playing in his own waste" (281). He eventually begins mimicking infantile behavior; he regularly breaks down weeping in front of his family, begs for maternal comfort, and at one point even attempts to simulate the prenatal stage. Evidently under the impression that early childhood itself is the safe space that humming spacecraft hinted at, Neary attempts to move into the earliest possible stages of human development.

Neary's behavior in this portion of the film is likely the reason that a number of scholars have taken to psychoanalytic readings of the film as a whole. For Andrew Gordon, Neary's behavior is indicative of a film that is "fundamentally regressive" at heart, one in which the protagonist's narrative arc amounts to a long attempt at becoming infant again and reuniting with the lost mother (70). Such readings posit that Neary's behavior in this portion of the film is indicative of what he truly desires – to relive the "infant's experience of fusion with the mother and of the mother's power to transform the environment" (66). Neary's ultimate ascension into space and sound at the film's end thus gets reduced to a heavy-handed symbol, with the alien

spacecraft emerging as a “spectacular floating breast” (66) that allows Neary to become infant again. Yet such readings risk reducing the film’s more conflicted relationship with infancy and fantasy into a tidy paean to regression. While Neary does engage in overtly infantile behavior in the middle section of the film, Spielberg takes explicit measures to make infancy seem just as oppressive and unnerving as Neary’s adulthood, if not more so. Ultimately, Spielberg’s child-man grows so incapacitated by his babyish state that his subsequent flight into fantasy registers as a flight away from infancy, not towards infancy.

The film’s most intensely miserable depiction of Neary’s regressive behavior occurs the night before Neary’s family leaves him. Ronnie, woken by the sound of running water, barges into the bathroom to find her husband fully clothed in the shower, curled up the fetal position as water roars down upon him. Here, Neary blatantly attempts to recreate a womb scenario for himself, enclosing himself in a bath of warm liquid that he unconsciously hopes will provide the same comfort as the womb’s amniotic fluid. The raining water from the shower itself creates a dull roar, one that seems to simulate the constant hum that comes from being submerged as a fetus. Roy takes the adult association between childhood and escape to its most literal extreme – by reducing himself to the absolute earliest point in childhood, he seems to think he can cocoon himself off from the rest of the world. But he does not find solace in that faux-womb; when Ronnie finds him, Roy is whimpering helplessly, like an infant overwhelmed by uncertainty. Submerging himself into a makeshift sonic womb has indeed succeeded into returning Neary to infancy.

However, as he soon discovers, infancy comes accompanied by crippling feelings of vulnerability and helplessness.

As an infant, Roy is even less capable of facing the oppressive noise of his family, which has grown even more intense as a direct consequence of Neary's regressive behavior. His wife responds calmly at first, urging her husband to agree to family therapy. However, when he ignores her request, Ronnie breaks down and begins screaming hysterically. Their children enter the room and begin sobbing and crying as well – one screams “stop fighting,” while another begins repeatedly slamming a door, shouting, “You cry-baby!” at his father. Roy responds by seeking more infant-like comforts and begs his wife to “hold him” as he attempts to rest his head on her chest; he is effectively asking for the same comforts that a mother traditionally provides for her child. Yet if Neary had any lingering beliefs that comfort might be found through some symbolic union with the lost mother, Ronnie effectively disabuses him of that notion. She reacts with revulsion to her husband's pleas to be held; screaming “I hate you!”, she violently strikes her husband. She then secludes herself in the bathroom, leaving her husband to sob feebly by the bathroom door, begging his wife to come out as he collapses on the floor. Roy, in attempting to turn himself into an infant and his wife into a mother, only experiences violent rejection.

Throughout this sequence, the film also lingers on the Neary children's reactions to their parents' domestic dispute. While the parents fight, Spielberg frequently cuts to close-ups of the children's tear-streaked observing faces. Even when the children are off-camera, we constantly hear them wailing, screaming, and

violently slamming objects against the wall. Though Neary is ostensibly the character with whom the audience is meant to identify, this constant focus on the children's subjective experience reminds us that Neary is not the only character experiencing trauma in this scene. The terrified children serve as a constant reminder that as much as Neary may wish to return to it, childhood is not some idyllic place where the anxiety of adulthood somehow does not exist. Being a child in this film means depending entirely on emotional security from paternal figures who can rarely provide it. Roy experiences this when he attempts to simulate infancy and finds himself begging for maternal love from a woman who can only give him disgust. His children experience this when they witness their father descend into a version of childhood that somehow seems even more helpless than their own. In behaving like an infant, Neary makes an already unhappy state of existence even worse for his children, for he takes away one of the few bright lights that childhood affords – that the fear and uncertainty that can cause every moment to feel like the ground will open up in childhood will somehow give way to assured security in adulthood.

Up to this point, the film has placed so much emphasis on the destructive ramifications of Neary's behavior that it nearly plays like a morality tale against the dangers of regression. Were this a standard Hollywood story, the film would likely follow that storyline to its natural conclusion – either with Neary learning a lesson and embracing his role as a responsible parent or with Neary receiving some sort of punishment for turning his back on fatherhood. Instead, the film abruptly shifts direction at its midway point and abandons the Neary family's domestic drama. The film writes Neary's family out of the story and, seemingly against all logic, actually

allows Neary to escape reality and all of its attendant hardships. That turn pivots on Neary experiencing an epiphany, one that fundamentally changes the way he pursues escapism. The morning after his meltdown with Ronnie, Roy wakes up in the living room and finds his daughter watching a Daffy Duck cartoon, *Duck Dodgers in the 24th and a Half Century*. As Carl Stalling's manic music and Mel Blanc's exaggerated voice acting fills the room, Roy smiles and chuckles to himself. As he begins clearing away clutter from the previous night, he triggers a *Pinocchio* music box that plays a lullaby version of "When You Wish Upon a Star." At that point, as cartoon music surges around him, Roy knocks the top off of one of his sculptures and finally discovers the mountainous shape that the extra-terrestrials planted in his head. From this point on, Neary's behavior distinctly changes. He loses his crippling emotional vulnerability and stops behaving like an adult who wants to become an infant. He instead takes on a confident and driven demeanor, as he is now focused exclusively on following the thread of a new fantasy world - one that exists outside of both childhood and adulthood.

On a strictly literal level, we could of course argue that this change in his character comes because he finally sees the shape that will eventually reveal itself as Devil's Monument, the aliens' planned landing site. Yet the fact that this moment of discovery pointedly occurs when Neary is surrounded by the sounds from children's cartoons indicates that his epiphany is about more than the location of the landing site - it is about the unique fantasy that these children's soundtracks themselves provide. Hearing the theme from *Pinocchio* and the audio from *Duck Dodgers* catalyzes a realization - conscious or not - that the worlds suggested by these

children's soundtracks can themselves provide the escape that Neary has been frantically seeking throughout the film. This is more than simple nostalgia for fondly remembered childhood icons - this is a repurposing of the affect of those icons in order to reach an entirely new space. Neary does not need to see *Pinocchio* or even look at the television screen that is displaying the Daffy Duck cartoon in order to reach his moment of clarity - the melodies and sound effects from those children's films are actually more powerful for being divorced from their original contexts.

Taken in isolation, the faux-dramatic music from the *Duck Dodgers* cartoon takes on a power that transcends the silliness of its source and suggests an entirely new world that has not yet materialized. This is why Neary is finally able in this moment to take the abstract image in his mind and give it material shape - the isolated children's music returns him to a mental state where impossible worlds still seem possible, where abstract fantasies like this mountain seem like they actually can materialize in the real world.

From this point on, Neary begins working his way towards his sublime refuge, a development signaled by a stark tonal shift in the soundtrack. Shortly after her husband's epiphany, Ronnie finally reaches her tipping point and leaves Roy, taking the children and their cacophonous noise with her. Filling the sonic gap left by that anxious racket, composer John Williams' orchestral score begins to take over the film. Earlier, the score had only appeared in fits and starts, rarely accompanying scenes involving Roy and his family. But after the family leaves and Roy fully commits himself to his obsession, majestic and sentimental score music begins to sweep through the film's aural landscape. This shift occurs gradually, but its most

dramatic turning point comes when Neary first sees the image of Devil's Monument on the television. Up to this point, the house is still filled with aggravating sounds – the static sound of a news report is blaring on the television and Neary is bickering with his wife on the phone, making a final half-hearted attempt at convincing her to return. But once Neary sees the mountain on the television and recognizes it as the image he has been obsessively sculpting, the soundtrack dramatically shifts. Neary goes silent and hangs up the phone, effectively eliminating his wife as a source of auditory anxiety for good. The score then gently enters the room with a mysterious two-note phrase that repeats continuously, gradually growing louder and more grandiose. The television continues to blare, but it can scarcely be heard beneath the overpowering music. In burying all real-world sounds under its flood of fantastical affect, the music is effectively transforming Neary's world into one akin to fantasy. Visually, nothing has changed – the dimly lit living room is still filled with garbage and dirt. But the score diverts the listener's attention away from any gritty imagery and towards the music's promise of a more glorious alternative. And as Neary takes to the road and navigates his way through a series of obstacles on his way to Devil's Monument, that score becomes his near-constant companion.

While this grandiose music may at first appear to be non-diegetic sound, the film offers the distinct possibility that Neary himself is on some level generating it. Though the massive orchestral and choral ensemble does not have a literal physical presence in the film's narrative world, the foundations of the music all come from diegetic sounds that have special meaning to Neary. The timbre of the wordless choir that appears when Neary first sees Devil's Monument on television, for example, can

be traced back to the soothing hum of the spacecraft Neary earlier encountered out on the road. More significantly, the nine-note phrase that serves as the score's primary theme is actually variation on the B section of Pinocchio's "When You Wish Upon a Star" (i.e., the portion of the melody that corresponds with the song lyrics, "Fate is kind / she gives to those who love..."). This is the second half of the melody that started in the *Pinocchio* music box in the Neary household, the melody from the film that best represents the fantasy world Neary so deeply desires. Significantly, this variation is magnified and twisted from its original form – where the Disney song was gentle and reassuring, the score's variation adds unresolved chord progressions that add a mysterious and majestic air to the theme. The impression is that of a familiar piece of children's fantasy growing, breaking off, and opening up into new world of its own, a space that resonates with the comfort of its source while still promising thrills not yet experienced. Significantly, this music, rooted in a melody so close to Neary's own longed-for escape, becomes a dominating presence in the film at the same time as Neary discovers the means of accessing that escape. As a result, the film opens up the possibility that Neary himself may be building a sonic bridge that might lead him into a sublime refuge.

That sonic bridge leads him to the real Devil's Monument in time to witness the alien mothership's arrival. Though "real," in the context of the film, this spacecraft serves as the culmination of all of Neary's longing for escape, a glowing orb that invites him to cocoon himself in sentimental ecstasy. Yet before Neary can ascend into a new fantastic realm with these creatures, he must make his way through one last sonic obstacle. Upon reaching the monument, Neary finds a team of

government officials, researchers, scientists, linguists, cartographers, and military officials who have set up a camp in preparation for the extra-terrestrials' arrival. For though I have thus far focused on one character, Neary is only one of a number of people the aliens have affected on some level. Throughout the film, the international research team has been following signs of extra-terrestrial influence, seeking out scattered individuals across the globe who also have been haunted by vague images of mountains and the aliens' chipper 5-note musical phrase. Their efforts have led them to the mountain, and initially, they seem primed to remove all fantastic elements from the alien encounter. At the landing site, they have constructed an elaborate technological apparatus, a network of computerized machines designed to document and quantify the encounter with alien life. Yet as the soundtrack indicates, these efforts to bring the fantastic into the realm of tangible logic only result in yet another form of auditory discord. In order to access the extra-terrestrials, one must approach them as Neary does – as site of cosmic wish-fulfillment.

This dynamic is clearest when Neary first descends to the landing site and discovers a din of overlapping sounds - mechanical noises from the scientists' machines, distorted announcements coming through the loudspeaker, and scattered technobabble from the various frantic researchers hustling to and fro. These sounds are all the direct result of the team's attempt to quantify the extra-terrestrial encounter – to bring the fantastic down to earth by measuring it with elaborate mechanical apparatuses and needlessly complex technical jargon. Rather than enable the scientists to understand the alien encounter, however, these sounds overlap and create a racket of non-meaning that obstructs understanding. This holds even for the famous

“conversation” scene between research team and the alien mothership. When the mothership lands, the team engages it in a musical dialogue, using an enormous computerized keyboard to play a call and response using variations on the aliens’ 5-note phrase. Referring to this sequence as one of discord may at first seem odd, given that the scene has been almost universally interpreted as a celebration of cross-cultural communication. Yet while human and alien-kind do manage to cross linguistic barriers and communicate with music, the actual music they play is pointedly anxious and unstable.

The conversation does begin pleasantly enough as a simple call and response – the humans play the first three pitches of the phrase on their keyboard, and the mothership responds with the last two pitches. But after repeating this several times, the music begins to develop into a more elaborate counterpoint, each new iteration of the phrase growing more distorted in the process. The music coming from the humans’ keyboard grows increasingly frantic, particularly when the keyboard’s computer takes over and begins playing music on its own. While the mothership patiently thumps out steady rhythmic bass notes, the keyboard falls behind the rhythm and begins spurting out a series of short, high-pitched chromatic phrases that create dissonance against the mothership’s music. Finally, the mothership seemingly loses patience and cuts the conversation off with a menacing two-note growl. The human scientists then applaud, but it is clear that they had no idea what the “conversation” they just conducted actually entailed. For while their computerized keyboard has carried out a conversation of sorts with the aliens, that keyboard has also added so many needless auditory complications that it has rendered the conversation

indecipherable. Even to operate the machine, the scientists seem to need to shout out a series of music terminology instructions to the keyboardist (“Up a perfect fifth ... down a full octave”) - simply so he can play 5 notes that a toddler could learn on a toy piano. Indeed, the aliens seem to have designed this phrase as their signal to the humans for its welcoming simplicity, something that is decidedly lost on these experts. The research team, in making sure that every note receives its proper technical instruction before it is played, and in developing a computerized machine to control every last moment of their contact with the Martians, has instead created a scenario that can only descend into unintelligible nonsense.

Neary radically changes that acoustic dynamic. When the government officials notice that Neary has entered the landing site during the conversation, they reluctantly allow him to be one of several dozen people who will be presented to the aliens as a potential space-traveler. And when he and his fellow candidates approach the mothership, ecstatic and sentimental score music pours over the film – from here until the ending credits close, this music dominates the soundtrack. Neary, unlike the government officials, sees the aliens not as an unknowable force that needs to be tied back down to everyday reality, but rather as the natural conclusion to his longing for escape into children’s fantasies. And now the connection to Disney music finally becomes explicit. When the childlike aliens single out Neary and guide him into the mothership, variations on the main melody of “When You Wish Upon a Star” ripple through the orchestra. Yet the score does not simply quote the music – it breaks it into pieces and builds something larger and grander from its foundations. Different iterations of the eight-note melody pass through different sections of the ensemble in

a canon, each phrase ascending slightly higher, each one ending on an unresolved harmony. The music creates the sense of something comforting and familiar that is nevertheless struggling to articulate something grander, each modulation into a new key an attempt at ascending into a higher plane of existence.

The score also creates the sensation of a world that is both intensely familiar and spectacular by using impressionistic idioms that have come to be associated with the larger idea of Disney escapism. In both Leigh Harline's original 1941 score to *Pinocchio* and the countless variations throughout the *Disneyland* anthology, any instrumental variations on "When You Wish Upon a Star" tended toward straightforward romantic string arrangements. In *Close Encounters*, however, the same melody moves through a much more elaborate orchestral and choral palette, one that stems less from standard film music and more from concert-hall impressionists like Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Much as with Debussy's *La Mer* or Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*, the orchestration is based primarily on instrumental color – wordless choir joins the orchestral ensemble to provide textural harmony rather than melody, while solo woodwind, harp, and string effects flutter in and out of the massive ensemble to create the impression of an organic tapestry. On a purely visceral level, these orchestrations create the sense of a deep and textured acoustic space, amplifying the sense that the familiar Disney melody is developing new and unpredictable dimensions.

Yet the impressionist references themselves also likely carry powerful nostalgia for the film's target audience of suburban Baby Boomers. While only a small portion of Spielberg's target audience is likely to be familiar with early-

twentieth-century concert hall music, that audience very likely does have strong associations with a Disney film that appropriated this music; *Bambi* (1942). As I discussed earlier, that film also turned to Ravel and Debussy to turn transform otherwise simple melodies into a vast impressionistic tapestry, using the same soothing choral and orchestral layers that characterize *Close Encounters*' music. The score is effectively combining acoustic fragments of two Disney films that have by 1977 become part of America's collective popular-culture consciousness. Over the three and a half decades that separate *Pinocchio* and *Bambi* from *Close Encounters*, the two Disney films have become common household fixtures, perpetually reissued for each new generation in movie theaters, television screens, record albums, and other ancillary media. In the process, the music for both films has taken on a meaning that extends far past the original films. *Bambi*'s orchestrations, repurposed as I noted earlier for key *Disneyland* episodes, have become part of the larger studio's aesthetic, while the melody of "When You Wish Upon a Star" has become the anthem for the entire Disney brand name. This means that for both Neary and the film's presumed audience, merging "When You Wish Upon a Star" and *Bambi*'s orchestrations into one sound-world means more than simply meshing two films together – it means combining two of the strongest signifiers of the entire idea of Disney fantasy. The resulting acoustic space accordingly takes everything that Disney films seem to promise – retreat from anxiety, soothing comfort, whimsical fantasy – and carves away anything that does not enhance that core musical ideal.

Neary thus enters a sublime refuge, ascending into a world that simultaneously offers the pleasure of nostalgia without the sadness and the ecstasy of

excitement without the fear. Crucially, this world of cognitive dissonance as wish-fulfillment functions largely because it emphasizes sound over sight. For while the sequence is famous for its elaborate visual effects, it is easy to forget that the audience sees very little of the world Neary is entering. The scene is dominated by Spielberg's signature lighting techniques of flashing bright light directly into the camera, filling the screen with a white light that the director has referred to as "the God lights" (McBride 286). Though it may indeed create the sensation of staring into a higher power, the God lights primarily result in the absence of vision – their piercing brightness blinds the audience, obscuring any other objects in the shot. This is decidedly the case here – as the mothership's doors open, blinding white light pours out and ensures that nobody will be able to see the ship's interior. The same light also keeps the alien creatures that emerge from the ship nearly indiscernible. What amounts to intense backlighting ensures that the creatures only appear in silhouette, with no details other than the vague outlines of their childlike bodies clearly visible. Any sense of awe-struck wonder the scene generates comes less from visual spectacle, and more from overpowering music that conjures fantastic new worlds of its own; worlds that are more visceral for being abstract and auditory than they could hope to be if they were locked down by images alone.

Ironically, that dynamic reaches its fullest statement in a sequence that has been widely criticized for being *too* visual – a sequence that Spielberg himself apparently regretted filming. The "inside the mothership" sequences that was added to the 1980 Special Edition has largely been regarded as a mistake, and few complained when Spielberg removed the sequence in the 1998 Collector's Edition.

As Spielberg biographer Joseph McBride explains, the critical consensus seems to be that by “preventing the viewer from simply imagining what happens to Neary,” the new ending “squandered much of the film’s sense of wonder and magic” (290). Yet though it may seem counterintuitive, this scene inside the mothership actually offers invaluable insight into the audio-visual dynamic of Neary’s sublime refuge. As much as the scene seems to be dominated by special effects, very little is clearly visible inside the mothership. Once again, searing light renders the already-abstract imagery hazy, forcing audience members instead to rely on what they can hear.

Even apart from lighting, however, the film distorts a visual sense of space through subtly deceptive editing. Upon Neary entering the mothership, he first stands transfixed by the glowing shafts of light and color. Eventually, however, he turns to the back wall and looks up to see column after column of tiny, silhouetted extra-terrestrials at work in brightly lit compartments. Or rather, the rules of basic continuity editing indicate that this is what he should be seeing. The eyeline match – from a close-up of Neary staring up at the wall to a low angle shot of the wall itself – indicates that the camera occupies Neary’s perspective as it stares up at the wall. Yet even though Neary remains stationary, the camera tracks up, floating through space to reveal row after row of aliens that Neary could not possibly see from his position.

The effect should be disorienting; the viewer assumes that this is Neary’s point of view, yet the viewer is also able to recognize that this point of view is spatially impossible. This is a realm, in other words, where vision is no longer trustworthy as a sense that offers tangible confirmation of the environment’s spatial rules and limitations. And what little vision is initially available is fleeting. As the camera

floats upwards, it simultaneously zooms closer to the aliens in their brightly-lit cubicles. Yet moving closer does not make these silhouetted childlike creatures more discernible – it only intensifies the blinding “god lights” that pour out of the aliens’ chambers, gradually blinding the audience. To approach this new world is to gradually lose one’s ability to see. To drive this point home, the sequence ends with a low angle POV shot from Neary’s perspective that stares directly at a glowing light directly overhead. As the sequence closes, the light bursts into all-encompassing brightness, eliminating every other image.

The soundtrack, however, mitigates the unnerving sensations that might come from losing vision. Inside the mothership, the score takes on a more extreme version of its previous iteration, dominating the audience’s sensory experience of the environment. As Neary steps inside the ship and observes the massive light beams around him, the impressionistic references take on a life of their own. The wordless children’s choirs no longer simply perform textural harmony - they take over the melody, leading the score into an evocative Debussian pastiche resonant of both mystery and innocence. And as the camera floats up toward the silhouetted aliens, the score plays its most straightforward rendition of “When You Wish Upon a Star” to date. This time, the theme is not fragmented or distorted by unresolved harmonies or outlandish orchestrations – the cello section simply plays the melody in the gentlest manner possible. The only alteration comes from the subtly piercing pizzicato strings that play under the melody, an indication that this familiar melody has the potential to burst apart into something new at any given point. That burst comes at the end of the sequence; as Neary stares up into the searing white light, a

massive choral outburst punctuates the moment, signaling a transition into a realm made up entirely of rapturous sound.

The cumulative effect of this audio-visual dynamic is to recreate – to the greatest extent possible – the actual sensation of ascending into the acoustic realm of sublime refuge. The silhouetted aliens, with their miniature infant-like bodies, suggest a world of childhood comforts just before the fade into the light. Yet miniaturized though that world may be, the film shows us enough of it to create the sensation that stretches out into infinity. The vast columns of alien cubicles seem far too tall to fit into the spaceship as it was presented outside at the landing site, and one gets the impression that spatial boundaries cease to apply inside this world. Both of those visual suggestions, however, only scratch the surface of the world suggested by the score. By playing “When You Wish Upon a Star” right before the blinding light entirely obliterates vision, the score turns the Disney melody into a nostalgic gateway into the new – the melody draws on the listener’s associations with the song, using those associations to bring the audience back to that point where the song’s promises for better, limitless worlds still seemed feasible. And having brought the audience back to that point, the film proceeds to stun and awe - blinding lights and heraldic choirs elevate the audience into a state of sublimity that somehow never undermines prior feelings of nostalgic security. This is what Neary truly desired when he cajoled his children to see *Pinocchio* – now, somewhat impossibly, he has taken up residence in this bath of pure wish-fulfillment.

The film also does everything in its power to ensure that the audience will share in this fantasy. After miring the audience in the enervating sounds of everyday

domestic strife, the ascension into pure auditory pleasure can only register as a euphoric relief. *Close Encounters* closes with Neary enclosed in the space ship, sailing into the stars as heavenly variations on “When You Wish Upon a Star” play right into the ending credits. But does closing the film on such a celebratory note necessarily mean the film is endorsing this escape? It certainly feels that way – indeed, the film makes its concluding acoustic fantasy so overwhelmingly attractive that it is easy to sympathize with scholars who claim that Spielberg actively advocates this sort of willful escapism. Yet to treat this ending as an unconditionally positive celebration of escapism also means willfully ignoring the path of destruction that Neary has left in his wake to get there.

After all, this euphoric finale does nothing to resolve the conflict between Neary and his family. For the better part of the film, Neary’s cataclysmic effect on his wife and children has occupied the central drama of the narrative. The last time Ronnie and the children appear in the film, however, they are fleeing from Roy, their fates uncertain. Questions about their futures – whether Ronnie will find some other means of supporting the children, or whether the children will suffer long-term psychological damage after witnessing their father self-destruct – go entirely unanswered. These were not questions that the film had previously avoided; earlier scenes in the film had pointedly lingered on both Ronnie’s distress at Roy losing his job, as well as on the children’s traumatized reaction to their father’s behavior. A standard Hollywood film would almost certainly tie up these loose ends. For example, one could easily imagine a scene in which, right before Neary enters the mothership, he leaves the government experts money for his children and a letter in

which he tells them that he will always love them. Such a saccharine scene would not improve the film, but it would provide the expected closure to the domestic drama in the film's middle act. The film, however, leaves these conflicts entirely unresolved.

While witnessing the fulfillment of Neary's deepest desires may seem joyous, the closing scene never resolves the implication that Neary has severely damaged the lives of other people in the process.

Indeed, earlier scenes in the film underline the destructive potential inherent in Neary's desire for escapism. Return to that moment of Roy's big epiphany – the moment where he realizes that throwing garbage into his living room, breaking his windows, and effectively driving his family away is precisely what he needs to do in order to materialize his fantasy. Earlier I emphasized that audio from the Warner Brothers cartoon, *Duck Dodgers in the 24th and a Half Century*, was one of the major catalysts that triggered Neary's internal change. I did not, however, detail the startlingly violent qualities of that cartoon's soundtrack. An uncharacteristically fable-like Warner Brothers short, the cartoon riffs on Mutual Assured Destruction - an arms race over an alien planet eventually results in its obliteration. As Neary begins to see his vision of Devil's Tower materializing in front of him, we hear the violent finale of this cartoon. We hear Daffy Duck and Marvin the Martian cackling maniacally. We hear the cartoon's score ratcheting up tension one halftone up the scale at a time. We hear the wailing sirens of the doomsday weapons, and finally, we hear the crashing explosion of the planet. That *this* is the soundtrack for Neary's final decision - to commit wholly to his dream at the expense of his family - should carry significantly ominous implications about the nature of Neary's quest. Neary is

pursuing an escape to a realm where the anxieties of reality are replaced with the uncomplicated pleasures of children's fantasies. Yet *Duck Dodgers*, the very children's film that seals Neary's descent into this obsession, specifically models the destructive danger in pursuing a dangerous and nonsensical goal to its natural conclusion. We do not hear the sounds of celebration when Neary makes this decision – we hear the sounds of pure destruction, no less vivid for coming from a Daffy Duck cartoon. The implication, however subtle, is clear – escaping into a blissful audio-fantasy may very well entail wreaking destruction on the world that Neary is leaving behind.

Yet *Close Encounters* is hardly a fable about the dangers of shirking one's familial responsibilities. While the film does not compromise on showing the trauma Neary puts his family through, it also seems to go out of its way to ignore that trauma during the film's last act. This is what makes *Close Encounters* so beguiling – it is a film that raises difficult questions in its first act and then proceeds to do everything in its power to help audiences forget those difficult questions in its last act. And where such a sharp tonal disconnect should theoretically cause severe cognitive dissonance, the film's wide popular appeal and critical reputation as an uplifting fantasy indicate that few audience members feel discomforted by the film's ending. This may be simply due to the sheer force of affect that closes the film. After all, when wave upon wave of sentimental musical ecstasy rolls over the listener, it is all too easy to set aside any lingering doubts about the fates of Ronnie and the children. Yet even if this is true, it does not explain why the film goes to such great lengths to emphasize the damage that Neary does to his family in the first place. Why create a scenario that

can seemingly only undermine the sublime celebration the film ultimately wants to impress upon its audience?

We could still write these tonal clashes off as directorial oversights, of course, by-products of a film that went to go through two additional cuts after its initial release. There is, however, a more uncomfortable answer to this question that I suspect is closer to the truth: the audience's awareness of Neary's negative impact on his family is precisely what makes watching him achieving his fantasy so appealing. For in allowing Neary access to this paradise of thrilling reassurance, the film is essentially telling the audience that such a dream can be fulfilled without any moral or ethical preconditions whatsoever. Neary, after all, is not a heroic figure in any sense of the word – he does not learn to become a better father, a better patriarch, or a better citizen over the course of the film. He does not redeem himself with acts of selflessness, bravery, or any other noble qualities that would, in virtually any other Hollywood film, come as a basic prerequisite for such an extraordinary reward. He harms and abandons the family that depends on him, and the film does not even mitigate this behavior with an assurance that his family will somehow be fine. He is not presented as an *evil* character, but he does not do a single thing in the film that is not entirely for his own benefit. Neary's success after so much selfish behavior tells the audience that his reward has been entirely unearned.

Again: this is what makes his reward at the end so appealing. Were the film to first require Neary to learn to accept responsibility, demonstrate selflessness, or mature in any other fashion, his entrance into the mothership would be reduced to an exchange – a happy ending offered in return for good behavior. This scenario would

implicitly compromise the sublime refuge's position as an alternative to reality, a realm unbound by the limitations and rules that structure Neary's – and by extension, the audience's – adult life. For while American culture professes to value the idea that people appreciate things most when they have earned them, in truth this is often not the case. Your average adult is far more likely to grow excited at finding \$20 on the street than at earning \$20 for an hour's work, for the found money is a breach in the regulated structure of daily adult life. If Neary can ascend into his sublime refuge without having done a thing to “deserve” it, then such a realm is not even bound by the most basic moral obligations of the real world – it is truly limitless, and requires no payment upon entry.

This is an offer that even the original Disney films did not extend. The title characters of *Pinocchio* and *Bambi* may inhabit sentimental fantasy worlds, but both are also obliged to exhibit personal growth and moral behavior as a precondition for remaining happy in these worlds. Pinocchio cannot simply become a real boy – he must demonstrate obedience, honesty, and selflessness before the film is willing to fulfill his desires. Bambi cannot simply remain content in his lush forest cocoon – he must face death, demonstrate bravery, and accept his responsibility as the forest's patriarch before he may comfortably savor the forest's magnificence. However much the individual viewer does or does not agree with these values, the logic of the morality-tale narrative limits the appeal of the fantasy – morality turns the fantasy into something that one must work for. This requirement drags the abstract escapism down the level of an object to be purchased, rather than a thoughtless void that exists for its own sake. The irony is that in order to follow through with the moral values

that *Bambi* and *Pinocchio* impose on their young audiences, one would need to mature out of the early childhood state that makes Disney's fantasy worlds seem accessible in the first place.

Part of the overpowering appeal of *Close Encounters*' finale then, lies in using only key musical signifiers from *Pinocchio* and *Bambi*; doing so allows listeners to experience the pleasure of Disney fantasies without any of the moral obligations those films demand. By appropriating the sentimental melody of *Pinocchio* and the lush orchestrations of *Bambi*, *Close Encounters* allows the audience to experience the joy and wonder associated with those films in an abstract void; here, no lessons about good behavior or maturity threaten to inevitably drag the listener back into reality.

The film even goes a step further, rewriting those musical references so that they are more spectacular and more reassuring than they ever were in their original formats.

As a result, the film brings audience members closer to the infinite pleasure zone that these films seemed to promise in the first place. The resulting sublime refuge is a space where pure positive affect exists in perpetuity and any negative side effects are immediately silenced. The inherent contradictions in the very concept of sublime refuge – the idea that placid feelings of calm security could coexist with feelings of massive spectacular awe – are possible precisely because the film has created a space where no positive emotion comes at a price. One no longer needs to exchange the ability to feel thrilled for the ability to feel calm, as the logic of exchange no longer holds in this sonic void. This, in other words, is a space where simultaneously having and eating one's cake is the perpetual state of existence.

2.5: Reclaiming the Fantasy: *Close Encounters*' Legacy

In the late 1970s, the prospect of entering such a space was evidently extremely attractive – enough so to virtually revolutionize the American film culture. The film was extraordinarily successful, grossing over \$116 million in North America alone (\$447 million when adjusted for inflation), and coupled with George Lucas's even more financially successful fantasy *Star Wars* that same year, it signaled a shift away from the more overtly challenging, serious-minded adult fare that had dominated Hollywood throughout the 1970s. As Peter Biskind notes, *Close Encounters* enormous success indicated that “audiences were tired of bad news” and that “awe was more commercial than fear” (363). And indeed, much of *Close Encounters* unhappy first half seems designed to remind audience just how tired they are of bad news in the cinema. Nearly every site of sonic anxiety in the film can be traced back to auditory tropes from more cynical 1970s films. The overlapping dialogue and emphasis on strictly diegetic sounds that we hear in the domestic scenes stem from the gritty realism that Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and John Cassavetes made a regular feature of 1970s cinema. By making these sonic tropes seem so abjectly miserable and then contrasting them so vividly with the Disney-inspired music, *Close Encounters* sets itself up as an extraordinarily attractive alternative for an audience hungry for sentimental fantasy.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind thus proved hugely influential in the decade that followed, and not simply because it resulted in more films marketed as blockbuster pieces of escapism. Throughout the next several decades, the use of

sound associated with children's fantasies as an escape from more mundane real-world settings began to emerge as a common trend throughout a variety of genres, from straightforward science fiction like Ron Howard's *Cocoon* (1984) and James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989) to comedies like the Spielberg-produced *Back to the Future* (1985) and Tim Burton's *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985). In many of these instances, the soundtracks were specifically influenced by John Williams's *Close Encounters* score, leading to a feedback loop where the Disney-inspired music of one film took on a life of its own – one that began and ended with ecstatic sonic ecstasy. Few of these films offered such a stark contrast from sonic misery to sonic ecstasy, and none were as explicit in the idea fully escaping into sublime ecstasy as *Close Encounters*. But the film set in motion a widespread cultural desire to reclaim fantasies long-since abandoned, desires that, however problematic, film sound finally seemed capable of answering.

Chapter 3: He Doesn't Speak Words – Comfortable Discord in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Animation

3.1: Alternatives to Disney: Comfortable Discord

The first chapter examined Disney's development of a sound aesthetic that would eventually evolve into the dominant sound of children's media culture. Yet while Disney's exaggerated pathos has held the greatest influence over American child viewers throughout the past eight decades, alternative approaches also have emerged. This is particularly true in the mid-20th century, when the animation industry saw a brief upsurge in studios positing themselves as alternatives to Disney's aesthetic. In the process, tropes in animation sound began to emerge that eventually became media fixtures in their own right. This is particularly the case with United Film Productions (or UPA), a studio that formed in the late 1940s when a group of disaffected Disney animators struck out on their own. In much of UPA's output, we find cartoons that take experimental approaches to sound, inverting or ignoring the conventions that had long dominated the animation industry. And though most of UPA's output has fallen out of the collective cultural consciousness, the studio's unconventional approach to sound had a significant and direct influence on much of the children's media in the decades to follow. Indeed, after the studio's decline in the late 1950s, many departing UPA artists would go on to continue the studio's unconventional approach to sound in more culturally ubiquitous children's media.

In what follows, I will explore two pivotal case studies of popular animated films that pioneered these alternative approaches to sound and image, one made at the height of UPA's glory years, the other made by a former UPA artist years after the studio's decline. The former, Bobe Cannon's *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (1951), is the first fully formed example of UPA's radical approach to animation, while the latter, Bill Melendez's far more famous *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965), is in many ways a culmination of the experiments started at UPA. Both films employ counterintuitive methods that do not produce clear relationships between sound and emotion, ultimately finding their appeal with a phenomenon I refer to as *comfortable discord*. These films triangulate image, sound, and emotion through unorthodox means, creating scenarios where conflicting sensations clash in ways that should be unnerving. Yet somehow rather than upset, these clashes open up a form of open-ended emotion that comes across as uncannily appealing. Because the open-ended tension never actually resolves, the films invite a sense of peace within that tension, a comfortable stasis within conflict.

On one level, the concept shares key similarities with sublime refuge. Both involve combining seemingly contradictory feelings in a manner that produces some version of pleasure within the contrast. Both, for that matter, are anchored on a foundation of comfort, the idea that at least one side of this affective collusion will be consoling. Yet where sublime refuge attempts to fold opposing emotions into a unified experience - to make overwhelming fear and gentle reassurance come across as a unified experience - comfortable discord never attempts to disguise the inherent tension between the competing feelings. Where sublime refuge emerges as a wholly

positive experience, comforting discord finds instead elicits a calming sensation from tonal conflicts that remain fundamentally unresolved.

A wide variety of methods can bring this feeling about, but it frequently occurs in instances where the soundtrack seems to be either circumventing or even ignoring the rest of the film. These are moments where sound effects vanish unexpectedly or appear where they are not supposed to, when music follows patterns that seem unrelated to on-screen events, or when a tonal disconnect emerges between the content and the delivery of a character's speech. Deployed poorly, these off-kilter sonic choices may risk coming across as "wrong" or sloppy, as though the filmmakers failed to coordinate their efforts. But at their most effective, films that produce these forms of audio-visual disconnect open listeners to multi-faceted forms of emotional engagement. The soundtracks in both *Gerald McBoing-Boing* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* take the audience's engagement in roundabout circles, allowing cognitive connections that are rarely easy to process. But the work put in to following those circles often replicates the animated characters' unique states of mind, provoking empathy that might not have been possible through more conventional means.

From a film music theory perspective, this concept may seem similar to the "parallelism versus counterpoint" binary that scholars have been returning to ever since Eisler and Adorno outlined the concept in 1947 when they wrote *Composing for the Films*. The basic premise states that while film music that practices parallelism seeks to reinforce the obvious emotions suggested by the on-screen narrative, counterpoint seeks to refute and play against the image (Eisler and Adorno 40-3). As Caryln Flinn summarizes, counterpoint "upholds that music should be used in

contrast to the image and should try to dispel any illusion of unity. In doing so, music would then expose - and exploit - cinema's basic heterogeneity, not conceal or deny it as under parallelism" (46). On one level, the central premise of using music to rupture the illusion of film as a unified whole does strike a chord with the approach to sound practiced by the filmmakers at UPA. If we apply the principles of musical counterpoint to film sound, it is certainly tempting to find the technique in *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, a cartoon that frequently comes across as an exercise in dismantling the sonic tropes designed to give animated drawings the illusion of unity.

But the counterpoint tradition also frequently implies a clinical and intellectual engagement with sound that is less in keeping with this conception of comfortable discord. Flynn also explains that proponents of the counterpoint approach favor it for the "'critical distance' it allegedly promotes" (Flynn 46-47). It is here that counterpoint seems to grasp at a different form of audio-visual engagement than that which plays out in *Gerald McBoing-Boing* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. True, these cartoons often play music - as well as other sounds - in ways that run counter to the image. But unlike the intellectual exercises promoted by counterpoint practitioners, sound in these films is not strictly a means of making the audience intellectually aware of film's artifice. The animated films in this study deploy sound to affect the listener on in a less obvious manner, triggering conflicted layers of emotion that the listener is most likely to receive unconsciously. Though critically distanced intellectual engagement is certainly not precluded in this formulation, it is not the most likely outcome.

That last point about the film's audiences consisting largely of children is not meant to be an off-hand remark. Comfortable discord makes such a powerful impact in these cartoons largely because it reaches audiences members at very early ages. When, for example, the *Peanuts* specials present young listeners with music and voice acting that run counter to narrative unfolding onscreen, the cartoons end up teaching young audiences nuanced methods of processing multiple and often conflicting layers of auditory emotion - auditory layers that evoke everything from anxiety to playfulness, from melancholia to contentment. And as we will see in the next chapter on Wes Anderson, these films plant the seeds for a more complex and multifaceted relationship with audio-visual media when that child audience reaches adulthood.

3.2: UPA and Gerald-McBoing-Boing

The animated films produced by United Productions of America throughout the 1950s hold a curious place in annals of Hollywood history. On the one hand, none of the studio's creations have entered the lasting public consciousness in the manner of Disney's Mickey Mouse, Warner Brothers' Bugs Bunny, or any of the studio's other contemporaneous animated competitors. Before TCM released the *Jolly Frolics* DVD set in 2011, few of UPA's shorts were available for home viewing in any form. Yet though modern day viewers have largely forgotten the studio's output, for a brief period UPA was the most influential cartoon studio in the industry. In the 1950s, UPA lead an industry-wide paradigm shift that moved animation away from the gently rounded realism of Disney and towards the sharper, more angular aesthetic of

modern art. And though the studio is most famous for its visual innovations, much of that modernist urge to experiment would also play out in the way that the studio approached sound.

The studio emerged in the mid-1940s, founded by disaffected Disney animators who were frustrated with what they saw as the tired stasis in the company. David Hilberman, one of the studio's founders, later explained that UPA emerged from the pent-up artistic ambition of "designers who had art training who were beginning to push out and feel their oats. People who knew Picasso and could recognize Matisse across the room. And here they were working at Disney, Warners, working on this really cute corny stuff" (Hilberman, qtd. in Gabler 555). To break away from that "cute corny stuff," Hilberman, along with co-founders Stephen Bosutow and Zachary Scharz, eventually formed an animation studio where modern art aesthetics and design would take precedence over fluid movement or realistic character animation. As Disney biographer Neal Gabler puts it, "UPA consciously forswore all the hallmarks of Disney animation: the realism, the depth, the sense of gravity and secondary effects, the sentimentality and emotional affect, even the animals that Disney typically featured" (555). Far removed from Disney's emphasis on depth of field, UPA's animators embraced the two-dimensionality of the animated plane, emphasizing flat, angular characters juxtaposed against stark minimalist backgrounds. The results, as UPA historian Aram Abrams puts it, often resembled the animated equivalent of "Picasso, Matisse, and Mondrian combined with the stylings of New Yorker illustrations such as Saul Steinberg" (X). The studio pioneered a form

of limited animation that subordinated fluidity of movement or level of detail to aesthetically striking design.

The studio's influence in popularizing this modern aesthetic is hard to overstate - in addition to UPA's widespread popularity with audiences, it became a critical darling and a mainstay at the Academy Awards. For a brief period in the 1950s, seemingly every cartoon studio followed UPA's lead; Disney began incorporating stylized, angular design into its own productions, such as *Toot, Whistle, and Plunk* (1953), while Warner Brothers began featuring increasingly abstract backgrounds designed by Maurice Noble in such Looney Tunes shorts as *What's Opera Doc?* (1957) and *Hare-way to the Stars* (1958). And while youth culture may have quickly forgotten UPA's often consciously adult-oriented output (the lingering relative popularity of Mr. Magoo notwithstanding), the studio's aesthetic significantly influenced the cartoons that did become children's culture mainstays after animation migrated to television in the late 1950s. When cartoon production companies made the move to television production, they followed UPA's model of limited animation, saving on production costs by severely limiting the frame rate and range of motion for its characters.

In these instances, the modernistic design became as much a cost-saving feature as an aesthetic decision. Amid Amidi explains, "If the type of full animation that had been the hallmark of American theatrical animation was no longer possible, then cartoon producers could engage audiences through colorful eye candy in the form of distinctively designed" characters (40). Cartoon producers like William Hanna and Joseph Barbera in particular learned that UPA's striking stylization could

capture the audience's attention even when the characters were nearly motionless, and they adapted the aesthetic to characters ranging from Yogi Bear, Fred Flintstone, and George Jetson. Thus even when UPA faded from prominence by the end of the 1950s, its visual signature was still firmly embedded in the televised cartoons that played in front of millions of young viewers in the decades that followed.

Yet while animation scholars and historians acknowledge the influence that UPA had over American animation, very few recognize the studio's innovative experiments in sound and music. Even the growing body of critical work on music for animation tends to ignore UPA in favor of Carl Stalling's work at Warner Brothers and Scott Bradley's work at MGM. But while UPA's shorts were most immediately striking for the way they looked, the studio's approach to sound was just as radical as its approach to animation. If the studio posited itself as a visual and thematic antidote to what its creators saw as the hyper-sentimentalized house style at Disney and the hyper-violent house styles at Warner Brothers and MGM, they also extended this ideology to their music and sound design. Where Disney's films and shorts were increasingly using Romantic music to overwhelm listeners with pathos, UPA composers often turned to neoclassical modernism, serialism, and bebop jazz in ways that juxtaposed with unpredictably against images on-screen. And while nearly every studio producing animated shorts strictly adhered to the laws of hyper-specific synchronization, where each onscreen movement received reinforcement from both sound effects and music, UPA frequently challenged the assumption that sound and image needed to be inextricably linked.

Nowhere is the studio's commitment to challenging its audience's relationship with cartoon sound more evident than in *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, the studio's first major artistic breakthrough. Easily the most celebrated of the studio's shorts, Bobe Cannon's Oscar-winning film about a child who "doesn't speak words, but goes Boing-Boing instead" is renowned for being the first fully-realized iteration of UPA's visual style. A far cry from the hyper-detailed and fully realized animated worlds created by Disney, Warner Brothers, and MGM, *Gerald McBoing-Boing* occupies a visual world represented by only the slightest of animated gestures. Backgrounds often consist of nothing more than a monochrome plane and a single piece of furniture. Translucent characters assume the colors of their backgrounds and engage in minimal movement; rather than exit the frame for scene changes, they often remain in place while the setting changes around them. Moreover, as Adam Abraham puts it, the characters themselves are "flat, two-dimensional," figures that do not make any pretenses towards spatial realism; "unequivocally they are *drawings*, not meant to be mistaken for anything else" (87).

Yet however bracingly innovative the cartoon's visual design may have been, the film's soundtrack has received little attention. True, Gail Kubik's score has received brief mentions: Roy Prendergast devotes a few sentences to the score in his chapter on animation in *Film Music: A Lost Art*, and Abrams himself notes that "Kubrik's jazz score sounds cool and modern" in his analysis of the film (87). But overall, few scholars have devoted serious attention to the way the entire soundtrack of this film disrupts the audio-visual hierarchy of the studio cartoon. This critical oversight is particularly surprising given that in this particular instance, sonic

upheaval is not merely subtext, but the actual basis of the film's plot. *Gerald McBoing-Boing*'s central drama emerges from the havoc a young child wreaks on the cartoon universe when he tries to communicate using the "wrong" part of the soundtrack. For Gerald speaks not through dialogue but through sound effects. Gerald, in other words, "speaks" using the spring noises (the "boings"), horn honks, sirens, railroad crossing signals, and explosions that by 1951 had long been part of the standard sound effects repertoires of cartoon studios and radio stations.

The plot, adapted from a children's record by Ted Geisel (better known by his pen name, Dr. Seuss), follows the travails of young Gerald McCloy as he navigates the social ostracization caused by his unique condition. When young Gerald turns two and begins speaking, his parents are shocked to hear him speak entirely through sound effects. The child is rejected from school, taunted by his peers, and finally driven to run away from home. Just as all hope is lost, however, he is intercepted by a radio producer, who invites Gerald to work as a Foley artist for a popular radio drama. The story ends with Gerald reunited with his parents, famous and wealthy as a radio celebrity.

In its rough outline, the story is very similar to other popular children's stories in which a young misfit is first scorned then celebrated for an unusual physical characteristic. Abrams himself notes that the film's initial audiences in 1951 noticed distinct similarities between this story and that of Disney's 1941 feature, *Dumbo* (89), and the story also fits the general mold of *Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer* (popularized as a song in 1949). Yet *Gerald McBoing-Boing* distinguishes itself from these earlier iterations of the trope by anchoring its conceit specifically to its medium.

Geisel could easily have adapted the signature rhyming anapestic tetrameter of his script for the record into one of his many children's books, but he refrained because he knew fully well that the story only worked in an auditory medium - one where those sound effects could themselves function as part of the text.

That said, the initial medium Geisel chose was the phonograph, not the studio cartoon; he first he sold the idea to Capitol Records as a children's record in 1949. The Capitol recording features the same story and much of the same rhyming text that we hear in the UPA short, which might make it tempting to downplay the cartoon's auditory innovation. But while the Capitol version faithfully maintains Geisel's inventive story and his signature anapestic tetrameter, the LP otherwise offers nothing resembling UPA's innovative approach to sound. Harold Peary, in the persona of his popular radio buffoon, The Great Gildersleeve, recites the text with affected pomposity; he treats the story more as a Great Gildersleeve routine than as an independent narrative in its own right. Meanwhile, Billy May's score responds to each turn in the story with correspondingly melodramatic music in the quasi-Romantic style that had long been the standard of film and radio serials. Even the central conceit of Gerald speaking through sound effects does not register as particularly bracing in the record, as arrangers like Spike Jones had already made playing silly sound effects in seemingly random places a standard feature of 1940s novelty songs (see Jones's "Cocktails for Two").

Geisel seems to have sensed that his story did not reach its full potential in this recording. When his friend at UPA, P.D. Eastman, asked Geisel to pitch the studio story ideas, Geisel immediately responded with *Gerald McBoing-Boing*,

evidently hoping to give the concept a second chance (Morgan 130). Once the story moved into the animated medium, Gerald McCloy's sounds took on a dramatic new context. Cannon and his crew used Gerald's unique condition not only as a gimmick but as a lynchpin for upending the sonic hierarchy of the studio cartoon. In the film, Gerald does more than speak through sound effects - he displaces sound effects from their traditional place in the cartoon soundscape. While boings and crashes come out of Gerald's mouth, these sound effects are otherwise absent throughout the cartoon; characters jump, run, dial telephones, and fall over without any corresponding sound effects. The music, for that matter, does little to make up the difference; Gail Kubik's score by and large ignores the onscreen action, avoiding any attempt at "Mickey Mousing" the characters' movements and pratfalls with corresponding music. Though such sonic omissions may not have been quite so dramatic in a live-action film, it was nearly unprecedented for the soundtrack of a studio cartoon produced in 1951 to feature so many soundless actions.

For throughout the 1940s, nearly every major animation studio cartoon inhabited a universe where every action received a corresponding exaggerated sound, regardless of whether that action would produce anything similar in a real world setting. The perpetually bouncing kangaroo in Robert McKimson's *Hop, Look, and Listen* (1948) makes a corresponding "boing" every time his feet leave the ground, while Jerry creates a deafening cymbal crash every time he bashes Tom on the head in Fred Quimby's *Kitty Foiled* (1948). As that latter example indicates, the logic of this intensely action-focused synchronization also frequently extends to the musical scores of these cartoons. As Daniel Goldmark explains, "almost all studio cartoon

music from this period was written to correspond with some level of the action, from a single note (a realization cue [“Boing!”]) to a long melody (tracking the descent, for instance, of a leaf wafting through the sky on a breezy day)” (Goldmark 266). In both instances, music effectively joins the sound effects in “reifying the physical impact of visual action in a made up world” (266). Music and sound effects in studio cartoons of the 1940s functioned primarily to give the fictional world physical presence, to create the illusion that these animated drawings are actually capable of producing noise.

Gerald, by appropriating those synchronous sound effects from their place in the soundtrack, upends the rules that previously structured that animated landscape. On one level, this new approach to sound is in keeping with the filmmakers’ mission statement for making a clean break from realism. This idea comes into particularly sharp focus when we consider Michel Chion’s claims regarding synchronous sound in American cartoons. While discussing the role of precise synchronization in Tex Avery cartoons, Chion argues that because sound is “so clear and precise in our perception of it,” it often functions as a “drop of reality” in the otherwise “closed and inconsequential universe of the cartoon” (122). For Chion, the precision and clarity of sound gives the animated cartoon a visceral tactility it would otherwise lack, and he notes the way details like the sound of a dog panting can make the animated figure seem “concrete, realistic, canine” (122). In disavowing the precise noises that might anchor its characters in time and space, however, *Gerald McBoing-Boing* severs its animated universe from that drop of reality.

At first glance, it might seem that the absence of orienting sound effects could produce anxiety, that the audience might feel unmoored in the cartoon's universe without the expected sonic tethers. This would at least be in keeping with the theories regarding synchronization that K. J. Donnelley outlines in his book, *Occult Aesthetics*. Donnelly speculates that instances of specific synchronization between sound and image in film offer “moments of comfort in a potentially threatening environment that is overwrought with sound and image stimuli” (8). Synchronization, for Donnelly, implies some semblance of order; it enables illusion that the fragmented images and sounds are in fact part of one coherent whole. Though the author is speaking primarily of live action films, one could easily apply this logic to the studio cartoon, where sound and image stimuli frequently take intensely exaggerated forms. When images are explicitly drawings that are physically incapable of producing sound, fostering that illusion of synchronous order would seem to be that much more crucial.

For in instances where sound and image do not explicitly align, Donnelly argues that the results are “potentially disturbing,” and that they signal “moments of textual danger” (8). “Asynchrony,” he explains, “Threatens to pull apart the contract of film's illusion of sound and visual unity into a miasma of disparate and potentially meaningless elements” (10). Now to be sure, *Gerald McBoing-Boing* never veers into literal asynchrony – indeed, the sounds that come out of Gerald's mouth time precisely to his motions. But because the cartoon breaks so many unspoken rules of exaggerated synchronicity in the studio cartoon, *Gerald* nevertheless creates the sensation of asynchrony – when we are so accustomed to each musical phrase

aligning with each physical action, the absence of that musical mimicry creates the impression that the sound and image tracks are out of alignment. And given how steadfastly studio cartoons prior to *Gerald McBoing-Boing* avoided anything resembling asynchrony, one might conclude that this threat of coming unraveled into meaningless elements is especially potent in this film.

Indeed, it would be tempting to thus read *Gerald McBoing-Boing* through the lens of anxiety, to read the havoc he wreaks on the illusion of audio-visual order as a disturbing or frightening ordeal. Yet while the danger of sonic collapse often seems to motivate the terror Gerald instills in his parents, the film was received as anything but a disturbing or disquieting affair. The cartoon was, after all, a critical and commercial darling upon its release 1951; it won the Oscar for best animated feature, spurred “the sort of critical hosannas that had once been reserved for Disney animation” (Gabler 556), and went on to spawn three sequels and a television series. While this does not preclude the possibility that some audiences were unnerved by the cartoon, the general reaction was and seemingly continues to be one of delight. However much *Gerald* may upturn the comfortable conventions of the form, something pleasurable emerges in the process.

To give the film a musical identity that would upend standard conventions, the studio hired Gail Kubik, a composer far more at home in the concert hall than in the studio cartoon. Unlike the other major studios, UPA did not have house composers, nor did it feature a signature house style. Each cartoon was contracted out to outside composers who were hired on a case-by-case basis. A diverse array of musicians worked for UPA as a result, and they rarely came from fields associated with

animation. They ranged from Oscar-winning Hollywood film composers like David Raksin and Ernest Gold, jazz musicians like Billy May and Phil Moore, and avant-garde serialists like Boris Kremenliev. This wide variety of voices and genres prevented any one style from setting a single recognizable tone for UPA, which suited a studio that would just as soon produce a gothic Poe adaptation like *The Telltale Heart* (1953) one week and a whimsical children's adaptation like *Madeline* (1952) the next. In the case of *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, the studio hired a composer whose reputation for forward-thinking modernism in his film and concert hall projects could complement the brazen modern-art aesthetic that would drive the cartoon's animation.

Kubik scholar Alfred Cochran has described the composer's music as "rhythmically vital and active, harmonically dissonant, with distinctive, and rather angular, melodic lines" (Cochran 123), and the description is apt for a composer who freely combined neoclassical counterpoint, modern dissonant harmonies, urgent jazz rhythms, and popular music idioms into his orchestral music. Though he had never worked in animation, Kubik had worked in a wide variety of popular mediums ranging from radio programs, documentaries, and independent feature films. But much like his contemporaries Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, he viewed his forays into popular media as extensions of his "serious" music for the concert hall. Kubik believed that film and radio should serve as media for forward thinking contemporary music, and he railed against Hollywood's insistence on scoring every film with the vaguely Romantic, 19th century idiom that had become an industry standard. In a 1946 article he openly questioned why, if cinema had become the most

far-reaching and popular medium of its generation, it should be that “most film music has to reflect not this mass audience support and contemporaneousness, but, rather the days of hoop skirts and the bustle” (qtd. in Cochran 117). His outspoken stance and his refusal to adapt to the conventions of these industries had their consequences, and Kubik struggled in particular when he attempted to work within the Hollywood system. But his music also attracted wide acclaim from intellectual circles, and his reputation as an iconoclastic artist likely put him on UPA’s radar as the studio was preparing its earliest shorts for Columbia Pictures. One can easily surmise that Kubik and the artists at UPA shared the artistic imperative to reinventing a medium that, to their minds, had grown staid with archaic conventions. Moreover, both were committed to pushing their respective media forward by turning to contemporary developments in the art world, be they developments taking place in salons or concert halls.

Gerald McBoing-Boing makes its sonic break from convention and its alliance with these contemporary developments clear from the first pounding notes of Kubik's score. Juxtaposed against a the unassuming cursive font of the title card, the music plays the score's central motif - three dissonant chords, pounded with sharp staccato blasts from a small ensemble of strings and woodwinds. Nothing resembling traditional theme music follows. As the titles play on, the orchestra proceeds with a series of short, nervous phrases, fragments of melodies that first race frantically up the scale, then stop abruptly, and finally return to the dissonant three chords before repeating the cycle. Throughout, the music comes across as a meld of jazz rhythms and the erratic harmonic instability associated with concert hall modernism. For

audiences expecting the typical catchy theme music that opened virtually every other studio cartoon of the era, this credits music functions as a bracing splash of cold water.

For by 1951, most (if not all) cartoon studios were following similar conventions regarding their opening credits; Disney, Warner Brothers, MGM, Terrytoons, and others all opened their shorts with some variation on a welcoming signature melody, theme music that was designed to be as memorable as a commercial jingle. Sometimes these shorts opened with an appropriated Tin Pan Alley Tune ("Merrily We Roll Along" for Warner Brothers), sometimes with a studio chorus singing a specific character theme (as in Disney's "Donald Duck" song). In each instance though, the theme music functioned both as a calling card and a promissory note. For example, the punchy twang of the electric guitar string and the galloping brass choral of "Merrily We Roll Along" of a *Looney Tunes* short immediately establishes a tone of lighthearted, anarchic comedy. Moreover, the instantly recognizable hook also assures audiences who have already seen a *Looney Tunes* cartoon that the tone will be consistent with every other entry in the series.

The titles sequence of *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, by contrast, dismantles that trope of welcoming theme music. In essence, the music in these first 30 seconds behaves as though it is attempting and failing at building coherent theme music for the film. Even the simple three dissonant chords struggle to remain consistent. When they first introduce the cartoon, they are at least rhythmically precise; each chord lands on the beat with a sharp eighth-note, each separated by an eighth-note rest. And the next phrase that follows, energized with a syncopated jazz rhythm, bounds up the

scale as though it were about to start a longer melody. Yet instead of continuing to build this melody, the music pauses for an eighth rest as though it has forgotten its lines, then plays the three dissonant chords again. This time, however, the score hesitates on the third chord, pausing for an extra eighth rest that pushes the last orchestra crash into the next measure. The music then shifts from 2/4 into 3/4, as though that brief hesitation has disrupted the time signature itself. The orchestra pauses again, then attempts another variation on that initial ascending phrase.

Midway through the phrase, the score even shifts back into 2/4, as though trying to right the ship and return to the original meter. Again, however, this phrase stops short, as though scratching this attempt at a melody as well. The dissonant chords then play for a third time - this time, however, the music hesitates for an even longer full quarter note rest between each chord, as though the score is not even sure of its primary motif any longer. Finally the score explodes with a series of furious descending phrases that abruptly draw to a halt with a single sustained whole note on the French horn.

This rapid descent into chaos takes less than 30 seconds, and it immediately situates the audiences in a frantic, disorienting state of mind. Here, even the theme music does not have the confidence to proceed or develop - each time it attempts to express itself, it hesitates, doubles back, then plays itself again with even less confidence. From the offset, the music creates a tone of unstable uncertainty, as though the most basic stabilizing element of the studio cartoon's soundtrack - the instantly familiar theme music - is so unsure of itself that it needs to make three attempts at getting itself right before it is even willing to start the cartoon.

Yet from this uncertainty also comes a degree of exciting freedom. The music is dissonant and nervous, but it also carries a level of playful energy. While the three chords are dissonant, the sharp staccato phrasing also makes the music seem light on its feet, as though it were bouncing. The phrases may never evolve into full melodies, but the syncopated jazz rhythms that drive the phrases indicate the potential for forward momentum, even if the score cannot quite focus itself enough to carry that momentum past a single measure. Kubik sets a tone that is disorienting and anxious, yet enthusiastic and playful at the same time. The music may be furiously erasing the comfortable foundations of the studio cartoon, but it is also creating a fresh canvas full of possibility in the process. The impact may be that of experiencing the ground suddenly disappearing beneath one's feet, but falling, the music reminds us, also carries its own visceral thrills.

If the music's combination of instability and playfulness seems to send the audience mixed signals about the cartoon's tone, the scene that follows nearly sextuples those mixed signals. After the last credit disappears and the music continues its excited, halting manner, an unseen pen draws Gerald and his family onto the blank page while an off-screen narrator begins reading the verse text from Geisel's original story. Each of these elements in isolation - animation, voiceover, and music - would send multiple and conflicting messages about the cartoon in their own right. When the film juxtaposes these elements atop each other, however, they create a wide network of cognitive dissonances.

This is most noticeably the case for the animation itself. As the opening frames of animation reveal, the film would have an ambivalent tone even if it were

silent and relied entirely on its visuals. After the credits disappear, leaving a blank beige screen, an unseen pen begins drawing in the characters, as though creating them right in front of the audience. Gerald's outline emerges first, sitting quietly and smiling serenely. He then turns to his right as the animators draw in his mother, quietly practicing her needlework, then to his left as the animators draw in his father, peacefully reading the paper. Even when the picture is "finished," it is still as spare as is possible; apart from their clothes, the characters do not get colored in, and the "room" they sit in is only recognizable as such due to a few key items of furniture; a single archway in the background suggests a wall, while a single chandelier at the top of the frame suggests a ceiling.

On one level, the completed image is a tidy portrait of domestic normalcy. Each member of the nuclear family is at rest, each fitting neatly into his or her prescribed gender role; the mother is knitting, the father is reading the paper, and the son is seated in front of his toy train. The sparse animation and minimalist design emphasizes the serenity in this tableau; little moves, little competes for the eye's attention, and little suggests obvious conflict. At the same time, by starting with a blank screen and making the audience watch as the invisible pen draws Gerald and his family right on to the cel, Cannon and his animators are loudly signaling that this is all artifice. There is no Disney-esque attempt at creating the illusion of life, no attempt at making the characters seem like living, breathing life forms with weight and depth; in drawing the characters onscreen, the film reminds us that these figures are in fact drawings. The minimalist aesthetic of their environment keeps the eye from growing distracted with excessive detail, but it also suggests a world with very

little holding it together. Remove a few objects the room - the archway in the background or the chandelier overhead - and the characters would appear to be floating in space. If the peaceful, smiling nuclear family makes normalcy seem comforting, the modernist graphic design urgently reminds us that this state of normalcy is a construction lying atop a tenuous foundation.

Kubik's music adds more layers of confusion to the scene. As the last sustained trumpet note from the opening credits cue fades, the invisible pen begins drawing in Gerald's outline. For a split second, it almost seems as though the music is going to treat the scene serenely. Before Gerald is even half-finished, however, the score begins right back into its racing, fragmented merging of jazz and concert-hall modernism. While the scene is nearly entirely still, the music bustles with activity; scurrying layers of counterpoint and dissonant chords stumble over each other, propelled by Gershwin-esque syncopated rhythms. As with the opening credits, the score continues to oscillate back and forth from anxious clumsiness to playful exuberance. On one level, this is in keeping with the animation's active attempts at revealing the inherent artifice of cartoon conventions. Where the animation achieves this by depicting the cartoon's near-literal construction right in front of the camera, the score demonstrates this by sending the various pieces that might make up a Mickey-Mousing melody into disarray.

At the same time, that restless energy creates even more tonal ambiguity, because it is so pointedly out of synch with the still images of Gerald and his family. Busy fast-paced music is hardly unorthodox in an animated film, but only when that music is reinforcing fast-paced onscreen action. Here, the music pushes against any

idea that it should be subservient to the visuals, or synchronized to character movements. Instead, it behaves as though working out some problem unrelated to the figures sitting peacefully on-screen. Rather than reinforce the audience's perception of the image, it diverts the audience's attention, forcing us to split our focus between the images - themselves already loaded with complex contradictions - and the incongruously frantic music playing off-screen. In the process, the cartoon keeps the audience from settling comfortably into this animated universe or absorbing its rules. Where the opening frames of the standard studio cartoon are typically devoted to establishing a foundation, the jumble of conflicting audio and visual affiliations in *Gerald McBoing-Boing's* opening thwarts any idea that a stable foundation is even possible.

Adding yet another layer is the voice of narrator, who reads Geisel's text over the music. In adapting the story for the cartoon, writers Bill Scott and P. D. Eastman elected to retain significant portions of Geisel's original verse from the Capitol recording. To read the adapted verse, the filmmakers hired Marvin Miller, a character actor whose deadpan baritone voice had served him well throughout the 1940s as the announcer for radio programs like *The Story Behind the Story* and *The Whistler*. He applies that straightforward manner of delivery to his narration in *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, lending an air of matter-of-fact authority that is somewhat incongruous with the whimsical nature of the actual words he is speaking. By 1951, Geisel's rhyming anapestic tetrameter had become firmly associated with his popular Dr. Seuss books such as *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940) and *Thidwick the Big Hearted Moose* (1948). Yet when Miller reads these Seussian lines, he never indicates that he is reading

material for children. In a sharp contrast to Harold Peary's mock-histrionic performance on the earlier Capitol recording of the story, Miller reads the verse as though it were copy for any other radio program for adults. Where Peary made a point of leaning into each stressed syllable as though reading at a poetry recital, Miller treats the meter more subtly - he pauses slightly at most line breaks, but he otherwise treats the verse like casual dialogue, rarely putting more emphasis on the rhythm than would be natural in everyday speech.

The effect is subtle, but significant. When Miller begins speaking, the cartoon has yet to clearly establish its genre; the cursive, hand-drawn font in the opening credits may suggest something innocent and childlike, but the constant emphasis on thwarting expectation and unraveling convention in both the music and the animation suggests something closer to an experimental art film. Miller's narration, for all of its calm authority, only further confuses the genre by reading rhyming children's poetry as though speaking to an audience of adult listeners.

Moreover, both Geisel's words and Miller's delivery clash against Kubik's frantic score. As the cartoon starts and Kubik's frantic music zigzags across the soundscape, Miller calmly announces, "This is the story of Gerald McCloy / and the strange thing that happened to that little boy." The narrator speaks with a firm baritone voice, and he takes time to draw out the vowels on "McCloy," and "haaapened." Kubik's music, however, plays against those elongated vowels with piercing pizzicato notes, while its orchestrations frequently feature high register reeds and woodwinds that jar with Miller's low voice. Moreover, the music's hyperactive, inconsistent rhythm is entirely out of synch with steady rhythm of the verse,

effectively undermining consistency that the steady anapestic tetrameter might have created. Where music for cartoons - and indeed, music for classic Hollywood film in general - is traditionally designed to support and reinforce the spoken word, here the music seems to be operating on an entirely different wavelength.

For contrast, one can look to an earlier attempt at turning a Dr. Seuss story into a studio cartoon: Robert Clampett's Warner Brothers short, *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1942). While Clampett's cartoon is as much a parody for adults as it is a straight adaptation of a children's story, Carl Stalling's music nevertheless falls lock in step behind the Geisel's verse; when, for example, the narrator speaks of Horton's long period sitting on the egg and declares, "And he sat / and he sat / and he sat / and he sat," Stalling emphasizes each stressed "sat" with an accent on the strings.

Similarly, Billy May's score for the Capitol Recording of *Gerald McBoing-Boing* follows Peary's reading beat for beat; when Peary reads the opening lines from the story, May responds with a melody that synchronizes to each word of the verse, effectively treating the poetry like song lyrics. In addition to being previous Geisel adaptations, both of these examples adhere to the more general rule that music should support, rather than distract from the spoken word. In pursuing its own agenda, however, Kubik's music actively distracts from the words that are supposed to be establishing the basic narrative context for the audience.

As a result, the cartoon effectively establishes its network of overlapping audiovisual sensations before a single character has moved or spoken. If Donnelly's theories about synchronization are applicable to a cartoon landscape, one might assume that the lack of clear synchronization in these opening moments would lead to

a tone of anxiety. Yet while the clashing layers of dissonant music, patient voiceover, and spare graphic design might give the cartoon an unstable foundation, the cartoon does not necessarily posit that instability as something to be feared or rejected. For though each element carries its own subtle cognitive dissonances, they also each maintain an air of amiability. Miller's calm reading might be unusual for the material, but his voice is nevertheless takes a friendly tone. Kubik's music might be erratic and speckled with dissonances, but it also maintains the same lightness of touch that it carried in the opening credits. And while the film forces us to acknowledge that the McCloys are only drawings, that knowledge does not change their genial reassuring smiles as they rest in their living room.

Gerald's look of contentment is of particular significance, for the child ultimately serves as the closest thing the audience has to a guide in these strange new proceedings. With little else to hold on to, young Gerald becomes the one constant in the film, and his reactions to story events often function to guide the audience's emotional reaction when the soundtrack refuses to. The film establishes Gerald as the audience's focal point from the start by keeping him firmly centered in the frame. He is literally the only thing onscreen when the cartoon begins - the invisible pen draws his smiling outline so that it fills the entire frame. Having captured the eye's attention, Gerald even helpfully indicates when the audience should look elsewhere. When the camera moves back to give the pen space to draw Mrs. McCloy, Gerald helpfully turns his head towards the empty space, as though cueing the audience that a new figure is about to appear here. He does the same when the camera moves

farther back to make space for his father, functioning practically as an arrow directing the audience's attention.

Gerald's apparent understanding that his parents are about to be drawn into the frame also indicates some level of extra-diegetic awareness, as though he is aware that his parents are drawings who will only materialize when somebody draws them into the blank space he inhabits. He confirms that he has at least partial extra-diegetic access moments later when he responds to the narrator. After the pen has completed drawing the family into the scene, the narrator announces, "They say it all started when Gerald was two. / That's the age kids start talking; least, most of them do."

Upon this last line, Gerald reacts as though insulted; he rolls his eyes, raises an eyebrow, and gives a sideways scowl. Gerald appears to be listening to the narration of his own story, taking offense at the reminder that Gerald, unlike "most kids," will not begin to talk anytime soon. Gerald's ability to hear and react to the narrator demonstrates that the child also has access to the non-diegetic side of the soundtrack, the omniscient voiceover and music that only the audience should theoretically be able to hear. In demonstrating that he hears this sound too, Gerald forms a bond with the audience - on some level, he knows what we know, he hears the same conflicted soundtrack that we hear, and he can help us understand what we are supposed to make of all of these competing currents.

And though Gerald briefly scowls at the narrator's implied insult, the fact that he quickly goes back to smiling peacefully signals to the audience that these clashing auditory sensations are not to be feared. The world he inhabits may be confused and riddled with tonal contradictions, but Gerald's serene expression indicates that this is

no cause for alarm. His cartoon home may be nothing more than a series of drawings, but acknowledging the artificial nature of this world also frees one from the need to simulate reality with rigidly synchronized sound. This is not a cartoon where painstaking Mickey-Mousing is necessary for giving the drawings the illusion of tangible material presence, and Gerald's look invites the audience to embrace the inherent freedom that results.

As though to demonstrate this freedom, Gerald appropriates the sounds most strongly associated with synchronized physical action in studio cartoons and uses those sounds to express his contentment. As the narrator continues to speak, Gerald grins, narrows his eyes like a cat receiving a scratch on the head, then emits a soft "Boing Boing." In other contexts, this noise would not be associated with quiet contentment; in countless cartoons and radio programs, the "Boing" is a sound effect used to suggest a crack on the head, a jump on a pogo stick, or a spring that pops out of place. The "Boing" comes across as peaceful here, however, because it manages to silence the rest of the soundtrack. When Gerald speaks, Miller's narrator and every competing instrument in Kubik's orchestra briefly pause, allowing the "Boings" to reverberate in a hushed vacuum. In this context, Gerald's sound effects arguably have a calming effect, for they bring clarity to the otherwise crowded soundtrack.

That said, the impact of hearing sound effects pop out of the mouth of a young boy still registers as a shock, for the cartoon has done nothing to prepare us for this improbable development. But because the shock occurs in a calming context, the otherwise piercing nature of those "boings" takes on a new form of affect, one where pleasure emerges because of, rather than despite of, audiovisual dissonance.

And with the understanding that Gerald communicates his joy through these seemingly random, bracing noises, Kubik's erratic music takes on new meaning. Its unpredictable harmonies, wild mixed meters, and erratic dissonances are not simply random occurrences that are unrelated to the on-screen action. Rather, the music emerges as an extension of Gerald's own unconventional way of understanding emotion through sound. Just as the music does not maintain any sustained melody that would lead to an easily readable tone or emotion, Gerald does not communicate with words or even vocal expressions that would give the listener access to what he is feeling. He conveys his happiness without this obvious one-to-one relationship between sound and image, just as the music is able to convey a sense of open-ended playfulness without relying on the images to reinforce that tone. And as the film progresses, it becomes clear that the character and score share a symbiotic relationship; when both are at peace, they reinforce each other's ability to express their playful jubilation through unconventional sonic means.

The other characters in the film, however, do not share Gerald's disposition towards unusual sounds. Upon hearing Gerald's first non-words, his parents both panic, a reaction that will prove emblematic of society's response to the child. For his mother, the fear comes from misunderstanding her son's means of expression. When Gerald emits his "Boings," his mother moves to comfort the child, cradling him in her arms and rocking him as though he were in pain. Gerald continues to grin good-naturedly throughout, seemingly impervious to his mother's concern. Mrs. McCloy, however, apparently cannot read Gerald's emotion if he cannot make the "correct" sounds.

To be sure, her reaction does not need extra metaphorical weight to be meaningful - reading Mrs. McCloy's fear for Gerald as the natural protective concern of a mother towards a child that cannot communicate clearly is certainly powerful enough in its own right. But her response is also representative of a mentality that assumes sound in the studio cartoon must directly reflect the emotion of its visual referent. Mrs. McCloy's reaction takes this mentality to its absurd extreme - even though Gerald is clearly smiling, his inability to match that smile with a corresponding auditory expression renders his obvious emotions unreadable to his mother.

Gerald's father's, on the other hand, reacts less with concern for the boy's wellbeing and more out of fear of the potential ramifications of his son's aberrant noises. The moment his son speaks, Mr. McCloy screams "What's that?!" and runs around the room, his arms flailing; "That's a VERY odd thing for a young boy to say!" On one level, we can read this reaction as a response for the boy's potential non-normativity. His father is upset that his boy might sound "odd," indicating an anxiety that the child might not conform to his social expectations as a young, well-adjusted child in a model nuclear family. And when Gerald does not fulfill that role and speak like a child, it opens a sonic vacuum that other characters need to fulfill. As a result, when Mr. McCloy speaks, he sounds less like a stern father than a child himself. Marvin Miller gives Gerald's father a squeaky, high pitched voice that often makes him sound like a child entering puberty; when he calls the doctor to announce that his boy "can't speak words; he goes 'Boing Boing' instead," his voice actually cracks when he says "words" and "Boing Boing." Far from the voice of patriarchal

reason, Mr. McCloy's panic in the face of his son's noise has reduced him to an ineffectual man-child.

Of course, there are two caveats here: a) we do not actually know what Gerald's father sounded like prior to his son's noises, and b) a squeaky-voiced teenager is still considerably older than Mr. McCloy's two-year-old child. But the fact that Mr. McCloy immediately reacts to Gerald's "Boings" by speaking with the voice of a child several decades his junior nevertheless indicates that Gerald is having a ripple effect on the other characters in the cartoon - if Gerald cannot make the appropriate sounds for a child, then those sounds will have to come from his father. With this in mind, Mr. McCloy's panic is more than a fear of his child not being normal - it is a fear, conscious or not, that Gerald's inability to fit into his sonic role might dismantle the threadbare structure that holds their animated world together.

This starts a ripple effect that extends not only to the characters' voices but to the function that sound itself plays in this world. For again, while sound effects come out of Gerald's mouth, they are - with one important exception - absent in the cartoon. Though Cannon may simply designed the film this way to avoid ambiguity over whether sounds were coming from Gerald or other objects onscreen, the complete lack of sound effects elsewhere in the film creates the impression that Gerald has appropriated them from their proper place in the soundtrack. And as though in response to this development, the adult characters frequently find themselves attempting to recreate the sensation of synchronized sound effects through other means; they try to force the logic of "Mickey Mousing" back into the cartoon's score.

For as Gerald's parents begin to panic, Kubik's score continues apace with its frantic, halting momentum. Unlike the parents, the music is not clearly reacting in response to Gerald, as its mixed meters and fragmented phrases are no more intense now than they were moments before Gerald spoke. But at several key points when their anxiety towards Gerald's sound reaches a peak, the adults make a point of moving in synch to the music, bending their knees or waving their arms in time with Kubik's brief and abrupt phrases. Immediately after Gerald's father cries, "That's a very odd thing for a young boy to say," he bends his knees twice in perfect rhythm to two shrill blasts from the orchestra before running off to call the family doctor. Later, after Gerald has shocked both his parents and the doctor with several more "boings," all three adults register the shock by again bending their knees several times, moving in perfect time to a reappearance of the three-chord motif that opened the cartoon.

And though these moments are rare instances where images and music perfectly synchronize, they should not be confused with conventional Mickey Mousing. These are not instances of the music following the action, stopping short simply to mimic the specific movements of characters. Indeed, when Kubik wrote the music, he was not even aware of what characters would be specifically doing on-screen. According to a 1950 article of *Film Music Notes* dedicated to Kubik's score, the filmmakers had Kubik write the entire score before they animated a single frame or recorded a single line of narration. Kubik based his music entirely on the script and some preliminary sketches (Sternfeld). As a result, the score, despite its staggered, halting nature, never gives off the impression of behaving erratically for the sake of the onscreen action - when a shrill brass triplet plays, that triplet comes across as the

natural extension of the fragmented ideas developing throughout the music.

Accordingly, when the adults do move in time with a stray phrase, the film gives the impression that they are moving to the music, not the other way around.

Furthermore, when Gerald's parents and Dr. Malone move in time to the score after Gerald surprises them, they are not performing actions that would otherwise come about naturally. They are rhythmically bending their knees while standing place, an action that could serve no other possible purpose apart from moving in time to the score. Whether they literally hear this music is of course unclear, but if we allow that the characters are even unconsciously aware of the cartoon universe they live in and the potential threat Gerald poses to its structure, their attempts at punctuating the music with movement make sense. Gerald has usurped the sound effects that were supposed to give this universe the illusion of material tangibility, and the music is not moving to compensate for their absence with Mickey Mousing of its own. Startled by Gerald's noises, the adults' gut reaction is to try recreating Mickey Mousing themselves, as though they can somehow restore synchronous stability by responding to the music with movement - even if that movement is otherwise entirely pointless.

Even as the adults panic about their world unraveling, however, the film maintains a genial tone - Gerald's good-natured disposition is seemingly impervious to the anxiety of his parents, and he continues to smile while emitting increasingly violent sound effects, ranging from train whistles to gunpowder explosions. Yet as the cartoon progresses and Gerald grows older, he grows more vulnerable to the scorn

he receives from the rest of society. And as Gerald's self confidence shrinks, the soundtrack grows increasingly more conventional.

The first hint of this shift occurs when Gerald is playing in the living room one day and lets loose an explosive sound in front of his father. The noise startles his father so much that he leaps to the ceiling and ends up dangling from the chandelier; his limited patience at an end, he finally berates his son, shouting, "This is enough! He'll drive us both mad with this terrible stuff!" This time, a worried look appears on Gerald's face, indicating that he has finally registered the negative impact his noise has on his parents. At this moment, Gerald's father falls from the chandelier and pops a spring as he lands on his chair. When the spring pops out of the chair, a "boing" plays on the soundtrack - the first and only instance in the film of a sound effect that does not come from Gerald's mouth. The moment when Gerald absorbs the fear and anger that his parents project onto him, his hold over the soundtrack falters - sound effects fall back into their standard position as side effects of physical action.

Yet though the "boing" should theoretically sound more "normal" coming from a popping spring than from Gerald's mouth, the noise does not bring comforting stability back to the soundtrack. The sound effect only makes the pain in Gerald's father's landing more visceral, and in the process it exaggerates Mr. McCloy's anger and frustration. When the conventions of synchronous sound do reassert themselves in this world, they only amplify negative feelings like unnerving aggravation.

A similar trend continues in the score as Gerald's plight worsens. As he grows older and attempts to interact with other children, he finds that his noises make him a social outcast. As more and more children shun him or taunt him by calling

him “Gerald McBoing-Boing, the Noise-Making Boy,” the music grows progressively less playful and more openly melancholy. When Gerald returns home after one upsetting day and attempts to receive comfort from his father, the score temporarily abandons its frantic modernism and begins behaving like traditional film music. Weepy strings play as Gerald finds his father shaving in the bathroom and tries to get his attention. The music no longer plays against the image or follows its own scattered impulses - it instead follows the same conventions of any other standard film score and matches Gerald’s sad expression with the type of vaguely Romantic film music that is designed to invite sympathy for a film’s characters.

Yet because Gerald cannot speak, he finds no sympathy from his father.

When Mr. McCloy ignores his son, Gerald begins to sob - which takes the form of piercing car horn honks. His father is so startled that he nearly cuts himself shaving, and he angrily sends Gerald out of the room in response. For the first time, the child fully absorbs the fact that his inability to express emotion through conventional sound prevents others from accepting that he even has emotions. The sound of a weeping child might stir his father’s sympathy, but his honking horn noises only enrage his father. The child goes silent and leaves the room, his downcast face matched by heaving melancholy strings. The music’s ability to experiment and fly in the face of convention is apparently dependent on Gerald’s confidence in the sounds he makes.

When Gerald loses that confidence, the music retreats into normalcy.

At this point, Gerald goes decides to run away from home. In the scene that follows, the music takes over the soundtrack - Gerald goes silent, and the narrator temporarily disappears. Gerald abandons his means of expression, and the score

correspondingly continues to follow the standard method of responding to on-screen drama. As Gerald slowly walks up the stairs to his room, his head slumped, despondent cellos play a dirge that matches both the mood and tempo of Gerald's movements. The score is now following the rules and corresponding directly to Gerald's feelings and movements.

Yet here again, doing so does not bring order or clarity to Gerald's world. As Gerald leaves the house and runs through a snowstorm, the music continues to reflect his movements and emotions, but it does so only by amplifying the horror he experiences. Shrill dissonances shriek as Gerald frantically runs through the snow. As the train approaches, the music even begins filling in for the train's absent sound effects, with high pitched strings and woodwinds rhythmically screeching to create the sound of a train whistle. This is the film's version of Mickey Mousing, and it becomes a nightmare of synchronous sound. Gerald has now entered a space where each rule regarding the way cartoons are supposed to sound is in place; rather than restore order or realism, however, each only serves to exacerbate every overpowering feeling of fear, isolation, and menace from the outside world.

Just as he is about to leap aboard the moving train, however, perhaps the least likely of saviors rescues Gerald. The owner of NBC's radio station appears and calls out to Gerald, explaining that he has been seeking the child for weeks. He offers to make Gerald "The most famous lad in the nation" as NBC's star Foley artist. Gerald is saved, in other words, by the man in charge of maintaining the same sonic conventions that Gerald has spent the duration of the cartoon breaking. In effect, Gerald's job will be to take the sound effects he has usurped from their standard place

in one medium, and place them right back where they conventionally belong in a different medium. If Gerald previously spoke in the sound of gunshots as an attempted friendly greeting, now his job is to make those gunshot noises to signify fictional cowboys shooting actual guns. The NBC owner offers Gerald an opportunity to rejoin society, but in order to do so, Gerald has to sublimate his non-normative manner of expression; if Gerald can only speak in sound effects, then he must speak those sound effects in a context the rest of the world can understand.

Gerald, however, does not seem upset as this prospect - perhaps because he gives up less than it initially appears. At the climax of the film, we see Gerald in a recording booth, reading for a cowboy serial. By following a script, Gerald is apparently able to control the sounds he makes, and he speaks out the galloping hooves of an approaching horse, the rattle of a cowboy's spurs as he dismounts from his horse, the creek of the saloon doors he enters, the explosive gunshots he fires, the whinnying and galloping of the horse again as the cowboy departs. Yet in the process, both Gerald and the film remind us that these foley sounds are arbitrary in the first place. The cartoon does not offer any visual representation of the radio narrative Gerald is acting out - we only see him speaking these sounds, celebrating the noises for their own sake. Gerald becomes a famous celebrity not by making sound seamlessly disappear into the diegetic fabric of a radio narrative, but rather by drawing the audience's attention to his production of those sounds. By returning to an older medium, Gerald reminds us that there are no "natural" or intuitive sounds in a studio cartoon, and catering to that illusion is no guarantee of security.

And as the film enters its final scene, it becomes clear that Gerald only abandons his non-conventional sounds when he is in the recording studio. We see the newly famous Gerald marching down the red carpet with his parents to his limousine, pausing to sign the occasional autograph for a fan. At this point, all of the disparate soundtrack elements we heard in the opening scene return in full force. Gail Kubik's score reprises its three-chord motif and continues apace with the same erratic phrases and fumbling dissonances that opened the cartoon. The narrator returns for the first time since Gerald's encounter with his father in the bathroom, and once more Miller gives a deadpan reading of Geisel's whimsical verse. As the limo departs and the music continues its fragmented racing, the narrator calmly delivers the film's happy ending: "Now Gerald is rich, he has friends, he's well fed / Because he doesn't speak words, he goes [Gerald interjects with the "Boing Boing" noise] instead." As Gerald happily delivers those parting "Boings," the narrator and music again go temporarily quiet, allowing Gerald's sounds to reverberate in isolation. Gerald may now be accepted by society, and he may have even found a more normalized context for his erratic noises. But as the cartoon draws to a close, Gerald's unique sonic landscape of pleasurable cognitive dissonance has firmly reasserted itself.

Gerald McBoing-Boing ultimately emerges as a film that teaches audiences to embrace that pleasurable cognitive dissonance that often comprises comfortable discord. The film upends the comfortable standards regarding cartoon sound that had ossified in the industry, revealing that one does not need intense synchronized sound in order to legitimize the artificial space of a cartoon. Just as the animators were

committed to making drawings that looked like drawings and not living people, the soundtrack embraces sound for its own sake, not for some desire to reinforce the actions and emotions that are already clear onscreen. And when sound is no longer subservient to image, new possibilities for audio-visual engagement open up. All of the film's audio-visual contradictions can coexist without need for resolution, for the soundtrack's purpose is no longer reduced to bringing clarity to the visual narrative. With Gerald's spare and clear facial expressions providing steady tonal cues on their own, all of the soundtrack's disparate elements - the erratic music, the serious spoken delivery of children's poetry, and the incongruous sound effects - can surprise and explore without the need to settle on a fixed or resolved tone for the film.

In a roundabout way, these unorthodox sound choices actually bring the audience to a deeper understanding of the title character than any directly expressive sound could, for they offer us a window into Gerald's unique affective relationship with the auditory world. Gerald finds happiness in the dissonant cloud of music and voiceover, as well as in his own noises, because sound is not directly tethered to emotional expression for Gerald; rather, Gerald treats sound as a series of unpredictable possibilities that function independently from human expression. If forced, he can play along for other people, and read from a script that gives those sounds traditional narrative cohesion. But as the bookending scenes indicate, Gerald is most at peace when he allows sound to operate on its own independent terms.

The cartoon thus set an open precedent for unconventional sound choices that UPA would further develop throughout its brief tenure in the spotlight. Bobe Cannon in particular would continue to explore different methods of circumventing obvious

affect through sound, whether by casting the monotone voices of actual children in *Willie the Kid* (1951) or by setting his would-be parody of bleak crime noir to the upbeat strains of bebop jazz in *The Jaywalker* (1958). For children's media culture, the cartoon's relevance is less obvious. Though Gerald went on to star in three more theatrical shorts and host the anthology television series, *The Gerald McBoing-Boing Show* (1956, cancelled after three months), the character has not had the same long-lasting popular culture caché as his peers at Disney and Warner Brothers. This is in part because aside from Mr. Magoo, the UPA characters never had a lasting presence on the Saturday morning cartoons or videocassette compilations that kept Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny in contact with so many generations of children. But the sound techniques that Cannon and his team pioneered in *Gerald McBoing-Boing* had a lasting influence on many of the more iconic pieces children's media that followed in its wake - often at the hands of the same people who worked on *Gerald*.

3.3: A Charlie Brown Christmas

Of all the UPA artists who moved on to other things as the studio dissolved in the late 1950s, Bill Melendez arguably went on to have the most successful career in children's media. Melendez was one of the leading animators at UPA, and he worked with Bobe Cannon on *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, *Madeline* (1952), *Ballet-Oop* (1954), and many of the studio's other signature works. After he left the studio in 1954, he went on to work produce and direct animation for television commercials at Playhouse Productions, which eventually led to directing several commercials in

1959 for Ford featuring Charles Schulz's characters from *Peanuts* (Michaels 320).

The commercials proved to be an immensely lucrative success, and they led to an artistic partnership that spawned dozens of animated television specials and multiple feature films featuring the *Peanuts* gang. In these animated specials, Melendez and his crew brought much of UPA's counterintuitive approach to sound to Charlie Brown's animated universe; in the process, they made comfortable discord a fixture of millions of American childhoods.

Of the dozens of *Peanuts* features Melendez directed, the first made the most dramatic impact on collective cultural consciousness. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* has now aired on CBS every year since its first broadcast in 1965, and it competes only with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1966) and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) as the most popular network holiday special of the 20th century.

The film has become an icon of seasonal nostalgia, a feat that is all the more striking given the special's unapologetically unsentimental and ambivalent tone. That tone comes in no small part through the cartoon's unique approach to sound, which plays with layers of cognitive dissonance that are in many ways the natural evolution of *Gerald McBoing-Boing's* experiments in comfortable discord.

Indeed, one could easily liken the special's most famous sonic features back *Gerald McBoing-Boing*. Like that UPA short, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* contains characters who struggle to express their feelings vocally, and it features a musical score that often seems at odds with of developments taking place on-screen. In *Charlie Brown*, however, those sonic features practically form the mirror opposite of those in *Gerald*. Charlie Brown struggles to express his emotions with his voice, not

because he cannot speak words, but because he can only speak with the monotone inflection of a child reading difficult words from a script. Vince Guaraldi's music often plays against the picture, not because it is overly anxious or dissonant, but because it is so languid and relaxed that it often neglects to register the action that does occur in the film. Where *Gerald* used abrasive bombast in a way that somehow registered as friendly and welcoming, *Charlie Brown* uses soft, soothing calmness in ways that often lead to alienating coldness.

The voice acting is the show's most unusual feature. Up to this point in history, most animated films and television shows relied on adult voice actors like Mel Blanc and June Foray to voice animated child characters (sometimes sped up on tape to simulate a child's higher-pitched voice). Ostensibly, the adult voice actor has years of professional performance training and experience that make up for any loss in verisimilitude when it comes to creating a character. Melendez, however, cast actual children when he made the Ford commercials, and Schulz insisted on using the same child actors for the Christmas special (Solomon 15). The decision was not entirely without precedent - Disney's *Bambi* famously used child actor Peter Behn to voice the young rabbit Thumper, and UPA also experimented with using real children in shorts like *Willie the Kid* (1952) and *Baby Boogie* (1955). In theory, using child actors allows for more naturalistic delivery, allowing the child characters to sound like actual children, rather than an adults attempting to mimic children.

Yet in retrospect, Charlie Brown and company are probably the last cartoon children one would expect to hear voiced by real children, for the *Peanuts* characters are children in appearance only. Though Linus and Charlie Brown have the nearly-

bald heads of toddlers, they speak with sophisticated vocabularies that put most adults to shame, and they discuss depression, theology, capitalism, and philosophy with more confidence than many graduate students. In a comic strip, the effect is only incongruous if one reflects on it after the fact - we never actually hear the characters speak, so we do not have to imagine how bizarre it would sound to hear actual children speaking this way unless we make a conscious effort to do so. Melendez, however, makes that disparity starkly clear by casting actual children who frequently sound as though they have no idea what the words they are reciting actually mean.

As it turns out, this was exactly the case. Sally Dryer, who voiced Violet in the Christmas special, has since recollected, “We’d get a script that we could review, but it didn’t really make much sense to a little kid. We would sit across the table in a recording studio from [Producer Lee Mendelson] or Bill [Melendez], they would say a line, and we would repeat it” (qtd in Solomon 19). Peter Robbins, who voiced Charlie Brown, recalls similar experiences: “nothing made sense to us ... but we were having fun doing it anyway” (qtd in Mendelson, *Pumpkin* 29). In the specials, hearing that lack of comprehension between the actor and the material has a surreal effect - we hear characters speaking about a wide variety of topics ranging from seasonal depression, the commercialization of Christmas, conspiracy theories about Eastern syndicates, and long passages of Bible verse, but the characters all deliver this complex dialogue with the conviction of a child sounding out random words in the dictionary. The gap between the sentiments expressed and the actual quality of expression forms one pivotal layer of cognitive dissonance in this animated landscape.

Similarly, Vince Guaraldi's Latin jazz score adds irregularities of its own. Guaraldi was hired for a documentary about Schulz and his strip that producer Lee Mendelson attempted to sell to the networks in 1963. Searching for a jazz musician to provide background music for the documentary, Mendelson discovered Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" on the radio and was immediately taken by what he refers to as the musician's "open and melodic" approach to jazz music (Mendelson, *Christmas* 91). The producer commissioned Guaraldi to provide a series of jazz combo pieces for the documentary, many of which would go on to become staples for the series. Though the documentary, eventually titled *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*, failed to find a network sponsor and thus went unseen by the general public, Mendelson was pleased with Guaraldi's music and immediately turned to the musician again when he sold CBS on *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Guaraldi, however, was not a film composer, and his working methods were decidedly unorthodox for animation. As a jazz pianist, Guaraldi could not actually read printed music, and thus could not compose scene-specific cues to the bar sheets - pages designed to allow composers to write bars of music timed to the number of animation frames in a scene (Solomon 34). Rather than score to the particulars of the film, Guaraldi instead studied the storyboards and then wrote a series of short mood pieces for his jazz trio that Mendelson and Melendez could later apply to the film as they saw fit. As a result, the music took a much looser approach to its relationship to the image track, with little possibility for the sort of intensely synchronized Mickey Mousing that, even in 1965, was still prevalent in most mainstream animation.

To an extent, certain aspects of this approach are not quite as unorthodox as they have sometimes been made out to be. Mendelson has claimed that jazz “had never been associated with animation before” (Mendelson *Pumpkin* 43), but in truth jazz had been a fixture of American animation prior to the *Peanuts* specials. But Mendelson is likely correct to the extent that *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is the first piece of mainstream animation to use an actual jazz combo, a trio of musicians that could vamp and improvise without any attempt to adapt to the manic needs of animation. Stalling’s version of jazz was rigidly synchronized to the specific details in every Warner Brother’s cartoon he scored. The score for *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, however, is not just unorthodox for its jazz music - it is unorthodox for allowing that jazz music to flow freely, unhindered by any attempts at following the picture.

Before any jazz music or children’s voices enter the soundtrack, however the special starts in stark silence. The special opens abruptly, without so much as an opening credits sequence or studio logo; a silent black screen appears on camera, followed a split second later by the image of a snow-covered pond. For a full second, the film proceeds in silence, providing just enough time for the wintry impressionistic imagery to cast an empty, chilled tone. After that second passes, however, we hear the opening chords of Vince Guaraldi’s song, “Christmas Time Is Here.” From the start, the song presents several layers of tonal disconnect, both between lyrics and music and lyrics and performance. On the piano, impressionistic jazz chords softly land with the deliberate precision of an Erik Satie composition, devoid of any recognizable traces of traditional Christmas music. Yet as a children’s choir begins to

sing, we hear what amounts to a grocery list of happy signifiers of the holiday season; we hear lines like “happiness and cheer” and “snowflakes in the air,” wistful nostalgic sentiments that the languid, haunting music does little to suggest on its own. At the same time, the children singing this song are faint and out of key, giving their delivery of these happy statements a shrill, ghostly quality.

As this music plays, the camera tracks over to a group of children skating in circles on the pond. The image of these children, coupled with the sound of children singing, initially creates the impression that these skating kids are themselves singing the song. Certainly the out-of-tune choir make more sense if its voices are supposed to be children casually singing to themselves as they play. Yet if we look closely at the children, we see that none of their mouths are moving. Indeed, few of them are even smiling, their mouths instead fixed with grim Keaton-like expressions as they circle about in repetitive patterns on the ice. We see children playing who do not seem to be enjoying themselves, and we hear children singing who sound like joyless phantoms; these two sensations, each contradictory in its own right, create yet one more layer of confusion by refusing to synchronize. The sense that these children are singing the song remains, but the disconnect between the animation and the music creates the vaguely unsettling impression that their voices are somehow disconnected from their bodies.

While the song continues, the film cuts to Charlie Brown and Linus walking to join their friends at the pond. Upon arriving at their wall, Charlie Brown vents to Linus about his feelings of seasonal depression:

I don't know what's wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents. And sending Christmas cards. And decorating the trees and all that. But I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.

These lines have now become such a staple of the holiday season that it is often easy to forget how startling such a vivid description of depression and ennui might sound coming out of a child's mouth. Charlie Brown's description of his inability to find joy in rituals that he intellectually knows he enjoys, as well as his sinking awareness of his depression's inevitability, suggest a much more world-weary sensibility than one would expect of a child living a comfortable, middle-class life in the suburbs.

But even more unusual than the lines themselves is the manner of their delivery. Actor Peter Robbins delivers the lines with a flat, monotone voice that is seemingly at odds with the agonized emotions he is attempting to express. Though the words suggest a prematurely heavy heart, the delivery suggests emotionless banality. Yet while the effect should be jarring, the near-robotic delivery does lead us to an indirect understanding of Charlie Brown's current state of mind. If the child's problem is itself an emotional numbing, an inability to feel happiness even from activities that he "likes," it makes a certain degree of sense that his voice would fail to express emotion even when he is consciously attempting to vent his feelings.

As the scene continues, we cut back to the pond as Charlie Brown and Linus join their friends. It is at this point that the soundtrack veers most dramatically from the visual narrative. As Guaraldi's leisurely jazz-impressionism plays and the

children continue to sing, Snoopy enters and introduces slapstick antics to the scene.

After dancing and performing figure eights, he grabs a child and leads the group in a skating line - at least until he abruptly spins and sends the children flying in all directions. At this point he attacks Linus, using the child's blanket to swing Linus and Charlie Brown in circles before finally letting go and sending Charlie careening into a tree.

The soundtrack, however, scarcely registers a moment of this entire routine. As Snoopy engages in pratfalls and roughhousing, the music continues unabated, maintaining the same calm, leisurely, moody atmosphere as though Charlie Brown were still discussing his existential crisis. And with the exception of the swinging whooshes Linus's blanket makes and the crash Charlie Brown makes as he hits the tree, the scene plays without sound effects. We hear no footsteps as Snoopy dances and gallops on the ice, no crashes as he sends the other children flying in all directions, and no rustling or scuffling as he attacks Linus. The score makes no separation between the "grimness" of Charlie Brown's depression and the freewheeling slapstick of Snoopy's roughhousing, resulting in a surreal bit of cartoon slapstick that plays out with melancholy solemnity.

The effect, however, again puts the audience into the mindset of Charlie Brown's ennui without attempting to reflect it directly. Rather than treating Charlie Brown's depression with outwardly sad music, the film extends the numbness that the child feels into all pockets of its fictional universe. The music, where children's voices chant joyous seasonal platitudes with all the joy of a choir of fading ghosts, becomes a fitting manifestation of a mind that consciously understands happy

sentiments but has no ability to feel them. And just as Charlie Brown gets lost inside his depression, the music gets lost in its own mood, playing on through Snoopy's slapstick as though unaware anything is even taking place on the ice. The sound effects follow suit and go silent, only waking up when Charlie Brown himself is at the receiving end of Snoopy's violence. The effect is splintering - we see that we are witnessing familiar cartoon slapstick, but without the auditory signifiers to cue our reaction, we wind up witnessing the spectacle from a dispassionate remove.

Having said that, however, it would be a mischaracterization to imply that the music is entirely cold or devoid of feeling. "Christmas Time Is Here" is, after all, one of the most widely popular, well-loved Christmas songs from the past half century, and it remains a constant fixture of shopping malls and grocery stores every December. There is some pleasure inherent in the music, a comforting serenity that comes through its slow, harmonically ambivalent progressions. This is not avant-garde jazz, after all - Guaraldi's light arrangements and gentle phrasing have a soothing effect that does play gracefully against the wintery scenery. But the inherent pleasure in the music reveals a deeper wrinkle in Charlie Brown's state of mind - that there is something pleasurable in the blanket of self-pity Charlie Brown has wrapped around himself. The peaceful glow is comforting even as it shuts off engagement with the outside world, and it captures much of the undying appeal that a seemingly unlikable character has for so many audiences. The soundtrack in this sense creates a state of mind that makes Charlie Brown's depression both understandable and perversely attractive.

Guaraldi's music is of course not all one monochromatic rendition of this languid jazz melody. In the scenes that follow, the music is frequently playful, from its whimsical falling piano trills as the children attempt to catch snowflakes on their tongues to the up-tempo piece for piano and trumpet that giddily plays as Snoopy decorates his doghouse. But these moments of playfulness only serve to further emphasize the impact of Charlie Brown's ennui. Each time one of these up-tempo cues plays for a few minutes, "Christmas Time Is Here" inevitably reasserts itself. Because these are individual pieces rather than scene-specific score cues, the transitions are not subtle; when Charlie Brown wanders away from his friends at the end of the snowflake scene, an instrumental rendition of "Christmastime Is Here" interrupts the playful snowflake music mid-phrase, as though somebody had picked up the record stylus and moved it back to a different track. The effect is that of Charlie Brown's depression interrupting all other emotions, as though it can only tolerate a few moments of other people's merrymaking before reasserting itself.

Only when Charlie Brown and Linus set out to find a Christmas tree for the children's pageant does lighter music begin to attach itself to the protagonist. In another reversal of *Gerald McBoing-Boing's* logic, the music seems to grow temporarily more conventional and responsive to the film as Charlie Brown approaches a more positive attitude. As Charlie Brown and Linus set off through the city, Guaraldi responds with a light, up-tempo jazz rendition of "O Tannenbaum," the first time the score has played traditional Christmas music. In some respects, this is an instance of music being more actively direct in its application to the picture - just as the boys set out to find a Christmas tree, the music responds with a traditional carol

about Christmas trees. In the process, the music seems to imply a lightening of Charlie Brown's spirit, a notion confirmed by the child's enthusiasm for the frail wooden tree at the tree lot.

Yet even here, any cheery holiday sentiments expressed by the music contrast sharply against more ominous punctuating noises on the soundtrack. As the boys walk past garish fake purple Christmas trees in the lot, Linus hits one and sets off a cold metallic echo that reverberates through the soundtrack, putting a jolting dent in the music's festive tone. And when Charlie Brown picks up the wooden tree, the Christmas carol abruptly stops short for the score's single instance of Mickey Mousing; a rapid flurry of chromatic high-end piano keys imitate the needles that fall from the tree as Charlie Brown lifts it. Tellingly, this one instance of music imitating action is as psychologically wrenching as is possible - the tinkling, discordant notes replicate less the physical sound of needles falling than the fragility of Charlie Brown's fledgling attempts at happiness.

When that attempt at happiness does shatter - first in the face of the friends who mock him for his poor tree purchase, then again when he inadvertently "kills" the tree - the score begins drifting back into its free-flowing indirect relationship with the narrative. The Christmas music remains, but the up-tempo jazz rendition of "O Tannenbaum" begins to give way to a downbeat, unadorned solo piano arrangement of the song. Though still the familiar carol, the spare arrangement is much closer in tone to the emotional ambivalence of "Christmastime Is Here," with mild dissonances and deliberate "wrong" notes casting an uneasy pall over the pleasant melody. As the special draws to a close, this downbeat music gradually takes over the soundtrack,

seemingly impervious to the narrative developments taking place in the film. When Charlie Brown leaves the playhouse, newly inspired by Linus's sermon, the solo piano rendition of "O Tannenbaum" plays as he confidently strides through the nighttime air. The same rendition also plays when Charlie Brown slumps off dejected, believing that he has destroyed his tree with a heavy ornament. It continues to play when Charlie Brown's friends appear and quietly decorate the tree to atone for their poor treatment of their friend. As a result of this music, the would-be dramatic developments in the final act - developments that in theory should move dynamically from hope to dejection to compassion - come across as muted and unassuming. It would seem that even when Charlie Brown does have surges of passion, his pervasive melancholic stupor still seeps back into the soundtrack.

The film of course does end happily; Charlie Brown discovers that his friends have decorated his tree, and he joins them in a slightly off-key rendition of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Yet even this apparent full embrace of a jubilant holiday spirit comes with a subtle caveat. Though the children continue to sing as the credits roll, the soundtrack fades to silence a full second before the image of the singing children dissolves into the closing title card. This means that the last time we see Charlie Brown and his friends, we see their smiling faces as they sing but hear only silence.

That moment of chilly quiet significantly dampens the uplift of the finale. Moreover, by closing the special with one last affect-deadening touch, the film seems to imply that Charlie Brown's happiness is short-lived. Hints of his numbing malaise linger in the sound design, and that malaise can (and in later *Peanuts* specials, most certainly will) resurface in the near future.

But again, the cartoon does not necessarily present that malaise as an unattractive prospect, and the deadening silence of those closing moments also carries a level of peaceful solitude. The fact that solitude is a quality that runs counter to the community-oriented image of the children joining in song further reinforces the conflicting tonal layers that have dominated the special from the start. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* may not take as overtly an experimental approach to sound as *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, but its engagement with comfortable discord arguably yields more profound emotional complexities. Rather than generate obvious sympathy for Charlie Brown with overtly melancholy music or vocal performances, the filmmakers use sound to thwart direct connections with the feelings the characters are experiencing. As the film uses sound to mute and withhold the visceral impact of each narrative event, however, it leads audience members into experiencing some version of Charlie Brown's numbing melancholia for themselves. That the soundtrack, replete with Guaraldi's soothing Latin jazz, manages to make this experience as appealing as it is alienating, demonstrates much of comforting discord's ability to spur simultaneous and conflicting feelings in the listener without forcing those feelings to resolve. Here, those contrasts even entail pairing intense feelings with the virtual absence of feeling - the film manages to cycle through playful slapstick, jubilant celebration, and shattering despair while rarely breaking from the cold, deadening sense of ennui that haunts the cartoon. Yet by maintaining that perpetual sense of tonal tension, the cartoon also creates a space for the viewer where irresolvable emotional conflict can form its own form of comfort - discord may not be a fully positive experience, but the constants of its presence can offer its own form of

tranquility. And as the generations who grow up with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *Gerald McBoing-Boing* mature and become filmmakers of their own, we begin to see the influence that these unassuming pieces of children's media have on the role that sound plays in the cinema.

Chapter 4: Irresolvable Empathy: Revisiting Comfortable Discord in the films of Wes Anderson

4.1: Prologue: Mark Mothersbaugh and Barnaby's "Funny" Sadness

Wes Anderson's films are famously saturated with overt references to the director's favorite films, books, and songs. Yet one of the most illuminating influences on Anderson's films comes from a television program the director may never have seen himself. In a 2005 interview with *The Believer*, composer and regular Anderson-collaborator Mark Mothersbaugh answers a question about his use of the celeste in *Rushmore* (1998) with an anecdote about the children's television program *Barnaby*:

When I was a kid, one of the saddest things I ever saw on TV was this show called *Barnaby and Me*, with this local personality Linn Sheldon. He'd put on little pointy leprechaun ears, a straw hat and makeup that was too thick; he would show cartoons and talk to himself, be kind of funny. ... At the end of the show, a celeste would play the saddest music I'd ever heard in my whole life and Barnaby would come right up to the screen and say [*in a weeping voice*], 'If anybody asks, just tell them Barnaby says hello.' And he'd burst into tears. At the end of every episode. It would make me really upset, even though I loved the show. So the celeste was sad to me. (Mothersbaugh, *Believer*)

Because *Barnaby* (1957-1990) was a local Cleveland program³⁴, it is unlikely that Texas-native Wes Anderson grew up with the program himself. But Mothersbaugh's memory of the show reveals much, not only about the reasoning behind his orchestrations, but about the fraught relationship between childhood and adulthood that Anderson's films navigate through sound.

For though Mothersbaugh does not state this explicitly, he implies that those last moments in each *Barnaby* episode were so upsetting in part because they were so incongruous with the rest of the program. When he describes the title character as man who would "put on pointy leprechaun ears," "wear too much makeup," and "be kind of funny," he is not describing a character from whom one would expect raw displays of unironic emotion; he is describing a fanciful clownish figure from whom one would expect nothing more than light entertainment in between screening cartoons. Barnaby's transition at the end of every episode into weepiness, to hear Mothersbaugh's account, seems to have come out of nowhere. Mothersbaugh's description does not give any indication that he understood *why* Barnaby was teary-eyed or playing such sad celeste music; he only remembers being upset and confused by the sudden display of emotion in an otherwise lighthearted entertainment.

One can only guess at *Barnaby* performer Linn Sheldon's reasons for choosing to close the show this way. In his memoirs, Sheldon does speak of both a childhood spent as a homeless orphan (17-18) and an adulthood plagued by alcoholism (163), and we could certainly speculate that some of Sheldon's personal strife worked its way into Barnaby's teary-eyed closing statement. But whether or not *Barnaby*'s close was an instance of an adult actor unconsciously projecting his

³⁴ See Sheldon's memoir, *Barnaby and Me*, pages 63-94, for more details about the television program.

own pain into his children's program, the end result was that child viewers like Mothersbaugh absorbed all of the show's free-floating melancholy without any real understanding of where it came from or what had caused it. Whatever adult baggage Sheldon was bringing to his performance, his audience absorbed out of context. And in Mothersbaugh's case, he absorbed that sadness through sounds that he would continue to associate with a specific form of upsetting childhood sadness well into adulthood.

At the same time, Mothersbaugh also remembers that he loved the show, enough to watch it on a fairly regular basis even with the knowledge that he would be disturbed at the end of each episode. That tonal disconnect, where careless whimsy and uncomfortable sadness somehow coexist, also served as a source of pleasure on some level. Moreover, those mixed associations with *Barnaby* clearly lingered with Mothersbaugh well into adulthood, and it did so primarily through sound.

4.2: Wes Anderson Finds New Channels of Empathy in Comfortable Discord

Mothersbaugh's memories about the celeste in *Barnaby* do more than illuminate his approach to scoring Anderson's films; they outline a fundamental relationship between childhood, children's media, and sound that runs through Anderson's filmography. This is a topic that, despite the recent surge in Anderson scholarship, has been largely overlooked in academic circles. There have been several strains of criticism on childlike qualities in Anderson's films³⁵, more still on

³⁵ Indeed, a remarkably large amount of effort has been expended in both academic and popular criticism just to settle on which child-centric adjective best describes Anderson's body of work. Some, such as popular culture critic Mark Spitz insist on categorizing Anderson with the moniker, "Twee," a quasi-derogatory adjective for adults who poster at precious, sentimental innocence. Others, such as

Anderson's use of popular music³⁶, and even one that discusses his use of children's books³⁷, but we have yet to see meaningful attention paid to the role that sound and music from children's media plays across Anderson's filmography³⁸. This is a significant oversight, for like Spielberg, Anderson and his collaborators consistently clutter his films with sonic references to television shows, films, cartoons, and records, and various other media that his adult audience members are likely to have encountered as children. Sometimes these references are overt - score music taken from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), songs from Disney films and television shows in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), or records of Benjamin Britten's children's music in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2011). Other times the references are less direct - acting styles that mimic the monotone delivery of *Peanuts* children in *Moonrise Kingdom*, music inspired by the offbeat synthesizers of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* in *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), or in Mothersbaugh's aforementioned evocation of local children's shows like *Barnaby* in *Rushmore* (1998).

Much like Spielberg, Anderson does not simply deploy these sonic touchstones out of mere nostalgia for some idyllic lost childhood. Though he

James MacDowell, argue that Anderson's body of work can be summarized with the moniker "quirk," an adjective that, to MacDowell, suggests both ironic detachment and nostalgic sentiment at the same time. See Mark Spitz's *Twee: The Gentle Revolution* and James MacDowell's "The Andersonian, the Quirky, and Innocence."

³⁶ See Arved Ashby's "Wes Anderson: Ironist and Auteur" and Laura Hrycaj's "Life on Mars or Life on the Sea: Seu Jorge, David Bowie, and the Musical World in Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*."

³⁷ See Peter Kunze's "From the Mixed-Up Films of Mr. Wesley W. Anderson: Children's Literature as Intertexts."

³⁸ An arguable exception to this rule might be Elena Boschi and Tim McNelis's essay, "'Same old song'" on Audio-visual Style in the films of Wes Anderson, which does briefly discuss the role of nostalgia in Anderson's use of Vince Guaraldi's *Peanuts* music in *Rushmore* and *The Royal Tenenbaums*. However, these authors scarcely make more than passing mention of this music, and the essay is much more invested in the director's famous use of artists like Nico and Elliot Smith.

famously constructs his cinematic worlds with bright colors, storybook tableaux, and cartoonish characters, Anderson nevertheless depicts childhood as an emotionally turbulent period dominated by trauma. Sometimes that trauma is subtle and slow-burning, as it is for the Tenenbaum children following their parents' divorce in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Other times, trauma takes the scale of historic atrocity, as it does when Zero Mustafa recounts witnessing the genocide of his people in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). Unlike Spielberg, however, Anderson's films rarely posit these sonic references to texts from childhood as a straightforward avenue of escape from these painful childhood experiences. Certainly, holiday specials and Disney cartoons can offer solace and provide a means of coping with grief and fear. But as Mothersbaugh's *Barnaby* anecdote indicates, the media we consume as children frequently comes loaded with its own piercing and unpredictable sadness.

Anderson's films demonstrate acute awareness that painful emotion can seep into even the most seemingly benign material for children, and they make no effort to brush away the knotted, barbed undercurrents of auditory touchstones that litter Anderson's worlds.

Indeed, in this director's films, that emotional turbulence is part of the intrinsic appeal. Anderson draws upon some of the same conflicted sound worlds that we encountered in the previous chapter - the comforting dischord of cartoons like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* - and he invents scenarios that demonstrate why that irresolvable audio-visual tension holds so much attraction for children and adults alike. In Anderson's films, that appeal frequently comes through in the ways that these children's works recreate the tumultuous emotions characters face in their

everyday lives, then miniaturize those feelings so that they become approachable and manageable. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* may present child viewers with a jarring combination of cartoon slapstick, meditative music, emotionless acting, and aching depression, but it also contains those potentially chaotic elements within the confines of a narrative cartoon. The tonal tensions in children's works like this one never actually explode into lasting damage - there is no risk that the general feeling of unease in a *Peanuts* special will eventually build to Charlie Brown's parents divorcing, Snoopy getting hit by a car, or any of the other more permanent tragedies that often befall Anderson's characters. Rather, audio-visual clashes in cartoons like this create scenarios where uncomfortable emotions paradoxically feel comforting, because they have been rendered safe and consequence-free.

In discussing children's texts that give the child audience more manageable methods of handling upsetting emotions, it may initially seem like I am evoking Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales in *The Uses of Enchantment*. For Bettelheim, fairy tales appeal to the young child because they take the "existential anxieties" that children face in their everyday lives and boil them down into an appealing miniature format that a child can "grasp" and control (10). Yet while this seems similar to what I described for Anderson, there is a crucial distinction. For Bettelheim, the primary purpose of these fairy tales is to give the child reader a series of solutions for his or her symbolic problems. Fairy tales in his study reduce specific Oedipal conflicts into easy-to-grasp symbols, then provide the child reader a method of resolving these conflicts. Anderson, however, uses children's texts in ways that do not offer any obvious symbols or direct resolutions.

The appeal of a Charlie Brown cartoon is not the appeal of projecting some fear of maternal abandonment onto Charlie Brown's predicament, then watching as Charlie Brown masters that fear. Rather, the appeal is that the general emotional tension does not have a clear source, and is never directly locked down to any one symbol that can be resolved. Children's works that mine comforting discord emphasize a form of tension that does not resolve – its appeal is that it does not need to be worked through. This is why, in part, the texts are still appealing to the adults in Anderson's films – they reveal the lie that our gnawing existential anxieties can somehow be resolved with maturity.

Anderson explores that central appeal in a deceptively complex variety of ways. Most blatantly, he does so when he features characters who themselves surround themselves with thorny sounds from records, cartoons, television shows, and other ephemera from childhood. Sometimes, these characters are themselves children, seeking to assert some measure of control over their turbulent home environments, as is the case for the case for the children who play Benjamin Britten records in *Moonrise Kingdom*. Other times, these characters are adults, reaching back towards sonic fixtures of childhood, not to escape into a romanticized happier period, but rather to the devices that once made life's overbearing pressures seem containable. The Tenenbaum siblings of *The Royal Tenenbaums* each have painful memories of childhood, but when depression overwhelms these characters, they nevertheless return to their mother's house and play records on their childhood turntable - here at least, they can return to a form of depression that seems manageable. And in even more remarkable scenarios, as we see in *The Life Aquatic*

with *Steve Zissou*, the characters in question are themselves creators of children's media. Zissou, in this instance, is a character who uses sound to make his own disappointing life resemble the comforting discord that permeates the children's programs he produces.

Furthermore, while the films are depicting this phenomenon within the narratives themselves, Anderson is also drawing upon the audience's own multifaceted relationship with sonic fragments of youth culture. For in addition to featuring characters who seek out these sounds, Anderson also liberally litters his films with sonic signifiers that are only accessible to his audience. These signifiers might come in the form of non-diegetic music on the soundtrack, as when "Christmastime is Here" from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* plays during Margot Tenenbaum's return to her mother's house in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, or when "Happiness is" from *Jazz Impressions from a Boy Named Charlie Brown* plays as Anthony and Dignan celebrate their heist in the short film version of *Bottle Rocket* (1994). Other times, Anderson engages the audience by including references within the diegesis that only his audience will recognize. It is doubtful that the children in *Moonrise Kingdom* are consciously speaking like *Peanuts* characters, or that the Steve Zissou in *The Life Aquatic* is aware that the music in his documentaries strongly resembles Mothersbaugh's music from *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* (Mothersbaugh is, not coincidentally, the film's actual composer). But these are all references that Anderson's adult audience members are likely to recognize - with varying degrees of consciousness - from their own childhoods. Anderson places his audience members in a complex position where they are simultaneously observing and implicated in this

sonic draw. To watch and listen to an Anderson film, one must consciously observe characters while they withdraw into varying forms of sonic children's media, all the while receiving a series of triggers for one's own complex relationship with comfortable discord.

Involving the audience in this process is crucial for several reasons. It would be easy, if the films were only positioning us as critical observers, to take a judgmental view of the characters and their impulses towards childhood fixtures - to single out their behavior as regressive or immature. And certainly, as the films indicate, there are many ways in which cocooning oneself in the music and sound tropes from old cartoons and kids shows can be self-defeating. The Tenenbaum siblings, for example, cling to pieces of children's ephemera well into adulthood, and it is not a coincidence that they also struggle to move past the emotional wounds they suffered as children. But because Anderson also draws upon the audience's own personal connections to these sonic touchstones, he invites the audience's empathy rather than judgment.

This quality is crucial. Empathy, in Anderson's films, is frequently a valuable byproduct of the comforting discord in children's media. The sound worlds that Anderson's characters turn to might be tense, open-ended spaces where emotion is constantly unresolved. But in being so open-ended, these sonic landscapes can also leave Anderson's characters emotionally accessible to each other. Comforting discord turns into an affectively flexible and capacious space with no pre-determined narrative, no fixed emotional response that must result from hearing Vince Guaraldi's *Peanuts* music in the Tenenbaum household or Mark Mothersbaugh's offbeat

synthesizer music in Zissou's submarine. As a result, characters who encounter each other in these spaces have the opportunity to set those emotional responses on their own terms and forge new empathetic connections with one another. And by drawing on the audience's own personal associations with children's media, Anderson also creates a scenario where audience members become part of this empathetic feedback loop.

4.3 *The Royal Tenenbaums*

Take, for instance, Anderson's use of Guaraldi's "Christmastime is Here" from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. When we first hear the music, Margot Tenenbaum has just confessed to her mother that she is depressed and wants to move back home. The instrumental music plays as she loads her luggage into a taxi, half-heartedly assuring her upset husband that she "kind of" loves him and that she will call him. We could regard the music in two obvious ways, both of which initially seem to lead to the same conclusion. Either A) the music is non-diegetic, designed as commentary for our benefit alone, or B) the music is internal-diegetic, music that is playing in Margot's head as she re-enters her mother's house. In either case, the music initially seems like a means of emphasizing that Margot is regressing, fleeing from adulthood in favor of childhood comforts. Margot is, after all, turning away from her marriage - the socially sanctioned institution of mature adulthood - in order to return to her childhood home. And just as the music is an object of childhood nostalgia that is nevertheless pregnant with melancholia, Margot's

childhood home is a longed-for safe-space that is also laden with many unhappy childhood memories - memories of the events, for that matter, that are likely at the root of her current depression.

Taken from this standpoint, it might seem like the film is positioning us to judge the character, to chastise the immature choices that are only going to compound her problems. But the audience's own connection to the music complicates any moralizing tone. Because few of Anderson's viewers are likely to be unfamiliar with *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, any associations that the audience has with this affectively loaded music - be they feelings of nostalgia, confusion, melancholia, or some combination - is going to prevent the audience from observing Margot from an entirely critical and judgmental standpoint.

To be sure, every audience member might feel something different upon hearing this music. We might think here of Anahid Kassabian's conception of "affiliating identifications" from *Hearing Film*. Kassabian posits that when films use preexisting songs, the audience's relationship with the music is going to "depend on histories forged outside the film scene," histories that are unique to each individual listener (3). To a large extent, affiliating identifications are at play when audience members hear "Christmastime is Here," as each listener is likely to have very different personal associations with the song, tied to his or her own specific childhood memories. But for Anderson's purposes, it is not necessary for audience members to have the same childhood associations. As long as the listener holds *some* vulnerable childhood connection to the song, that listener is in a position to empathize with

Margot and reach some understanding of her desire to retreat back into childhood memories.

When we next hear the music, that empathetic connection opens up for Margot as well. Late in the film, her father, struggling to make amends to his children after a lifetime of neglect, takes her to an ice cream parlor and attempts to engage her in a heart-to-heart conversation. We hear “Christmastime is Here” again throughout this sequence, this time as a vocal version that plays in the ice cream parlor itself. And as the slightly off-key children’s choir sings Guaraldi’s eerie and guileless melody, Margot finally makes a connection with Royal, her father. Margot has long resented her father for treating her as less-than, and she spends most of their conversation coldly rebuffing him. Yet when an exchange about Margot’s middle name prompts Royal to grow introspective and murmur, “That was my mother’s name,” Margot responds with gentle compassion: “I know.” In this moment, Margot seems to recognize that if her father has been emotionally absent throughout her childhood, it may be because Margot painfully reminds Royal of his own lost mother. Though the Charlie Brown music is not the subject of this conversation, it nevertheless establishes an empathetic space where both Margot and Royal can mutually grow vulnerable about their own painful childhood memories and connect on those terms.

4.4: Moonrise Kingdom

In films like *Royal Tenenbaums*, moments like this primarily tend to highlight ways that children's media impacts adult characters who have long since formed their own associations with bits of sound and music. As of 2016, he has made only one film that deals explicitly with the relationship that children themselves forge with their favorite music and literature. *Moonrise Kingdom* is ostensibly a tale of youthful rebellion, chronicling two star-crossed pre-teen lovers as they attempt to flee adult society and explore a romantic relationship in the woodland paradise of New Penzance Island. Throughout the film, Anderson depicts the adult world these children are trying to escape as an accumulation of world-weary disappointments; as Matt Zoller Seitz puts it, "anxiety, fear, and a creeping sense of personal failure affect nearly every adult in *Moonrise*," all of whom perpetuate their own values, even the bad ones, without thinking, and at all times without feeling" (274). Seitz takes an optimistic view of Sam and Suzy's rejection of these values, which he reads as a triumph of independent thought that is based on "empathy, attention, and understanding, not mindless fealty to ritual or ostrichlike evasion of unpleasant truths" (275). Yet while there is truth in Seitz's optimistic interpretation, the film also indicates that Sam and Suzy have already absorbed much of their elders' damaging values well before they attempt to escape - at times through the same children's media that the characters use to distract themselves from that adult world.

We hear this dynamic first through ways that Suzy and her younger siblings cling to children's music. Throughout the film, Benjamin Britten's concert pieces music for children - *Young Person's Guide to Orchestra*, *Noye's Fludde*, *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream, and *Friday Afternoons* in particular - serve as near-constant accompaniment. Children play the music in the household, perform it in church pageants, cart portable record players through the woods to hear it outdoors, and fight over it when denied access to the music. On one level, the music's presence here is the result of Anderson's own love of Britten's music; the director has spoken with admiration of the "the idea of these great composers speaking to a young audience," composers willing to educate younger audiences on the nuances of the orchestra simply because they "like to teach" (316). Yet while the children in the film are clearly as drawn to the music as the film's director, the Britten music that they select frequently comes loaded with somber and oppressive undercurrents.

Britten's music may be teaching children, but as with other adults in the film, the lessons it imparts are not necessarily those it intends³⁹.

The film's first scene outlines the child characters' complex relationship with this music. The film opens with the sound of a raging storm, thunder clapping as the first line of opening credit text appears onscreen. As this thunderstorm - perhaps the most elemental signifier of chaos - pounds on, the film cuts to a set that is as pristine and composed as the storm is bombastic. The camera tracks through one of Anderson's signature dollhouse-like tableaux - a children's playroom with low ceilings, walls covered in watercolor paintings of trees, and ornamental toy-like

³⁹ Granted, Britten was not necessarily oblivious to the ominous nature of much of his children's music. On the one hand, Britten reportedly saw *Young Person's Guide* as a youthful expression of joy that was driven by the "great fun" of disassembling the orchestra, and he apparently reacted to the first studio recording of the piece by "jumping around and laughing with pleasure at what he had done" (Bridcut 23-24). However, Britten biographer John Bridcut argues Britten was more ambivalent about themes of childhood and innocence in his work than he often let on. Britten's music, Bridcut argues, is driven by the sensation that the child "does not belong to the sinful adult world, but he is aware of it, and has been marked and measured by it" (31) - a sensation that does seem to resonate with the melancholy undertones of the music we hear in *Moonrise Kingdom*.

furniture that all coalesce to create a comforting, storybook-like quality. As the film progresses, that audio-visual negotiation between chaos and order will intensify.

As though to assert order onto the soundtrack, a small child enters the space and sets up a miniature record player in the center of the playroom. Moving silently and deliberately, he places Leonard Bernstein's recording of Britten's *Young Person's Guide to Orchestra* in the machine. As the voice of the piece's child narrator begins to fill the room, the boy's siblings - his younger brothers and his older sister, Suzy - emerge from their own rooms and silently join their brother, one by one, around the record player. The narrator's voice, though coming from the record player's tiny speakers, is nevertheless loud enough to cover over the sounds of the storm. "In order to show you how a big symphony orchestra is put together," the narrator explains, "Benjamin Britten has written a big piece of music, which is made up of smaller pieces that show you all the separate parts of the orchestra." This description presents orchestral music - a seemingly abstract force of emotion - as something approachable that can be broken down into easily understandable parts. Moreover, it is a force that a child can control through the act of narration itself - speaking, with calm, steady resolve, gives the child narrator the power to assert an aura of firm order and control over the roiling musical bombast.

But while children seem to be drawn to this record for that calm depiction of orderly sound, the music that follows is decidedly less than calm. The Purcell theme that Britten has chosen is itself a somber melody, and Britten's initial arrangement of the theme features every instrument of the symphony orchestra playing at full volume. As a result, the music booms with imposing *sturm und drang* that seems

more akin to the storm raging outside than the quiet children gathered around the record player inside.

As though noticing this herself, Suzy turns to the window and gazes out at the storm with her binoculars. As the film cuts to an exterior shot of the house amidst the storm, the Britten music shifts from diegetic source music to non-diegetic score.

Where we initially heard the music through the small speakers of the portable record player, we now hear the music fully envelop the soundtrack with complete clarity, and its volume grows deafening. As the camera zooms out to reveal the children's house nearly consumed by the surging storm and the raging sea, the music emerges as an extension of this apocalyptic landscape. At one point a cymbal crash even synchronizes to a clap of thunder, briefly rendering the orchestra and the storm near indistinguishable. Yet somehow, this oppressive music still seems to set the siblings at peace. When the film cuts back to the interior of the house, the children are still calmly listening to the record.

As the camera moves through the house's various rooms, the music's appeal for the children gradually becomes clearer. Over a montage of tracking shots, we see repeated shots of the children's parents, Laura and Walt silently going about their daily activities while entirely avoiding each other. We see them each reading books in separate rooms. We see Laura compulsively washing her hair. We see Walt shuffle about the house with a glass of wine in what appears to be the middle of the day. Though the family household is calm and orderly, it is also cold and devoid of affection. At no point do the two parents share the same room or exchange words with each other - or with their children, for that matter. The parents may maintain a

quiet household, but larger issues - an unhappy marriage, a drinking problem - visibly infect the atmosphere of the house.

In this context, the appeal that *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* has for the children makes a certain amount of sense. The music plays throughout the montage; we hear the narrator introducing each section of orchestra, and we hear each section play their part of the Purcell melody in isolation. While the melody remains somber, it comes across as less imposing when played by smaller groups of instruments. Moreover, because each section only plays after an introduction from the young narrator, the piece gives the impression that the narrator is in charge of the music himself, determining how and when each section will play its part of the melody. Unlike the young siblings, who can do nothing to affect the atmosphere of chilled, unspoken discord in their parents' house, the young narrator can take an oppressive form of abstract emotion and assert control over it. Filling the house with this music allows the children to transform the household's atmosphere of uncontrollable anxiety into something they can manage and feel that they have power over.

Yet in ritualistically using this music as a coping mechanism, the children also risk absorbing habits of emotional repression themselves. The opening section of Britten's piece may introduce children to each section of the orchestra, but it does not attempt to explain the affective power that underlines the music; the piece offers no explanation as to why certain melodies carry certain emotional associations, or why playing them in different ways can exacerbate those associations. This is not a failing on Britten's part - he was writing this music (initially part of a 1946

documentary film, *Instruments of the Orchestra*) as a basic introduction to the orchestra for children, and could not have anticipated it serving as the constant musical accompaniment to an unhappy household. But in the context of this sequence, the music risks giving the children a means, not just of mediating unwieldy negative emotions, but of suppressing those feelings. Much in the same way, the parents deal with their depression by avoiding addressing it, convincing themselves instead that their calm and collected external behavior keeps that depression under control. But while they do not subject their children to screaming displays of passion, that searing unhappiness perpetually hangs over their household as a result. Comforting discord in this context gives the children a means of making that unhappiness manageable, but it also teaches them to follow the same behavior that perpetuates unhappiness.

If that reading seems like an uncharacteristically judgmental position for Anderson to create for his audience, this in part has to do with the comparatively obscure nature of Britten's music. While the Britten piece has become a concert hall staple, it has not entered the cultural hivemind the way similar pieces of children's concert music by composers like Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev have. Unlike *Peter and the Wolf*, Britten's piece has never been adopted into a piece of Disney animation, and unlike *The Nutcracker*, it does not make ubiquitous appearances in commercials and shopping centers every year. Moreover, because Britten's piece is not representational or tied to any narrative, it has not been appropriated ad nauseam for popular film and television. Due to the presence of a child narrator, the audience can readily discern that they are listening to music written for a child audience, even if

this is the first time they are hearing the piece. But because relatively few viewers are likely to have a strong pre-existing connection to the music, the scene gives the audience members an opportunity to observe children's media interacting with the film without complications from their own childhood associations. In the process, the audience receives an introduction to the film's treatment of children's media sounds and their potentially damaging impact without necessarily feeling implicated in the process.

Anderson only allows this critical distance, however, to make the audience members aware of the phenomenon before implicating them in the process as well. Soon after, he shifts his point of reference to a form of children's media that does have more ubiquitous popularity: the animated *Peanuts* specials. As I indicated earlier, television specials like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *It's the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown* have long been a part of Anderson's DNA as a filmmaker, dating back to his use of Vince Guaraldi's music in the short film version of *Bottle Rocket*. But though he has drawn on everything from the cartoons' colorful visual aesthetic to their music, his most consistent influence has been the monotone, emotionally blank vocal delivery of the *Peanuts* child actors.

This has not escaped the director's scholars; Mark Browning has traced Anderson's "deadpan delivery" back to Schulz and Melendez's films (104), while Mark Zoeller Seitz has observed that the *Peanuts* specials and Anderson's films are similar in that in both, "everything is incongruous." The *Peanuts* films, Seitz explains, are "about children, but the children don't talk like any children who have ever existed" (98), a phenomenon he implicitly links to preternaturally calm and

collected performances of Anderson's own child actors. But though Anderson does have his actors overtly imitate the child actors of the cartoons, he also gives the vocal incongruities a much darker context than anything imagined by Schulz or Melendez. In *Moonrise Kingdom*, the *Peanuts* influence is the most overt. Sam, Suzy, and her brothers all deliver their dialogue with a near-affectless deadpan that explicitly recalls the child actors who voiced Charlie Brown and his friends (as though to hammer the illusion home, Sam even blurts a frustrated "Rats!" at one point). Like the *Peanuts* gang as well, the actual dialogue that Sam and Suzy speak often plays in comic contrast to their deadpan delivery. At times, they seem to be delivering dialogue intended for adults, as when Sam offhandedly explains that he does not "give a damn" that the broach he inherited from his mother is "not meant for a male to wear," or when he responds to a question of whether a recently killed puppy was a "good dog" with a vaguely philosophical, "Who's to say?" At other points, the two speak of their turbulent emotional distress, with Suzy in particular echoing Charlie Brown in confessing that she often feels "depressed." Throughout, the emotionless delivery gives off the vague impression that the children do not entirely understand the dialogue they are speaking, emotionlessly speaking words that adults have written for them.

A crucial difference in *Moonrise Kingdom*, however, is that unlike Schulz and Melendez, Anderson provides substantial explanations for Sam and Suzy's speaking patterns. In both Schulz's comic strip and the animated specials, the characters' emotional problems largely exist in the abstract. Though Charlie Brown is ill-treated by his friends, his other problems are to all appearances, causeless. Indeed, the

central conflict in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* comes from the child inexplicably experiencing a form of existential depression that seems more befitting of an adult going through a midlife crisis. Charlie Brown decries the commercialism of the season, but commercialism is an abstract concept for a middle class child of the suburbs. Schulz and Melendez consistently find comedy by placing adult anxieties (often belonging to Schulz himself) in the mouths of children with no real conception of them.

In *Moonrise Kingdom*, Anderson expands that limited field of vision, and imagines an alternate universe version of *Peanuts* where the inexplicable childhood anxieties have been clearly been inherited from an adult source. For despite the dozens of animated specials and half-century of comic strips, the audience has always had a very limited view of the *Peanuts* gang's larger lives. Parents are never seen, treated as so unimportant to animated films' narratives that their voices are substituted for inaudible gibberish. We occasionally see reference to the fact that Charlie Brown's dad is a barber, or that Linus's grandmother is attempting to wean him from his blanket, but the central relationship between the children and their parents is never treated with any seriousness. The children by and large live in a hermetically sealed universe, one that never expands to reveal possible sources of Charlie Brown's persistent depression.

Sam and Suzy, however, do not have abstract problems - their depression and anxiety originates from their very real troubled home lives. Sam is an orphan who has been expelled from multiple foster homes, while Suzy's parents, as previously mentioned, lead disappointed lives in a loveless marriage. When Sam and Suzy

speak with a muted, affectless monotone, the film indicates that this is not a simple matter of child actors not understanding their dialogue; rather, this is a form of expression that these characters have absorbed from their environments. For children are not the only characters delivering calm, steely monotone dialogue in *Moonrise Kingdom*; we see the same performance style from every adult in the picture.

This is particularly the case for Suzy's parents, who attempt to hide their mutual disappointment with their lives by muting any sign of passionate emotion.

Both lawyers, Walt and Laura address each other as "counselor" when they do have to speak to each other, affecting a formal tone that keeps their deep-seated problems - Walt's drinking, Laura's ongoing affair with the town sheriff - below the surface.

Even when they do speak relatively frankly with each other about the state of their relationship late in the film, they keep their voices muted and numb. Deadpan delivery allows the characters to avoid engaging with the emotions that might be disruptive, were the couple to voice them directly.

Walt and Laura's behavior has a significant impact on their children, and not only because of the example they set; Suzy's parents also explicitly pressure their daughter to apply the same disaffected control to her own troubled teenage angst.

When Suzy, bitter after her parents have forbidden her from seeing Sam, tells her mother "I hate you," her mother responds by distractedly saying, "Don't say hate."

Laura does not chastise Suzy for saying that she hates her mother - her chief concern is that Suzy is expressing extreme language like "hate" in the first place. She then denies the validity of her daughter's hatred, explaining, "You think you mean it in this moment. You're trying to hurt me." This may be true, but in telling her daughter

what she does and does not feel, Laura is implicitly telling her daughter that she cannot trust her own emotions. Laura warns her daughter that “we women can be over emotional,” implying that they need to compensate by compartmentalizing those emotions, rather than giving voice to them.

And much as Suzy and Sam strive to rebel against this mentality, their own detached delivery indicates that they have already absorbed much of their elders’ approach to repressing their emotions. Anderson brings this into perspective early in the film, through a flashback that shows us the origins of Sam and Suzy’s relationship. Over the course of an extended montage, we see and hear Sam and Suzy writing letters to each other, gradually sharing more vulnerable personal information as the letters progress. Like Sally Brown dictating her letter to Santa Claus in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* or Linus writing his letter to The Great Pumpkin in *It’s the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown*, Suzy and Sam’s voices take on an especially blank, affectless tone when narrating their letters. The children speak the text of their letters like students reciting their book reports, with a slight sing-song rise and fall in their delivery that bears no relation to the content of their words.

Initially, the content of their letters is appropriately banal - Sam complements Suzy’s performance as one of the birds in a local production of Britten’s children’s opera, *Noye’s Fludde*, while Suzy tells Sam her favorite color. But as their letters progress, the children begin referencing progressively more violent and painful events, each of which jars sharply against the monotone delivery. Though the children do not voice their pain directly, the actions they describe reveal the intensifying trauma that their calm delivery is hiding. Sam begins one letter by

telling Suzy, “Last night, I accidentally started a fire while I was sleepwalking. Although I have no memory of this, my foster parents think I am lying.” Without directly expressing his grief for his parents or his fear that his foster family will reject him, Sam reveals that his grief and fear are taking the form of violent, unconscious actions. Suzy responds by telling Sam, “I am in trouble again because I threw a rock through the window. My mother still has glass in her hair,” calmly revealing the more overtly violent form that her own distress has taken.

Meanwhile, though the children speak of their difficulties with the incongruously monotone voices of the *Peanuts* cast, the images onscreen reveal a much more wrenching reality. When Suzy calmly tells Sam that she got suspended for getting into a fight with a classmate, her narration of that event comes juxtaposed with footage of Suzy ragefully tackling a student in the middle of the classroom. When Sam confides, “I am trying very hard to make friends, but I feel like people do not like my personality,” we see him cowering before a group of older boys, then impulsively punching one and running off. Even when they try to console each other, the footage reveals their anxious despair. When we hear Suzy telling Sam “I do hope you think of their faces every day, even if it makes you sad,” we see footage of her screaming at her own parents (who look back at her dispassionately). The audio-visual juxtaposition is similar to the types clashes in the Charlie Brown shorts in that it is incongruous. Far from coming across as a mysterious and random phenomenon, however, that incongruity between sound and image reveals the wide gap between the intense emotions the children are actually experiencing and the ways

that they have been conditioned to speak about their fear, anger, loneliness, and anxiety.

Adding yet another contrasting layer, Anderson scores this sequence with the faerie chorus from Britten's opera *Midsummer Night's Dream* ("Act 2: On the ground, sleep sound"). Though the piece itself is not strictly a piece of children's media, Britten's impressionistic writing for boy's choir is nevertheless strongly suggestive of a certain idea of childhood. In the opera itself, the fairies sing this music as Puck arranges the sleeping lovers into pairs near the play's resolution, using magic to ensure that each character is in love with his or her correct partner. Philip Brett argues that where Shakespeare presents this scene with irony - the audience is aware that the resolution is temporary, for the faerie magic will eventually wear off - Britten instead treats it as a reflection on the tension between innocence and knowingness. With tremulous, unresolved harmonies that are "sung by 'thin-as-board-juveniles,'" Brett observes, "It is hard to interpret [the music] as anything but the vision of innocence and purity that Britten seems to have been trying to recapture all his life" (121). To Brett, the music reflects Britten's lifelong tension between "honesty about life's difficulties and a longing for resolution and comfort" (121) - a formulation that could easily be used to describe Anderson's oeuvre as well.

Though the narrative of *Midsummer Night's Dream* has little to do with *Moonrise Kingdom* itself, that tension between innocence and knowingness weighs heavily on the letter-writing scene. In its depiction of pastoral serenity that gradually unravels into disruptive dissonance, the music mirrors the children's attempts at maintaining a calm front over their internal distress. When the montage begins and

the children are speaking of their favorite colors and animals, the boy's choir softly moans a gentle melody. As the content of letters grows more disruptive, however, the chords underlining the melody gradually grow more instable. By the time we see Suzy attack her classmate, the music crescendos to a crashing dissonant chord. Though the music then seeps back down into calm stasis, its conflicted tone places emphasis on roiling anger that the dialogue attempts to suppress.

In the context of the rest of the film's music, Britten's opera piece plays an even more complicated role. Unlike *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, the *Midsummer* piece plays non-diegetically; no children within the film are actually listening to this music. At the same time, the music is stylistically similar to the Britten music that has thus far been a constant staple in the film. As a result, its presence here comes across as an extension of the music that Suzy and her sisters have been using to mediate their chilly home life. Though the music reflects Sam and Suzy's personal conflict between anxiety and control, it also functions as a subtle reminder of the turbulent outside world that originally impressed this conflict onto the children.

The brief sequence compels the adult audience to reconcile a wide range of associations. Where the opening scene presented a form of children's media that was unlikely to strike many personal chords, Anderson's evocation of the *Peanuts* specials can potentially register with any American viewer who grew up with a television after 1965. And initially, both the pleasure of recognition and the novelty of hearing an animation trope in live action setting may elicit delighted laughter. But that laughter comes coupled with the audience's growing awareness of the darker context that

Anderson has given this trope. The film has inverted the benign form of melancholy that comforted in children's media into something more resembling the searing trauma that required the need of comfort in the first place. Meanwhile, the Britten music, first introduced as a balm to unhappiness that adults pass on to their children, serves as a subliminal reminder of the adults who inspired this repressed approach to trauma. The scene invites the audience to yearn for a tonally difficult piece of children's media, but it simultaneously compels the audience to reflect on how something so tonally difficult could become a well-loved object of nostalgia in the first place.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous to imply that the film takes a strictly negative view of children's media, particularly when Anderson himself has professed to loving the Britten and *Peanuts* works he references. There is a reason, after all, that scholars like Seitz respond so strongly to themes of "empathy, attention, and understanding" (274) in the film. For despite their blank manner of speaking, Sam and Suzy do not have a difficult time communicating with or understanding one another; unlike Suzy's parents, they learn to read other through their mutually suppressed anxieties. While each child may be struggling to express his or her own anger and fear, Sam and Suzy also do not have any problem recognizing those feelings in one another. Even during the letter writing montage, they each make a point of responding to each other's unspoken troubles with empathy, with Sam reminding Suzy that her parents still love her and Suzy encouraging Sam to remember his own parents each day. Each quickly learns to intuit the emotions the

other struggles to express, demonstrating a sense of understanding that eludes adult characters like Suzy's parents.

Similarly, while the Britten music has the potential to carry the same trauma it partially ameliorates, it also functions as a tether that connects the prepubescent lovers. When Sam first meets Suzy, she is performing as a bird in *Noye's Fludde*. The excerpt of the production itself is as tonally conflicted as the rest of the Britten music in the film. An adaptation of Noah's Ark written for child performers, the scene featured in the film features apocalyptic music juxtaposed against cartoonish stage design and children in dressed animals. Sam, however, is unaffected by the music and instead wanders away from the performance and down to the dressing rooms. Here, he first meets with Suzy, and establishes a brief flirtatious connection with the young girl as she waits in her bird costume. When Sam returns to watch the rest of the opera, the camera cuts to a close up of Suzy performing in the animal chorus; the shot, if not literally from Sam's point of view, is designed to signal that Suzy is now Sam's point of focus. Sam's renewed interest in the opera hinges on his interest in Suzy. The scene plants the seeds for Sam and Suzy to begin rewiring the children's music they hear on their own terms. For Sam, *Noye's Fludde* is no longer a jarringly whimsical portrait of Old Testament fury, but rather an acoustic token for his first meeting with Suzy.

The film's guardedly optimistic finale closes with that sense that Sam and Suzy may be able to reapproach Britten's children's music and use it for their own more healthy purposes. In the last scene, the film moves back to the attic playroom. Suzy and her brothers are again listening to *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

Once again, the child narrator calmly speaks of taming sound with meticulous order, telling his audience, “Benjamin Britten has taken the whole orchestra apart. Now he puts it back together again,” and explaining that the “instruments come in one after another in the same order as before.” Once again, the children silently circle the record player to listen to this description of a sonic world where every noise falls into perfect order. The children still have good reason to desire this sonic stability - within a few moments, we hear Walt and Laura call the children down for dinner, thinly suppressed rage in each of their voices suggesting that the household is just as fraught with anxious tension as it was in the opening scene.

But one element has changed - Sam is present in the room as well, visiting Suzy in secret. And when the children are summoned downstairs and Sam moves to leave, the soundtrack shifts. The children turn off the record player on their way out, and in its absence, Britten’s “Cookoo!” from his schoolroom song cycle, *Friday Afternoons*, begins playing on the soundtrack. Though this is not the music that played when Sam and Suzy met, the gentle child chorus softly repeating “Cookoo” over a close-up of Suzy immediately brings to mind Suzy’s bird costume in *Noye’s Fludde*. Though it comes from the same sound-world as the other Britten pieces in the film, its connection to that first meeting gives the music the impression of belonging to Sam and Suzy’s private relationship, rather than the anxiety that surrounds them outside. It does not play within the diegesis, but as Sam and Suzy pause at the window and share a moment staring at each other, the music’s peaceful, delicate melody fosters a sense that the two have created their own, shared sonic universe inside of the tumult.

This is not an unambiguously happy ending; there is every chance that Sam and Suzy will grow into the same disappointed and dysfunction adults that have previously populated Anderson's films. As the director himself has observed, much of the hopeful tone at the end of the film comes from the fact that Sam and Suzy "haven't had time for it start coming unglued" (qtd. in Seitz 288). But the film maintains an optimistic outlook because while their future is uncertain, Sam and Suzy have managed to forge their own relationship with sound and emotion in ways that elude many of Anderson's adult characters. They have learned to maintain the deadpan delivery in ways that express empathy rather than pent-up bitterness, to determine their own associations for the children's music rather than absorb its unintended emotional baggage.

In this way, the film reminds the audience that for all the knotted conflicting associations that children's media can call into play, each of those associations is malleable. As with the rest of Anderson's films, *Moonrise Kingdom's* uses sound to both draw on the audience's fond associations with children's media and simultaneously rewrite the terms of those associations. But in the process, the film reminds audiences that those associations can be changed in the first place; that our relationships with the books, movies, records, television shows, and records that informed our youths - that continue to inform us as adults - are constantly in flux.

4.5: *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*

In the examples discussed thus far, the central relationship has been between characters - adult, child, or otherwise - and the children's media created by someone else. But Anderson has also directed one film that adds further nuance to this process, one that draws a creator of children's media into this formulation. *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* is, at heart, about an aging children's media icon attempting to come to terms with his identity through the soundscapes he creates in his children's programs. As such, the film serves as a fitting conclusion, not only to this chapter, but to the dissertation's larger attempt at parsing adulthood's ambivalent relationship with the sonic residue from childhood texts.

At various points in this project, we have looked at different ways that children's television personalities use sound to impact their young audiences. In the first chapter, that figure was Walt Disney himself, a studio-head turned benevolent television host who used the sentimental sound tropes from his films to create a soothing, reassuring space for his viewers. At the start of this chapter, we looked at a much smaller-scale children's television host, Barnaby, whose low-budget operation clashed fanciful visuals against inexplicably sad music in ways that both appealed to and upset young viewers. In *Life Aquatic*, Anderson brings us full circle by imagining the perspective from the other side of the screen. The film invents a fictional children's media icon, one who, knowingly or not, creates many of the same variations on comforting discord that we have explored in everything from *Peanuts* to *Barnaby*. Like his ostensible fans, Zissou also retreats into these worlds, using them to mediate outside pressures in ways that are not dissimilar to the Tenenbaum siblings or Suzy's brothers. As with those films, that same sound world also acts as an open-

ended channel that can potentially lead to empathy and human connection. In this case, however, that channel ultimately directs the audience's attention back at the children's media icon himself. After decades of using his sonic landscape as a means of hiding, Zissou ultimately resets the terms of that sound world for himself. In the process, he comes to a new understanding of his audience.

To be sure, Steve Zissou does not on the surface seem like a strictly child-centric celebrity, modeled as he clearly is on famed ocean explorer and documentarian Jacques Cousteau. Anderson confirms this in an interview with Seitz (166), though such confirmation is scarcely needed - the surface similarities are so blatant they verge on parody. Like Cousteau, Zissou is a famous oceanographer who traverses the globe with his film crew, travelling on a boat outfitted with a yellow miniature submarine, hot air balloon, and helicopter. Like Cousteau, Zissou frequently appears costumed in a blue jumpsuit with a bright red cap. The two even share broad biographical details - both, for example, lose an adult son in a tragic helicopter accident. The Cousteau connection might initially make the designation of Zissou as a children's media icon seem like a stretch. For while the filmmaker certainly had appeal for child audiences - in the Seitz interview, Anderson himself speaks of loving Cousteau's tv series, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, as a child (163) - he was not marketed exclusively towards children. Rather, his documentaries were designed to reach broad, multi-generational audiences in both film and television. Certainly, Cousteau understood the importance of appealing to child viewers like young Anderson, and referred to the episodes of his 1960s-70s ABC series as "adventure films" with characters with whom "kids could identify"

(qtd in Muller 111). But with a global reach that, at its peak, made Cousteau's television show the then-most successful documentary series of all time (Muller 111), it is clear that Cousteau's appeal extended far past child viewers.

Yet though Cousteau is clearly the springboard, Anderson makes pointed changes to Zissou's character and the films he produces that frame him much more squarely in the terms of children's media. To a significant degree, he does this by manipulating the visual aesthetic in Zissou's films. Zissou's undersea worlds, with their handmade diorama-like settings and fanciful stop-motion sea creatures, more closely resemble the claymation diversions in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* than any documentary footage one could find in a Cousteau film. Even more pointedly, Anderson uses sound to position Zissou's films as children's texts. In this instance, he does not do so by directly quoting from any one children's text, but rather by crafting a slew of sonic devices that are just reminiscent enough of popular children's television shows to make Zissou's world seem childlike by proxy.

This childlike aesthetic is clear from our first exposure to Zissou's documentary filmmaking, when his latest film premieres at the fictional Loquasto Film Festival in *Life Aquatic's* first scene. Filmed on location at the opulent Teatre de St. Carlo opera house in Naples and scored with dignified Baroque pastiche by Mark Mothersbaugh, the setting initially primes us for the sort of serious, culturally significant documentary filmmaking that could actually invite worldwide acclaim - a piece of filmmaking like Cousteau's own Palm d'Or-winning *The Silent World* (1955), for example. But as the lights dim and Zissou's film begins, it is clear that we are not going to witness anything nearly so elevated. Right from the opening logo, as

the film's producer credits appear on-screen, we hear a short, atonal burst of notes played on a 1970s-era synthesizer. The brief fragment, both playful and seemingly formless, calls to mind Raymond Scott's experimental synthesized music from Jim Henson's '60s experimental pieces like *Limbo: the Organized Mind* (1966), pieces that would later reappear in altered form in the early seasons of *Sesame Street*.

Though several degrees removed from a direct reference, even this vague musical similarity to a ubiquitous children's program is enough to suggest a childlike sound-world that is drastically removed from the pomp and circumstance of the film festival setting.

As the film proceeds, it becomes clear that Anderson is using Zissou's documentary to once again channel the uneasily indifferent sound-world of the *Peanuts* specials. Here again, however, he does not reference the specials directly, but rather through close approximation. Similar to the children in *Moonrise Kingdom*, Steve Zissou narrates the documentary with the blank, affectless tone of a *Peanuts* child actor reciting dialogue. One might be tempted to argue that in keeping his voice deadpan and affectless, actor Bill Murray is only mimicking the sometimes monotone delivery that Cousteau himself brought to his voiceover work. The significant difference, however, is that Cousteau rarely did the bulk of the narrating in his popular television programs. Rod Serling was the series' primary narrator, and his signature intense delivery-style was as melodramatic as Zissou's is flat.

Anderson, in other words, is pointedly veering from the purported source of his inspiration, opting instead to keep the same deadpan delivery that he once again borrows from Schulz and Melendez. And whereas Cousteau's documentaries for

television typically featured traditional orchestral scores by Hollywood composers like Leonard Rosenman, Anderson employs laid-back jazz exotica by Sven Libaek – music that is only several degrees removed from the familiar Vince Guaraldi *Peanuts* music we heard in *Royal Tenenbaums*. Though the Libaek music itself comes from a forgotten 1974 ocean documentary, *Inner Space*, the obscurity of the source renders it unlikely that many audience members would recognize it as such. Rather, the music is just similar enough to Guaraldi’s music to suggest associations with children’s cartoons like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* without directly invoking these works. Anderson uses a borrowed sonic language to create a sound world that adults can easily recognize as children’s media, even if it does not bear a direct connection with any pre-existing piece of children’s media.

More than simply evoking that sound, however, Zissou’s film also replicates the confusing audio-visual disparities inherent in the difficult children’s cartoons and television shows that we have explored in these past two chapters. In the opening moments of the documentary, the lazily cool jazz score and Zissou’s deadpan delivery may set a calm tone, but they do not seem at odds with the casual footage of Zissou’s crew going about their daily business. The soundtrack seems far more at odds with the footage, however, when tragedy strikes midway through the film and a shark eats Zissou’s mentor, Esteban. Visually, this is an abrupt tonal shift for the documentary. In one shot, we see Esteban underwater, smiling warmly at the camera as fanciful pink stop-motion fish swarm around him. The film then abruptly cuts to a close-up of Esteban’s blood billowing to the ocean surface, a starkly violent image of death following close on the heels of whimsical fantasy. Yet the soundtrack registers

very little change. The Libaek jazz music continues rolling smoothly along, seemingly unaware of the tragedy onscreen. And while Zissou partially breaks from his emotionless stupor and begins shouting to his crew with details of the shark that ate his friend, he nevertheless shouts each word with precisely the same volume and intensity, as though still reciting his lines.

In this respect, the sequence replicates the sort of audio-visual discord that we saw earlier with Guaraldi's music in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, but it also pushes the extremes so far that it would be difficult to refer to the phenomenon as comfortable discord. Where low-key, amiable jazz music was at odds with physical cartoon slapstick in that cartoon, here it plays at odds with the stark trauma of death. The documentary seems to fundamentally undermine the underlying appeal behind comforting discord - that the phenomenon feels so comforting because it presents a context where anxious, clashing emotions never actually erupt into permanent tragedy. Yet even though the film contains a startling death, the soundtrack's dispassionate lack of reaction still represents an attempt at containing this tragedy. The distinction, however, is that this attempt is less for the benefit of the audience and more for the benefit of Zissou himself.

For as the film makes increasingly clear in the scenes that follow, Zissou is not creating this audio-visual disconnect for the benefit of his audience alone - the sound-world he has created for his documentaries is a device he uses to shield himself from the unhappiness that gnaws at his everyday life. In the case of that documentary, refusing to allow the music to shift in tone and acknowledge Esteban's death is not simply a question of laziness - it is Zissou's own attempt at asserting

control over that death. Or more to the point, it is Zissou's attempt at asserting control over the grief he is experiencing in the wake of Esteban's death. Maintaining the artifice of his monotone cadence and allowing the music to play coldly over the grisly footage might result in cognitive dissonance, but it also offers Zissou a preferable alternative to facing the death head-on.

As we see throughout the film, Zissou does not confine these sonic coping mechanisms to his films. Instead, he carries them with him everywhere, speaking with the same dispassionate deadpan even when he is not reading a script, and concocting means of keeping music from his films perpetually in the background. As we learn during the introduction to the film that premieres at Loquasto, one of the crewmembers on Zissou's boat, Vladimir Wolodarski, is also the composer for all of Zissou's documentaries. At varying stages throughout the film, we see Zissou hunched over his composer's shoulder, giving words of approval for rough synthesized ditties. According to Mark Mothersbaugh, the actual composer of these pieces, Anderson's idea was for Wolodarski to be stuck using outdated analogue synthesizers, prompting Mothersbaugh to unearth equipment he had used with his New Wave rock group Devo in the early 1970s (Mothersbaugh). But while the resulting music has traces of Mothersbaugh's early Devo music, the playful, unpredictable synthesized melodies bear an even stronger resemblance to music Mothersbaugh wrote a decade later for a program that was in many ways a large-scale iteration of public access programs like *Barnaby: the Saturday morning children's program*, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. Mothersbaugh was the most prominent composer for Paul Reuben's anarchic children's show in its early 1986 and 1987 seasons,

composing everything from the off-beat lounge music of the opening prologue, the bittersweet new age end credits music, and various and sundry offbeat and unpredictable synthesized melodies for the episodes themselves. Certainly, his Wolodarski music in *Life Aquatic* is not interchangeable with his *Pee-Wee* music - the '70s-era keyboards have a harsher timbre, the melodies a more vaguely menacing air. But the self-consciously "silly" synthesized cues carry just enough of that familiar Saturday-morning residue to render the music recognizable as children's music for a good portion of the audience.

To be sure, this is not the only sort of music we hear in Zissou's environment. As other scholars have discussed at length, Zissou has one crew member who seemingly spends all of his free time singing acoustic covers of David Bowie songs in Portuguese, and the stripped-down glam melodies do make up a significant portion of the boat's sonic atmosphere⁴⁰. But without undervaluing the significance that these songs hold for the film, I would argue that Zissou seems to passively tolerate Pelé's acoustic Bowie performances, while actively seeking out the music Wolodarski writes for his films. Indeed, he goes out of his way to make these synth ditties a constant element of his sonic background. When, midway through the film, he brags to a reporter that he has had a special "rabbit ear" developed for his diving suits so that he and his crew can "pipe in some music," he immediately proceeds to cue one of Wolodarski's pieces - a cue that continues on as the scene transitions to the ocean floor and Zissou and his crew begin exploring undersea wreckage. This is music, in other words, that Zissou needs so fiercely that he even takes measures to make it

⁴⁰ For a more detailed exploration of David Bowie's role in *The Life Aquatic's* narrative, see Lara Hrycaj's "Life on Mars or Life at Sea: Seu Jorge, David Bowie, and the Musical World in Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*."

accessible underwater. The music, whimsical in its aesthetic yet subtly ominous in its melody, allows Zissou to transpose the comforting discord of his films onto his daily existence, erasing to the greatest extent possible the line that separates his children's fantasies with his actual life.

Here again, it would be easy to write off Zissou's behavior as unhealthily regressive and immature, particularly as it seems to impact his poor treatment of those around him. Throughout the film, Zissou behaves thoughtlessly towards the people in his orbit, whether the crew he needlessly endangers by sailing into pirate waters, the wife he cheats on, or the possible son he emotionally manipulates. It might seem at first that this behavior is connected to his penchant for caving himself within the sounds of his children's projects. By cocooning himself in these sound-worlds, perhaps Zissou is avoiding the "real" world and the human obligations he owes. Yet as the film progresses, we see once again that though Zissou rarely lets down his barriers and consider his impact on the people who surround him, the fraught children's media sounds to which he returns are not preventing him from doing this. Rather, they ultimately provide a path for him to discover empathy for the people around him.

This dynamic plays out most powerfully in his relationship with Ned, the young man who may or may not be Zissou's biological child. Ned reappears in Zissou's life after his mother passes away, hoping to forge a connection with the possible father he has previously only known through the films, television specials, magazines, and other pieces of Steve Zissou's media empire. In addition to posing as a possible son, Ned comes to stand for the audience that Zissou has only known

remotely throughout his life. Ned was a captivated Zissou fan as a child, an eager member of the Steve Zissou Society, and his current enthusiasm for Zissou's documentaries is rooted in his lingering fondness for these childhood memories. Thus when Zissou invites Ned to join his crew, he seems less motivated by the opportunity of forging a relationship with an estranged son and more motivated by the chance to incorporate a member of his adoring audience into his filmed narrative. Several heated exchanges result, throughout which Zissou and Ned both must find ways of grappling with one another as complex human beings, rather than as abstract figures in Zissou's fantastical media narrative.

Ambivalent music, as it turns out, ultimately provides the two with the space to make this connection. During Zissou and Ned's occasional introspective conversations, a piece of music plays in the score that gradually emerges as a theme for Ned. A downtempo piano-based melody with faint traces of jazz, the theme oscillates between reserved warmth and mild somberness. In keeping with Anderson's *Peanuts* fixation, the theme resembles a heavier, less playful version of Guaraldi's jazz scores. It is music that suggests both fondness for and disillusionment with beloved childhood fixtures, and in this sense it reflects Ned's ambivalent feelings towards the figure he once idolized as a child. As non-diegetic underscore, Zissou theoretically should not have access to this music, which provides so much insight into his son. This is fitting, as Zissou himself initially refuses any opportunity at gaining insight into his son as a person, rather than as a character in his documentary.

As the film progresses, Zissou and Ned gradually do let down their guards and begin teasing their way towards a human relationship. Tragedy, however, cuts this relationship short before it has time to begin. A helicopter accident claims Ned's life, leaving Zissou once again face to face with an uncontainable loss. And once again, Zissou responds by turning to the sound world of his documentary specials - following the lead of the shark that killed Esteban, he loads his friends and family into his miniature submarine and cues up a tape of music that Wolodarksi has presumably written for his films. Yet this particular tape bears the label, "Ned's Theme." And as the tinny synth music begins piping through the submarine's speakers, it soon becomes evident that this is not just an arbitrary cue from one of the documentaries - this is a synthesized version of the same music that accompanied Ned when he was alive. In order to reach an empathetic connection with his son that he had scarcely begun to forge, Zissou has almost supernaturally reached through the diegesis, pulling non-diegetic underscore into his world and recasting it in his own terms. As the reserved melody gently clashes against the self-consciously silly timbre of the dated Casio keyboard, the music forms its own form of comforting discord, drawing two contrasting emotional currents - playful nonsense and firm stoicism - together without forcing them to resolve. Here, however, the two contrasting emotions are not just abstract feelings - they function as stand-ins for Zissou and Ned themselves. Sonic discord provides an emotionally open-ended space where Zissou's childlike sound-world and the more reserved one connected with Ned can unite in the middle and together form a new and stronger bond.

Doing so does not allow Zissou to instantly resolve his grief, but it does open him to new empathetic channels that alter his self-focused perspective. When, moments later, he finally comes face-to-face with the shark that ate his friend, he responds not in anger but in moved awe. “I wonder if he remembers me,” he whispers teary-eyed, open now to regarding the creature as an independent spirit with whom to forge an emotional tie, rather than an outside force to conquer and contain within his narrative.

It is always tempting to react with suspicion when films made for ostensibly mature audiences draw so heavily upon memories that we have been conditioned to leave behind, when sound attempts to cut through our critical defenses and draw upon our personal ties to treasured childhood texts. But as we see in this closing scene, revisiting children’s media sound need not be a regressive indulgence. Reconceiving sound from treasured cartoons, television shows, films, records, books, and all other manner of media can also open listeners to new emotional channels that might otherwise have laid dormant. Sometimes, yes, in the case of a director like Spielberg, those channels might ultimately lead to self-interested wish fulfillment fantasies. But when filmmakers like Anderson mine those sonic memories for all of their nuanced, tonal ambivalence, those fragments of music, voice, and sound, can empower us to be more emotionally complex, more open to empathy, and more ready to accept and embrace the fundamental irresolvability of human feeling.

Conclusion: Towards a New Outlook on Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a slippery concept. On the one hand, it would seem almost perverse to spend 200 pages writing about films designed to trigger longing for cherished childhood fixtures and not think of these films in terms of nostalgia. And when it comes to *Disneyland*, a television program that used sound to transform a former struggling film studio as a romanticized universe of blissful childhood innocence, nostalgia is all but impossible to avoid. At the same time, I have been reluctant to lean too heavily on a term that so frequently carries pejorative connotations. When the word comes up in common parlance, people frequently evoke the term as a sign of naïveté regarding the past or an unwillingness to face the present. When we accuse somebody of waxing nostalgic, we are often accusing that person of romanticizing the past as a means of avoiding problems that a mature adult should be willing to face. Even when the term is treated with a minimum of overtly negative connotation, it still emerges as a fundamental rewriting of the past as an idealized space. Svetlana Boym, for example, writes very warmly of “reflective nostalgia,” which she describes as a complex process that allows us to engage in “dreams of imagined homelands” while still acknowledging that these dreams could never be materialized (18). But Boym does not deny that these are romanticized dreams - she only justifies those dreams because they come coupled with a sense of self-awareness about the fantasy’s impossibility.

Yet if we look back upon the eclectic assortment of television programs, cartoon shorts, and feature films that have made up this study, an alternate conception

of the past emerges. While sounds from these texts frequently gesture back towards fondly remembered fragments of the audience's past, they rarely attempt to turn that past into an idealized space that would spur any listener to return to childhood or romanticize the idea of home. If the texts in this study share a common theme, it is that they all on some level acknowledge A) that childhood is frequently made up of anxieties, fears, and traumas that are not easily resolved, and B) that these painful emotions do not simply dissipate or resolve with maturity and adulthood. All of these texts are also, for that matter, attempts at ameliorating those negative emotions, of providing the viewer-listener with an alternative mode of feeling that can offer a temporary reprieve or a soothing new perspective on these turbulent feelings.

“Sublime refuge” and “comfortable discord” are not polar opposite concepts, after all - both attempt to merge two contradictory feelings into a positive experience, and both tellingly emphasize that one of those feelings is associated with comfort.

The difference lies in where the emphasis falls. In “sublime refuge” the “comfortable” term is the noun - sublimity may color and affect that refuge, but the dominating concept is that of a comforting safe-space. In “comfortable discord,” conversely, the comparatively negative “discord” functions as the noun - “comfort” may be able to modify or ameliorate that gnawing dissonance, but discord remains the unavoidable constant that can never be fully transformed. One concept offers an escape into a fantasy where contradictory feelings can be subsumed at will and transformed into a fully positive experience - the other attempts to bring qualities of fantasy into this world. Comforting discord accepts the emotional conflicts that make

up human life, but it also finds ways to bend those conflicts into partially positive experiences.

Thus when I pair Spielberg with Disney in the first half of this dissertation, it is not only because Spielberg directly pulls from Disney's auditory body of work. More importantly, it is because both filmmakers respond to life's painful emotions by attempting to forcibly transform those feelings into uniformly positive experiences. Both turn to overpowering sound - primarily music, but also vocal performance and sound effects - to construct alternative universes where negative emotions submit to gentle reassurance and glowing euphoria. Of the two filmmakers, only Spielberg engages in sublime refuge directly; Disney is less concerned with bending uncomfortable feelings to his will than he is with demonstrating his power to make those feelings disappear. Make no mistake - despite the studio's efforts to carve away the bleaker moments from its archive of films that appear throughout *Disneyland*, darkness, fear, and violence still maintain a significant presence in the television show (the models for the Pirates of the Caribbean ride should put to rest any doubt on that front). But when those unwanted emotions emerge in *Disneyland*, they do so primarily so that Walt and his crew can demonstrate their ability to overpower those painful feelings. When Walt's reassuring voice joins forces with the gentle familiar music from the studio's films, even ugly imagery of rape and debauchery dissipate into a blissful safe-space.

Spielberg calls upon many of the same sonic tropes, and his attempts at building an alternative refuge from negative emotion is almost certainly inspired by Disney. But where Disney used sound to vacuum up the unsettling feelings of fear,

revulsion, or anxiety and leave only their hollow images as a shadow of their affective power, Spielberg seeks to transform those difficult emotions themselves into pleasurable feelings. The cacophony of anxiety-producing noises that a character like Neary faces in his home life gradually weave themselves into the blanket of Disney music that consumes Neary in the finale. The overpowering music that plays as Neary enters the mothership combines soothing familiarity with fragmented unpredictability, transforming sounds that once produced frustration and helplessness into sounds that produce wonder and excitement. Fear is still a part of the equation, but when coupled with the rapturous variations on familiar Disney melodies, fear and comfort fuse together into a fully positive experience. Spielberg creates a fantasy scenario where these tonal contradictions are possible, where the listener can not only vanquish anxiety but also bend it to his or her will.

Conversely, the filmmakers in the second half of the dissertation are less concerned with creating new worlds and more concerned with finding new perspectives on the tensions that already exist in this world. The animators behind *Gerald McBoing-Boing* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas Carol* are not attempting to force their images to submit to the overpowering affect of the soundtrack. Rather, they allow the audio and visual tracks to interact on equal footing. Music, vocal performance, and sound effects frequently clash with both the physical action and the dramatic currents of the narrative, but those audio-visual conflicts compel the listener to reassess dissonant tensions that would be unnerving in other contexts. By witnessing abrasive music violently clashing against pacific imagery in *Gerald McBoing-Boing*, or serene music ignoring cartoon slapstick in *A Charlie Brown*

Christmas, the audience can gradually come to trust that audio-visual collisions do not necessarily entail danger. By extension, the cartoons remind listeners that gnawing emotional anxiety might always remain a constant, but that learning to accept that persistent discord can provide its own form of comfort.

Anderson attempts to build upon that quality, moving those same audio-visual tensions into the adult world and demonstrating that the comfortable discord of children's media does not lose its relevance when children with anxieties grow into adults with anxieties. At times, Anderson directly juxtaposes music from children's texts like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* against his films; at others, he only indirectly references these cartoons with musical pastiche and speech patterns. In both instances, however, he does not create a new universe along the lines of Disney or Spielberg so much as he brings traces of a more reserved children's fantasy universe into a world more closely resembling our own. Discordant sound and music from cartoons and children's television shows do not help Anderson's characters escape the various sadnesses and traumas of their daily lives, but those audiovisual juxtapositions do allow the characters to find some version of tranquility within those painful feelings. And by finding ways to peacefully exist within those tonally conflicted spaces, Anderson's characters open themselves up to empathetic connections with one another. Accepting a multifaceted emotional experience gives Anderson's characters to consider the desires, fears, and anxieties of characters outside of themselves. More than any other filmmaker in this study, Anderson demonstrates that returning to these childhood artifacts can do more than offer solace or comfort - it can actually strengthen our capacity to form meaningful human

relationships. Disney and Spielberg's attempts at sublimating and unifying all positive and negative feelings into a single, unified experience may offer a temporary escape, but these fantasies also isolate the fantasist in his or her own private void.

But Anderson, in encouraging listeners to find peaceful acceptance within sonic anxiety, also encourages us to imagine ways that this anxiety connects us to others who share the same emotional distress.

Yet if I seem to favor Anderson over the other filmmakers in this study, I should also emphasize that my personal preference is not the point - all of the approaches to filmmaking in this study have something of value to offer the adult listener, and all of them challenge popular notions regarding nostalgia. Sublime refuge and comfortable discord both entail returning to childhood, but not out of some romanticized longing to relive childhood. Rather, they are attempts at re-accessing the films, television shows, and songs that once offered us alternative means of coping with the doubts, disappointments, and traumas that once haunted us in childhood. These painful emotions that may have evolved into slightly different forms in adulthood, but they never fully vanish. Children's media sounds, by cutting through our intellectual defenses, remind us of the temporary escape routes, coping mechanisms, and gentle reminders that we once had at our disposal.

When I began writing this dissertation in 2011, I occasionally feared that I was only addressing a cultural phenomenon at the moment of its passing - that the film industry was soon to move away from this relationship between acoustic children's media and adult entertainment. Gritty and obsessively solemn films like the *Dark Knight* and *Bourne* franchises dominated the box office, suggestive of a

larger audience that was rapidly losing interest in childhood artifacts. In the past few years, however, the inverse has proved to be the case: Hollywood is more obsessed than ever with producing films and television programs that deliver audiences the soundtrack of their collective childhood. Two days before I finalized these closing thoughts, *Pee-Wee's Big Holiday* (2016) premiered on Netflix. It was the latest of many attempts at resurrecting fondly-remembered children's properties from the 1980s and 1990s, tailored specifically for an adult generation that grew up with the shows. And bringing his career full circle, Mark Mothersbaugh was again providing music for the film, taking the whimsical musical style he pioneered in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, and combining it with allusions to John Williams' outlandish music for Spielberg's fantasies, Goldsmith's idyllic suburban music for Joe Dante's 1980s comedies, and Mothersbaugh's own quietly reflective music for Wes Anderson's films. The first five minutes of the film play almost as a parody of this entire dissertation - Mothersbaugh was apparently responding to a demographic that wanted sonic allusions to practically every well-loved children's property of the past several decades.

It is too early to determine how sound in a film like *Pee-Wee's Holiday* fits into this larger study. But the current popularity of films like this demonstrates that there is a cultural moment taking place that demands further developments on the work started with this project. The music, voices, and other sounds from yesteryear's children's texts are clearly answering some need or desire for the adult audiences who keep streaming these newly revived children's franchises on their Netflix accounts. I have outlined several possible theories as to where these desires come from, but this

is a subject that should not be limited to film sound and children's media studies alone. This is a phenomenon that would benefit from additional input from a wide range of fields, ranging from affect theory, popular culture studies, and child development psychology. We have before us an opportunity to explore neglected modes of feeling, modes that do not need to distinguish any imagined boundaries between child and adult.

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