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Analyzing Film Music Across the Complete Filmic Structure: Three Coen and Burwell Collaborations

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ANALYZING FILM MUSIC ACROSS THE COMPLETE FILMIC STRUCTURE: THREE COEN AND BURWELL COLLABORATIONS

By

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For LOML
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ABSTRACT

While plenty of film-music studies have explored the interactions between film and music at the local level, large-scale film-music analysis is a rare and under-researched phenomenon. I propose a methodology that allows for a film’s music to be discussed at the level of the entire film. Drawing upon works by literary scholars Gustav Freytag and Seymour Chatman, I present a methodology for graphic representation of the Narrative/Dramatic Structure of complete films that combines with the work’s complete score.

As a test case, I examine three filmic collaborations by Joel & Ethan Coen and Carter Burwell (Barton Fink, Miller’s Crossing, and Fargo). Through the use of various analytical techniques, I demonstrate how music functions at the global and local levels and reveal that Burwell and the Coens use their scores to project significant narrative information that changes the way their films are perceived by audiences. I conclude by showing that my methodology finally allows for the comparison of large-scale musical usage to take place in the context of a film’s complete score.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This dissertation proposes a solution to large-scale film-music analysis that relies upon the film’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure (as opposed to its narrative archetype) for its primary organizational logic. To this end, my large-scale approach—which focuses on collaborations between Carter Burwell/Joel & Ethan Coen—will allow for questions about the use of music to be asked in direct relation to the Narrative/Dramatic Structure of a film and will reveal that patterns and paradigms of film scoring within single films (and, perhaps most importantly, between multiple films) not only exist but are also absolutely essential to an analytical understanding of film music.

In the literature on film-music analysis, there are two lacunae I would like to fill. First, there are no analytical approaches to film music that engage entire films without presupposing (or concluding) that the film’s music has a structure independent of its visual track. Second, despite a great deal of critical acclaim received by the 15 Coen/Burwell collaborations, Burwell’s musical scores have received very little attention from music analysts.1 With this dissertation, I will work towards filling in this lack of attention by focusing on the works resulting from their partnerships. Burwell has composed all of the original music for the Coen brothers’ films, thus his musical voice is an integral part of their success. Like other long-standing director/composer partnerships (Hitchcock & Steiner or Spielberg & Williams or, more recently, Wes Anderson & Mark

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1 There are three notable essays on music in the Coen brothers’ films. One of Matthew McDonald’s articles (“Blowin’ in the Wind: Music and Meaning in the Coen Brothers’ Films”) focuses on aspects of Miller’s Crossing, Blood Simple, and A Serious Man, while another of his essays (“Mountains, Music, and Murder”) compares P.T. Anderson’s There Will Be Blood with the Coen’s No Country For Old Men.” Additionally, Michael Bakan provides an anthropologically based contextual analysis of the Kecak music found in Blood Simple in his article “The Abduction of the Signifying Monkey Chant: Schizophrenic Transmogrifications of Balinese Kecak in Fellini’s Satyricon and the Coen Brothers’ Blood Simple.”
Mothersbaugh and P.T. Anderson & Jon Brion), their many collaborations are a fruitful place for establishing features of filmic and musical style.

The Coen brothers and Carter Burwell have openly acknowledged that their collaborations have noticeably less music than typical feature films. One of the results of their minimalistic or unsaturated approach to scoring is that each cue becomes more important and distinct. To borrow from Robert Hatten, each musical cue is “marked,” providing an enriched opportunity for interpretation.

To envision a parallel situation, imagine a primarily black-and-white film that includes only three scenes shot in color versus a film that has an equal distribution of black & white and color scenes. The film with three color scenes has made each one more significant, more “marked,” simply because of their relative scarcity. Contrary to Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer’s claim that films use music in an overdetermined manner or in a fashion that provides redundant information, but I instead believe that much of the non-diegetic music in Coen/Burwell films provides necessary and distinctive insight into the film’s overall narrative. In this dissertation, I will use large- and small-scale musical/filmic analysis to illustrate how Burwell’s music adds a unique perspective and commentary to the Coen films. I will focus on three Coen/Burwell collaborations to expand upon and hypothesize about patterns of musical usage, the relationship between music and narrative structure, and speculate upon how my findings apply to other films.

2 “Music.” The question “what do you mean by music?” is an important and often discussed topic in the film-music literature. Throughout my dissertation, I will primarily use the term when referring to what Carter Burwell composed specifically for the film. Diegetic and/or preexisting, non-diegetic music will be discussed when pertinent, but I have selected films that have comparatively little in that vein (especially preexisting, non-diegetic music) in order to limit the number of competing variables in my study. The relationship between sound design and music is also an important and often discussed issue concerning film sound and film music. I will discuss sound design only when it seems to function as music. That is, when the sound design seems to provide more of a narrative function than a factual one.


Three of their films—Fargo (1996), Barton Fink (1991), and Miller’s Crossing (1990)—share a number of similar creative circumstances that allow patterns to emerge. Each film features a newly composed score (Carter Burwell’s music is, after all, an integral part of this research), is primarily dramatic instead of primarily comedic, and was completed during the same period of time (these three films were completed between 1990 and 1996). Figure 1.1 illustrates the complete set of Coen/Burwell collaborations in relation to these three criteria.

After introducing a methodology for diagramming the narrative and dramatic structure of an entire film, Miller’s Crossing, Barton Fink, and Fargo will be analyzed at the largest narrative/musical level to illustrate various aspects of how, why, and to what effect Burwell’s music has been used in each. Their filmic style will be discussed in more detail below (section 1.2). In the conclusion, I will demonstrate large–scale commonalities and differences between the three films. Individually, I will subject them to finer musical analyses to discuss, illustrate, and explore interesting facets of individual scenes and groups of scenes.

|---------------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

FIGURE 1.1: The film selection criteria applied to all 15 Coen/Burwell collaborations.

6 I would feel less confident that patterns between two very different films (Star Wars and Koyaanisqatsi, for example) would produce enough similar results to be worthwhile. Though, once norms have been established between similar films, the comparison between very different films will become all the more fruitful.
1.2 Introduction to the Coen Brothers and Carter Burwell

1.2.1 Joel and Ethan Coen

Joel and Ethan Coen have produced 15 feature films together as a directing/writing/producing/editing team. Figure 1.2 summarizes their collaborations and establishes the time frame of their completion. Unlike other famous directors (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock, Quentin Tarantino), the Coens do not tout themselves as auteurs (a perspective that centers the creative power of a film on a director instead of spreading it out amongst its many collaborators). Even so, they are regularly assigned that title. Their success as a creative duo is well known in the world of film, allowing them to cast in-demand, high-profile actors with only modest financial reward. In addition to their critically acclaimed group of actors from which they regularly draw (John Turturro, Steve Buschemi, Frances McDormand, John Goodman, etc.) they have their pick amongst Hollywood’s biggest financial boosters (George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Catherine Zeta-Jones, John Malkovich, Tom Hanks) even when the roles they write for them are, to say the least, unflattering. The Coens have often admitted to loving characters that are error prone and, to put it bluntly, buffoons. In an interview, Brad Pitt reflected on his struggle with depicting such a stupid character in Burn After Reading, “I said to them, ‘I don’t know how to play this, I mean, he’s such an idiot.’ And there was a pause and then Joel goes … ‘You’ll be fine!’”

The risk of playing such a character is counterbalanced by the Coens’ consistent ability to receive critical awards. Together they have been nominated for 13 academy awards (won four) and

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7 Their 16th feature film, Inside Llewyn Davis, was released towards the end of my research for this project and for that reason it is not incorporated into this dissertation.

received 12 nominations at the illustrious Cannes Film Festival (won five). All told, they have been nominated for approximately 200 awards, winning well over half of them.⁹

As independent filmmakers, the Coens maintain creative control over their works. Unlike most Hollywood productions, the works they release to theaters are their intended versions. The theatrical version is the director’s cut, making special “Director’s Cut” editions (which are effectively the caged screams of creatively suppressed directors) unnecessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Cinematographer</th>
<th>Music Producer/Arranger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood Simple</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Barry Sonnenfeld</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising Arizona</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Barry Sonnenfeld</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller’s Crossing</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Barry Sonnenfeld</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton Fink</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hudsucker Proxy</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fargo</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Big Lebowski</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O Brother Where are Thou?</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Carter Burwell (minor role)</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td>T Bone Burnett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man Who Wasn’t There</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intolerable Cruelty</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lady Killers</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td>T Bone Burnett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Country For Old Men</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burn After Reading</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Emmanuel Lubezki</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Serious Man</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Grit</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Carter Burwell</td>
<td>Roger Deakins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 1.2: List of the 15 Coen/Burwell collaborations.**

They are often characterized as “quirky” filmmakers who avoid predictability while featuring unpredictability. As Barton Palmer says, “The most predictable aspect of their filmmaking is its unpredictability …, its quirky and surprising engagement not only with Hollywood and American culture, but also with authors ranging from Homer to Clifford Odets to James M. Cain.”¹⁰

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their contemporary Quentin Tarantino who makes a point to feature overt references to the history of film and popular culture, the Coens claim that their influences are primarily literary and often downplay their relationship to other films. For example, their 2010 film, *True Grit*, is not a remake of the 1969 filmic production starring John Wayne and instead uses the novel of the same name as its source. Concerning this, Ethan said directly that they saw no reason to watch the 1969 film when creating their own work. They were not interested in attempting to parallel, contradict, or reference that work and instead were simply adapting the book for the screen. Their relationship to other films, however, is certainly present. The opening scene in *Miller’s Crossing*, for example, parallels the opening of *The Godfather*. In both films, a balding Italian man pleads with the leader of a local mob for a favor inside a small office. Of course, the similarity stops there and the scenes, not to mention the entire films, are entirely different.

Now that the Coens have been introduced, I will return briefly to the topic of why *Barton Fink*, *Miller’s Crossing*, and *Fargo* were the films chosen for this study. The primarily dramatic films of the 1990’s are stylistically very different than the Coens’ earliest work, *Blood Simple* (1984). *Blood Simple* is one of their lesser-known films and, though unique, it seems less mature, or at least distinctly less Coenesque, than the works that followed it. *Blood Simple*, their first collaboration, is different in that it features relatively limited humor and lacks the characteristically unusual, even grotesque, secondary cast members strongly associated with their filmic style. It does, however, contain the type of character-to-character misunderstandings that generate so much of the action in the rest of their films. *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *A Serious Man* (2009), and *True Grit* (2010) would have been compatible candidates for this study, though *No Country* has essentially no music

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and *A Serious Man* and *True Grit* were finished almost 20 years after *Miller’s Crossing*. They have been excluded because the Coens, Carter Burwell, and filmmaking style in general have changed considerably during that period of time. In the future, I intend to incorporate more Coen/Burwell collaborations as an extension of this study. *Barton Fink*, *Miller’s Crossing*, and *Fargo*, on the other hand, represent a selection of the Coens’s (relatively) mature work, contain a number of actors that became part of their standard cast (John Turturro, Steve Buschemi, Frances McDormand, and John Goodman), and were completed within a six-year span. These aspects allow for the present study to focus on a small set of films that contain a number of important similarities and to limit the number of outside variables that may produce an even wider spread of results.

### 1.2.2 Carter Burwell

The Coens and their long-time collaborator Carter Burwell began their respective directing and composing careers alongside one another with *Blood Simple* (1984). Burwell, who had no previous film-scoring experience, characterizes his involvement with the medium as almost accidental.

When the Coens were working on *Blood Simple*, their first movie, they were trying to find a composer who would do the job for essentially nothing, it being a low-budget independent film…. Of course I didn’t have a demo reel or anything like that to play for the Coens. So I just went in, saw a reel from the movie, went home, thought up some thematic material on the piano and synthesizers, made a tape, took it to them a couple of days later, and they seemed to like a couple of the things there. But they went on for months talking to lots of different composers—partly because the people who put money into the film, having backed these two guys who had no demonstrable experience at directing or producing, didn’t really want the Coens to just keep hiring other people who knew how it worked technically; I didn’t know anything about it at all. In the end they decided to hire me because they had just liked the themes that I’d written from my first reaction to the film, and those were the themes we ended up using.¹⁴


The Coens describe the process of finding a composer for *Blood Simple* as awkward and almost painful. Their appreciation of Burwell’s music and their disdain for interviewing composers has cemented a long-lasting and mutually beneficial working relationship. Though Burwell has scored many other films without the Coens (*Conspiracy Theory*, three films from the *Twilight* series, *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, *Rob Roy*, etc.), he has said that the Coens are his primary motivation for remaining a film composer.

The scores I’ve done for their movies are my main reason for being in this business. If I weren’t working on their movies, if they stopped making movies for some reason, I don’t know if I’d really keep doing this. They are by far the most interesting, and Joel and Ethan rarely prevent me from doing anything that I want. I mean, there are very few external considerations. In Hollywood it’s not unusual to have people say, “Well, we want to save this place for a song, or the end credits for a song, because the studio is owned by a conglomerate which has a record label associated with it which has a new band that’s coming out”—things like that enter into it. But I’ve rarely heard Joel and Ethan discuss anything that wasn’t just about how to make the movie better.¹⁵

Not only is it unusual for filmmakers and composers to have so much creative freedom, but their relationship is also rare in its integration between director and composer.

### 1.2.3 Carter Burwell and Joel and Ethan Coen: Collaborative Process

The level of collaboration between directors and composers can vary widely. In extreme cases (like Philip Glass and Godfrey Reggio’s *Qatsi* trilogy), the music may be written beforehand and the film created around it. This, however, is almost never the case. The most typical scenario is that the composer is brought in at the last second after the film has already been shot and edited. They are given a “temp track” (a temporary “score” with preexisting music that the composer should follow as a guide) and asked to complete the entire score in as little as three weeks.

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¹⁵ Burwell, *Knowing the Score*, 63.
The process for Burwell and the Coens falls between these two extremes. Burwell explains the process as follows:

First, Joel and Ethan write a script and give it to me. We’ll talk about what type of music might be appropriate, a conversation which continues through the shooting process. I usually go and watch some of the shoot—partly to see what visual environment is involved. I don’t really start writing until they finish shooting. Prior to that, the most specific we’ll get about the music is to consider the type of orchestra that might be involved, so that they can budget it properly. Once they have a rough edit of the film, we have a meeting called a ‘spotting session’ where we decide on the most elemental level where each piece of music begins and ends.

Of course, more important than that is the question of what the music is actually supposed to say: what the point of it might be. One of the most enjoyable things about working with Joel and Ethan is that they don’t have any preconceived answers to these questions. Occasionally they might have an idea about the scale of the music, but I don’t think they’ve ever come to me and said, “Yes, this is the type of music we need.” … After the spotting session I go back and do some writing. Initially, I try to think for myself what the music needs to do for the film; what it can contribute, and how I can translate that into melodies…. I’ll use synthesizers to put together a sketch of my ideas—partly for Joel and Ethan’s sake, any director’s sake, so they can come and hear what I want to do…. So, finally after these periods of discussing, sketching, testing and orchestrating comes the recording session.\(^{16}\)

Given Burwell’s account of their collaborative process, it is difficult to attempt to sort out the particulars of any given scoring choice, especially when it comes to large-scale form, which this dissertation is principally concerned with. The spotting session is of great importance to the large-scale organization of the score and, as Burwell clearly indicates, this is something they work on together. For this reason, I accept the ensemble aspect of the scoring process and think of the resulting film as a Coen/Burwell collaboration (as indicated in the title of this dissertation). Burwell, of course, is doing the actual writing (and at the level of the individual cue I regularly acknowledge that), but the overall score is planned and arranged by the Coens and Burwell, and I prefer to recognize and accept that instead of pitting the two against each other in an effort to definitively

\(^{16}\) Burwell, *Knowing the Score*, 129-30.
establish the origin of any certain affect or association. This perspective allows for my diagrammatic process to be extended to almost any director/composer relationship regardless of when the composer is brought in to contribute a score.

1.2.4 Burwell’s Three Styles

My analysis of Carter Burwell’s scores has revealed his preference of composing in three distinct styles. These are his Stable Tonal Style, Dramatic Tonal Style, and Unstable Style. Burwell typically casts his themes in his Stable Tonal Style (see example in Figure 1.3). Harmony, rhythm, and other musical elements are used in a manner that satisfies expectations and avoids subverting or manipulating them in any major way. His Stable Tonal Style is typically a full or partial presentation of the theme and does not include major modifications to proportion, harmony, or rhythm, though changes in scoring are common. The function of this style is to establish a mood with the film’s main characters and with locations that do not involve any major confrontation. Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style is found during the introductory and ending credits of the film, places where main characters are introduced, and during shots that establish a location. This style establishes a single affect and avoids altering the listener’s emotional state once established.

Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style, on the other hand, is used in order to guide and otherwise manipulate the audience’s emotional responses as the cue/scene progresses (see example in Figure 1.4). When cues set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style include motives from the film’s main themes they take on an extra layer of significance and typically highlight an event that is crucial to the Narrative/Dramatic Structure of the work because the scenes they complement typically involve goal completion. This is accomplished by pairing them with the suspense created by the cue’s manipulation of tonal tension. When motives from the film’s main themes are not included, these cues are used to manipulate and heighten dramatic scenarios that typically contain violence. Buhler,
Neumeyer, and Deemer might place Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style in the category of music found in action scenes.\textsuperscript{17}

The third and least used type of cue are those set in Burwell’s Unstable Style (see example in Figure 1.5). He uses this type quite sparingly and sometimes not at all (\textit{Barton Fink}). Burwell reserves this type—which is characterized by mixing unstable, tonal, and non-tonal elements while employing extended instrumental techniques and electronic manipulation—for scenes that are of an intensely negative nature. These scenes typically involve extreme violence that results in pain and, most characteristically, death and are usually found in places where none of the characters benefit from the scene’s consequences. Some examples of shocking scenes that use Burwell’s Unstable Style include the kidnapping scene in \textit{Fargo}, the rooftop money exchange in \textit{Fargo}, the final confrontational scene between Mildred and her daughter in 2011 mini-series \textit{Mildred Pierce}, and the climactic scene in \textit{Being John Malkovich} where Lotte chases Maxine through John Malkovich’s tortured psyche (though, this cue—as discussed in Chapter 5—returns to his Dramatic Tonal Style at the end to emphasize the scene’s important narrative function). These three styles, of course, exist outside of Burwell’s work and another study could show how various cue styles are employed by other composers. Additionally, these styles bear some resemblance to some of James Mathes’s formal functions. Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style can be likened to Mathes’s expository function while both his Dramatic Tonal and Unstable Styles are similar in affect and function to Mathes’s transitional and developmental functions.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, \textit{Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press) , 222.

FIGURE 1.3: Example of Burwell's Stable Tonal Style (Miller’s Crossing, Cue 01, “A Man and His Hat”).
FIGURE 1.4: Example of Burwell's Dramatic Tonal Style (*Fargo*, Cue 15, "Woodchipper").
Example 1.5: Example of Burwell’s Unstable Style (Miller’s Crossing, Cue 13, “Tom Confronts Bernie at His Apartment”)
1.3 Sources

1.3.1 Overview

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of large-scale film music analysis, I will be drawing upon a wide variety of literature in relation to (1) narrative structure (Chatman and Freytag),\(^\text{19}\) (2) the relationship between film and music (Neumeyer, Buhler, Deemer, Larsen, Abbate, and Parker),\(^\text{20}\) and (3) music analytical techniques relevant to Burwell’s music (Schenker, Rothstein, Lerdahl & Jackendoff, and Hasty).\(^\text{21}\) The \textit{Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram} proposed in this dissertation has no allegiance to any music-analytic method or theory, so it can be combined with any variety of analytical approaches in order to elucidate a given aspect of the film’s music. For example, the large-scale harmonic design techniques showcased and proposed by Ronald Rodman and Edward Latham could easily be used in tandem with my approach.\(^\text{22}\) Hepokoski & Darcy’s rotational design (as explored by Charity Lofthouse) and any number of smaller-scale techniques could be used as well.\(^\text{23}\) The techniques I have chosen are simply those that helped to elucidate Burwell’s musical approach.


\(^{23}\) Hepokoski & Darcy, \textit{Elements of Sonata Theory} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16; They describe rotational form or rotational process as, “two or more (varied) cyclings—rotations—through a modular pattern or succession laid down at the outset of the structure”; Charity Lofthouse, “Mythic Proportions: Rotational Form and Narrative Foreshadowing in Bernard Herrmann’s \textit{Psycho},” \textit{Paper presented at annual meeting of The Society for Music Theory, Baltimore, November 2013.}
1.3.2 Film Music/Music and Drama

Contemporary film studies cover an incredible number of modes of inquiry. Due to its multimedia nature, research in the area runs the gamut from auteur theory, feminism, queer theory, genre analysis, reception theory, nationalism and a great many others. This dissertation primarily utilizes filmic approaches to narrative and uses this subject to compress the incredible wealth of information presented during the average two-hour film into a single image that provides a synoptic view of an entire work while providing the means for cross-film comparison to take place. My philosophical perspectives are primarily indebted to the literature on film music analysis and on literature concerning the relationship between music and drama. Due to film’s similarities to opera, the overlap between the two should not be ignored. In representing the filmic relationship between the visual track and the audio track, I draw on the work of Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer found in their collaborative work Hearing the Movies. They make an important distinction between the music and other audio components: “in general, speech and sound effects do a better—or at least a more specific and concrete—job than music can in providing narrative information. Music can provide narrative cues, but these tend to be fairly general and are usually used in an overdetermined way, confirming with the music what we already know from the visuals or dialogue.” This perspective, which insists on a more limited role for music in the larger narrative structure, suggests that this is how the music generally functions within films in order to make space for the places in which music plays a critical role in the narrative. They emphasize that music adds emotional specificity and can influence the filmgoer’s experience of time. More importantly, they indicate that music may become part of a system of references (in the style of Wagner’s leitmotivs). Leitmotivs (and thematic repetition) are one of the ways that film music can begin to provide new narrative information that

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24 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 16.
25 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 16.
is not simply redundant or over-determined. Non-parallel use of music (Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer’s “counterpoint”) is another important way that the music communicates unique information to the audience. Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer (1999). Matthew McAllister explores this type of usage in detail in his study on the ironic use of preexisting art music in film.

Matthew McAllister explores this type of usage in detail in his study on the ironic use of preexisting art music in film.

I share Peter Larsen (film) and Carolyn Abbate & Roger Parker’s (opera) perspective that works that involve text and music must be considered as an integrated whole if they are to be properly understood. As Larsen says, “When we are dealing with film music, it is not the whole musical composition but the film that is the totality.” I mention this to support my decision to focus on the larger aspects of narrative structure in film instead of studying soundtracks in isolation.

1.3.3 Dramatic Structure and Narrative Structure

In order to illustrate how music is used across an entire film I construct diagrams that visually illustrate a film’s entire narrative structure. Seymour Chatman’s ideas about narrative structure (kernels and satellites) support the middleground and foreground levels of my Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams which I define in the methodology section of this chapter. In Story and Discourse (1978), Chatman defines key concepts of the structuralist’s approach to narrative. He draws ideas about the hierarchical relationship between narrative events from the French narratologist Roland Barthes and applies them more broadly to film and literature instead of focusing purely on literature. Chatman’s concepts of the Kernel and Satellite play a foundational role in my Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams. Simply stated, a Kernel is an event that captures a

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26 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 426.
27 Matthew McAllister, “A Spectacle Worth Attending To: The Ironic Use of Preexisting Art Music in Film” (PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 2012).
28 Peter Larsen, Film Music, 41.
29 Many thanks to David Neumeyer for pointing out in a private conversation (and at FSU’s 2014 Music Theory Forum) that the study of soundtracks that have been abstracted from their musical context (i.e., studying a commercially released soundtrack as a cohesive unit) is the study of music from film and not music in film.
key point of the cause-and-effect structure of the story being told and a Satellite is a non-key event that is a working out of a Kernel. When applied to an entire film they can produce a comprehensive network of cause-and-effect relationships that clarify the structural function of all the events in that film. Cognitive scientists Jeffery Zacks and Khena Swallow have illustrated that event segmentation of a film’s story is a very natural approach to how we understand any given situation and say that “in order to recognize or understand an object people segment it into its spatial parts.”30 This intuitive approach to event segmentation is echoed by Chatman. He counters criticism from narratologists that suggest event segmentation adds nothing to narrative readings by saying, “[the approach’s] purpose is not to offer new or enhanced readings of works, but precisely to ‘explain what we all do in the act of normal reading, with unconscious felicity.’”31 Chatman’s perspective might imply that works have an inherent and objectively defined narrative structure. Instead, I propose that differences between individual interpretations are superseded by the overwhelming similarities in a less granular mapping of plot synopses by different authors. I do not think it is necessary to assume works have a perfectly definable narrative structure but instead I consider the overwhelming similarities between plot synopses by varying authors to prove Chatman’s point. In order to convey the essence of a film, most will relay the same events in the same order. So, while the details of interpretation will vary, I believe that creating Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams of complete films will effectively serve to illustrate the relationship between a scene’s overall function and larger patterns of musical integration within single films, and will allow a comparison across multiple films.

Chatman’s Kernels and Satellites only allow for a discussion of a film at two hierarchical levels (Kernels only or Kernels and Satellites) but is also necessary to talk about a complete film at the broadest level to understand how its music is organized across the entire work. In order to

31 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 55.
accomplish this I will be combining Chatman’s concepts with Gustav Freytag’s dramatic pyramid (discussed in the methodology section below). Freytag’s pyramid charts the dramatic structure of a work. It focuses on the primary goal of the protagonist and is a diagrammatic representation of the major points involved in the pursuit of completing that goal. Chatman and Freytag’s concepts work quite well in tandem because the most important events in Freytag’s model of dramatic structure (the inciting incident, climax/turning point, and resolution) are equivalent to Chatman’s Kernels. I have called these special events *Super Kernels* and will discuss them further in the methodology section.

Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams represent a broadly acceptable consideration of events and characters in a film and their internal relationships (given repeated viewings). I refer to this perspective as the *Shared Experience* of a film. This is, of course, an artificial construct but is required to help differentiate between more individualized interpretations (what I call *Enhanced Experiences*) and simpler statements about logic and facts that most viewers could be expected to make about the cause-and-effect relationships in a film (the Shared Experience). This is the reason that genre and other elements in the domain of the individual interpreter are not considered during the Shared Experience stage. Putting off the concern of genre labeling to a later stage of interpretation is particularly important when working with the films of Joel and Ethan Coen because their films are notorious for referencing many genres but adhering to none. Ryan Kerr states this point quite strongly and says outright that the “Coen brothers can not be placed into a [single] genre.”

The fact that they are independent filmmakers is one of the reasons they are not bound by

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32 Chatman and others use the similar concept of the “implied reader” instead of “Shared Experience” and “real reader” instead of the “Enhanced Experience.” The “Shared Experience” is also known as the “authorial audience” which Gerald Prince defines as “the more or less specific hypothetical audience which is posited by the author in constructing his or her text and which understands that text perfectly.” I have chosen to use alternate terms with the hope that their meanings would be more obvious.

the same financial concerns that fuel most commercial films. Genre classification is an important tool for film studios when considering budgets, markets, and a film’s potential return. Independent films, however, are not usually bound by such restrictions, allowing them to pursue less formalized constructions. This supports Kerr’s conclusion that the Coens cannot be placed into a single genre or at least that categorizing their works is problematic or even pointless. Instead of suggesting the Coens subvert genres actively, I propose they simply are not bound by them in the first place. Not to suggest that they work in a creative vacuum, but the inherent freedom of the independent filmmaking process allows the Coens, and others like them, to use tropes found in many different genres without having to be exemplars of any one of them. Herein lies a major benefit to Chatman and Freytag’s tools. They allow the principles of narrative and dramatic structure to transcend the boundaries of genre and format (book, film, television, etc.) and ultimately provide a comparative structure for works that are quite different. Once the shared understanding of the film is established with the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram I will move into the domain of the Enhanced Experience. The Enhanced Experience is arguably the more important of the two and I will be using it to illustrate major connections and potential meanings presented by Carter Burwell’s music in the Coen brothers’ films.

1.3.4 Music Analytical Techniques

Because Carter Burwell’s music ranges from essentially tonal to non-serial atonality, a variety of analytic approaches is required. Schenkerian analysis (at the level of the cue) will be a regular mode of inquiry due to its ability to illustrate important harmonic, structural, and motivic phenomena and because of its ability to encapsulate long spans of music in an extremely concise manner. At times, however, I will extend Schenker’s approach beyond its intended style of music in order to illustrate aspects of harmonic prolongation and long-range voice leading that occur outside of traditional tonal paradigms. The tools of William Rothstein and Fred Lerdahl & Ray Jackendoff
will be used for hypermetric and rhythmic grouping analyses and Christopher Hasty’s concept of rhythmic projection will be used to model irregularities in rhythmic/metric/hypermetric structure.

Recent scholarship by Scott Murphy and Frank Lehman has provided unique insight into film-music harmony, employing transformational theory and neo-Riemannian operations (or their equivalent, in Murphy’s case). These approaches excel in contexts where composers focus on alternating between two harmonies that are in a non-traditional triadic relationship with one another (for example, the major tritone progression [I to #IV/bV] and I-iii/i-III progressions in Murphy’s work), or in scenes that feature cycles of repeating Neo-Riemanian progressions (Lehman’s LRS transformation).34 Burwell, however, does not focus on unconventional triadic relationships like James Horner and James Newton Howard do. Instead, he either employs more traditional triadic relationships, non-tonal music, or a combination of the two.

**Harmonic Design.** The majority of film music can be heard in a narrative role because it serves to support, emphasize, contradict, foreshadow, or otherwise “comment” upon the action on screen (as discussed in Shaftel 2009).35 Importantly, it is commenting upon the action on screen and not the other way around. Because of this relationship, I believe that the backbone of a film is its narrative structure not its musical structure and I am hesitant to use a large-scale, Schenkerian-style approach on the music as a whole. I will not be focusing on the types of large-scale harmonic design found in works by Ronald Rodman (film musicals) and Edward Latham (American opera).36 Figure 1.6 shows Latham’s background structure of Treemonisha’s role in Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha.*

Due, perhaps, to the obvious differences between opera and film, the story here seems to be secondary to the structure of the music. Latham also employs a hierarchical analysis of a character’s motivations using Konstantin Stanislavsky’s technique of organizing a character’s objectives to find parallelisms with the work’s linear design. In Latham’s character objective analyses the hierarchy appears to be reversed so that the objectives become the primary focus of the hierarchical arrangement (Figure 1.7).

Because I prefer to see the film’s narrative structure as its primary structural component, I anchor (to borrow from Barthes) the musical information on top of an established Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram. This is similar to Latham’s approach but the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram allows for multiple characters and goals to be shown.

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Neumeyer explores tonal design in film music himself yet dismisses it as little more than a “curiosity.” Although there may be exceptions (consider, for instance, Inception or Phillip Glass’s Koyaanisqatsi), he suggests that the notion of the music possessing long-term organic cohesion across an entire film does not seem to reflect its compositional goals or processes. Instead, he believes this approach abstracts the music from its native filmic context thus making it a study of the film’s score.
as concert music and not film music. I too am primarily interested in music in films as opposed to music from films which is why I have made establishing the work’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure such an integral part of this dissertation.

Rotational Design. Charity Lofthouse takes a different approach to understanding a film score’s larger, structuring principles. She suggests that Bernard Hermann’s overture to Hitchcock’s Psycho provides an example of Hepokoski and Darcy’s rotational form that foreshadows the film’s cyclic narrative. Though the elements of her rotations are noticeably short (only a few measures long in some cases), this approach is quite provocative, and speaks directly to the film viewer’s in-time experience. However, I have not found this sort of relationship in the Coen/Burwell collaborations so I do not plan to incorporate this approach into my own work.

Cue Charts. Many film-music analysts make regular use of cue lists that abstract the music from the Narrative/Dramatic Structure of the film. Figure 1.8 shows part of Neumeyer’s cue list from Bernard Hermann’s score to The Trouble with Harry. It illustrates that cue lists typically do not include the parts of the film without music in them (see, for example, the gaps in time between No. 1 and No. 2).

In order to better engage the relationship between the film’s music and its Narrative/Dramatic Structure I will build upon Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer’s approach to cue lists (which includes narrative/dramatic information in addition to being a list of the musical cues used in the film) by illustrating this information in the larger hierarchical context (see Figure 1.9). See, for example, the text under “CURRENT TIME” at the top of diagram. It lists events that have music and, importantly, those that do not (e.g., “Suicide?” has no music). The influence of Buhler,

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39 Lofthouse, “Mythic Proportions.”
40 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 148.
Neumeyer, and Deemer’s approach will become evident during the methodology section where the relationship between the music and the film’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure is formalized.

FIGURE 1.8: An excerpt of Neumeyer’s cue list for Bernhard Hermann’s music for *The Trouble with Harry*. 

![Figure 1.8: An excerpt of Neumeyer’s cue list for Bernhard Hermann’s music for *The Trouble with Harry*.](image)

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1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Introduction

This study meshes Gustav Freytag’s concept of dramatic structure, wherein the protagonist’s goals are mapped onto the larger hierarchy of the drama, and Seymour Chatman’s concept of narrative structure, wherein the cause-and-effect structure of the entire work is defined within the context of the larger hierarchy of the drama. The result is a graphically realized hierarchical framework of an entire film that may be used to analyze music across the entire work while preserving a synchronic relativity in relation to the larger whole (i.e., engaging in large-scale film music analysis without abstracting the music from its filmic context). Additionally, this graphic
representation allows for a more detailed view of particular moments to be properly located with both local and global contexts. This approach prioritizes narrative structure as the primary structural device in a film and is distinct from approaches that do not address form at all and from the few that search for unity and logic through the music’s larger tonal structure and/or tonal design alone (Latham, Rodman).

1.4.2 Freytag’s Pyramid

Scholars such as Mark Evan Bonds have used Freytag’s model, often referred to as “Freytag’s Pyramid,” to analyze the dramatic structure of plays, novels, and film. However, when Gustav Freytag developed his approach to dramatic structure he specifically had the tragic, five-act play in mind. In the 150 years since the concept’s inception, it has also been successfully applied to novels, short stories, and—most importantly for this study—motion pictures.

Simply put, Freytag’s Pyramid is an abstract theoretical model of dramatic structure that offers large-scale comprehension through graphical representation. Mark Evan Bonds provides a convincing assessment of the virtues of Freytag’s pyramid and the importance of graphic representation:

But as in music, it was only in the nineteenth century that literary commentators thought to “plot” a conventional sequence of dramatic events in schematic form, as applied either to a specific drama or to an archetype. The first to do so was the noted German novelist, critic, and editor Gustav Freytag (1816–95). In his Die Technik des Dramas (1863), Freytag proposed a means by which to represent the structure of the “ideal drama” in graphic form. His basic schema consists of a simple rising and falling line, with points of dramatic significance annotated through a series of letters corresponding to a descriptive key. […] The substance of Freytag’s reductive depiction has been subject to repeated criticism for being overly simplistic and too narrow in the range of dramas to which it can be applied, but his methodology of representing a sequence of temporal events in spatial form has not been called into serious question.

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The longevity of Freytag’s Pyramid testifies to the mnemonic and didactic effectiveness of diagrams in general. His verbal description of the sequence of events in an ideal drama, the labels on his diagram—provocation, intensification, climax, and so on—would scarcely be remembered today without the graphic element of his rising and falling line. Spatial representations hold an almost totemic power that even the most eloquent verbal descriptions can be hard pressed to rival. By allowing us to take in the form of a work at a glance—as a whole, as a Gestalt—diagrams by their very nature offer perspectives that verbal accounts alone cannot.

Given the substantial length of the feature film, being able to take in the whole work with a single “glance” is critically important. The Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram was designed with this perspective in mind and Freytag’s Pyramid is ideal for providing a conceptual framework and visual portrayal of an entire dramatic work.

Benefits for Film Music Analysis. Freytag’s pyramid offers a background picture of a larger filmic hierarchy, essentializing the critical plot events across an entire film. Moving from this background to a detailed foreground entails the incorporation of Chapman’s techniques, which I will describe below. Although the musical cues are represented in the foreground of my analyses, they help to identify the hierarchical status of a particular event or set of events as they emerge from the larger background. In other words, in many cases the music supports, links, dramatizes, or even contradicts the hierarchy of dramatic structure that is summarized by the background pyramid.

Freytag’s Pyramid illustrates the chronological move from a low level of dramatic intensity to the work’s dramatic peak and then back down, following the resolution of the protagonist’s goals (see his original graphic representation in Figure 1.10). Freytag’s original pyramid, shown in Figure 1.10, offers a clearer representation of the relatively low levels of drama that exist during the exposition (“a”) and dénouement (“e”) and emphasizes the palpable dramatic shifts that occur at the inciting incident (“b”) and resolution (“d”). I have chosen to represent the pyramid as in Figure 1.11

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44 Freytag, Freytag’s Technique of the Drama, 115.
because it offers a clearer representation of the relatively low levels of dramatic intensity during the exposition & dénouement and the rapid increase/decrease of intensity in the events adjacent to the climax ("c"). Of course, the beginning of a film may delay the exposition by beginning in medias res (e.g., Raging Bull, Raiders of the Lost Ark) but after the tension-filled beginning the exposition proper begins.

![Freytag's original graphic representation of dramatic structure](image)

**FIGURE 1.10:** Freytag’s original graphic representation of dramatic structure (1863).

![A commonly used version of Freytag's pyramid that I prefer](image)

**FIGURE 1.11:** A commonly used version of Freytag’s pyramid that I prefer.
Definitions. I will employ the following definitions associated with Freytag’s pyramid:

*Exposition* – “The presentation of the circumstances obtaining before the beginning of the action. In many narratives, there is a delayed exposition: the expository information is provided after the beginning of the action has been set forth.”\(^{45}\)

*Inciting Incident* – “the first major event of the telling, is the primary cause for all that follows, putting into motion the [rest of the story].”\(^{46}\)

*Rising Action* – “Along with the falling action and the climax, one of the fundamental constituents of a (dramatic or closely knit) plot structure. The rising actions proceeds from the exposition and culminates in the climax.”\(^{47}\)

*Climax/ Turning Point* – “The point of greatest tension; the culminating point in a progressive intensification. In traditional plot structure, the climax constitutes the highest point of the rising action.”\(^{48}\)

*Falling Action* – “Along with the rising action and the climax, one of the basic constituents of a (dramatic or closely knit) plot structure. The falling action follows the climax and extends to the denouement.”\(^{49}\)

*Resolution* – “any material left after the climax” which may be used for (1) a climax for subplots, (2) “to show the spread of climactic effects….by widening into society,” or (3) “as a courtesy…so the audience can catch its breath, gather its thoughts, and leave the cinema with dignity.”\(^{50}\)

*Dénouement* – “The outcome or untying of the plot; the unravelling of the complication; the end.”\(^{51}\)


\(^{47}\) Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 84.


\(^{50}\) McKee, *Story*, 312-314.

Application to Primary and Secondary Plots. Though Freytag’s pyramid is generally applied to the main story of a work (meaning the goal of the protagonist), it can also be applied to the goals of the antagonist or other prominent characters. For example, in Fargo there are two complete dramatic structures (one for Marge and one for Jerry) and both of them are integral to understanding how music functions across the entire film. Miller’s Crossing presents an interesting case because the film’s protagonist, Tom, has two independent goals and so each of these goals is represented by its own dramatic pyramid.

1.4.3 Introduction to Chatman’s Theory of Narrative Structure

While Freytag’s analytical approach to dramatic structure is successful at the macro level, it operates at a level that is too far from the surface and too general to be of any practical value if it were the only means of “accessing” the events of a work. Indeed, the majority of a film’s non-diegetic music will fall between the changes in direction of the dramatic structure, which are typically separated by rather wide temporal distances (30 minutes or more would not be an unusual duration). Thus, an additional approach is required that provides analysts the ability to “zoom in” to the level of the scene or to a single event if the scene has multiple events or purposes. The structural approach to narrative outlined by Seymour Chatman is ideal for such a task.

Chatman introduced his theory in Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (1979). He is heavily influenced by and has much in common with the French structuralists Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and especially Roland Barthes. Chatman discusses film at length and this makes his approach ideal for film music analysis because other approaches focus more on literature. It is Chatman’s approach to segmenting a work into its cause-and-effect structure that I have adapted for the present study.

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52 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 9.
Elements of Narrative Structure: The *What* and the *How*. Chatman discusses narrative structure in terms of story and discourse or the “what” and the “how” of the story. He describes the distinction between the two narrative components as follows:

Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*.\(^{53}\)

He provides the diagram reproduced in Figure 1.12 to illustrate his concept of how the primary elements of narrative relate to one another:\(^{54}\)

Chatman’s primary concern is with story. The story, however, is not what the audience is given, they are presented with a plot, or the “story-as-discoursed.” To distinguish story from plot he says:

[The plot’s] order of presentation need not be the same as that of the natural logic of the story. Its function is to emphasize or de-emphasize certain story-events, to interpret some and to leave others to inference, to show or to tell, to comment or to remain silent, to focus on this or that aspect of an event or character….Each arrangement produces a different plot, and a great many plots can be made from the same story.\(^{55}\)

Within the context of film, the notion of a single story being “discoursed” into multiple plots is obvious when considering phenomena like the filmic “remake.” Realizations of stories are not, of course, limited to manifestations in a single medium. Some examples include novels adapted into films, films into novels, and plays into operas or musicals.

\(^{53}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.
\(^{54}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.
\(^{55}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 43.
**Kernels and Satellites.** The story of a work may be understood as a series of events organized into a network of cause and effect that relates to the goals, relationships, and development of the characters in the story. This approach assumes that the narrative of the film is a closed structure. As Chatman says, “the narrative will not admit events or other kinds of phenomena that do not ‘belong to it and preserve its laws.’”\(^{56}\) Thus, the analyst should strive for an interpretation of the film that connects every event. During this process Chatman says the analyst will be confronted with events that are “not immediately relevant”\(^ {57}\) but “at some point their relevance must emerge, otherwise we object that the narrative is ‘ill-formed.’”\(^ {58}\) Notions of disnarration, denarration, anti-plot, and anti-narrative challenge Chatman’s assertion but the absolute majority of Hollywood and independent films do not make regular use of these techniques and I will not explore the issue in the present document.

Chatman (borrowing/paralleling the concepts introduced previously by Roland Barthes) employs the distinction between two different hierarchically related events, which he calls Kernels and Satellites.\(^ {59}\) Kernels are “narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of...

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\(^{56}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 21.
\(^{57}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 21-22.
\(^{58}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 22.
\(^{59}\) Roland Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 237-272; Barthes, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 248. Lionel Duisit, the article’s translator, translates Kernels as Nuclei and Satellites as catalysts though, Barthes says “the names are immaterial.”
two (or more) possible paths….Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic.”  
On the other hand, a Satellite is a “minor plot event” that is “not crucial” to the narrative logic and “can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot, though its omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically. Satellites entail no choice, but are solely the workings-out of the choices made at the Kernels.”  
Chatman illustrates the relationship between Kernels and Satellites in the diagram in Figure 1.13, though I have added the information on the right and the colored arrows for clarity. This is how he explains the diagram:

The Kernels are the squares at the top of each circle. The circle is the complete narrative block. Kernels are connected by a vertical line to indicate the main direction of the story-logic; oblique lines indicate possible but unfollowed narrative paths. Dots are Satellites: those on vertical lines follow the normal sequencing of the story; those outside the lines, with arrows attached, are anticipatory or retrospective of later or earlier Kernels (depending upon which way the arrow points).  

Changes to Chatman’s Graphic Representation. Chatman’s diagram of the relationship between Kernels and Satellites is conceptual and requires some manipulation for it to become a useful tool for graphic representation of a film’s complete narrative structure. There are a total of seven important adjustments I have made to his diagram which are summarized in Figure 1.14. First, I have omitted or altered four elements that seem unnecessary, in their previous form, when applying his technique in actual analysis. In addition, I have added three elements that are required to capture music in specific places (such as establishing shots and locations with character development that do not advance the film’s cause-and-effect structure).

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60 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 53.  
61 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 54.  
62 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 54.  
63 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 55.
(1) Perhaps because of our musical training, music theorists (such as Schenker, Lerdahl & Jackendoff, Hasty, Hepokoski & Darcy, Clendinning, Lochhead to name a few) tend to visually conceive of time from left to right instead of top to bottom as Chatman has done. To make this
adjustment I will be rotating Chatman’s diagrams 90° counter-clockwise.

(2) Chatman calls the large circles “complete narrative blocks.” This concept is never defined and is not used in other sources, but as far as the diagram indicates, narrative blocks encompass all the events that occur from one Kernel until the next. I find its notation redundant because it is very easy to tell which events have taken place between adjacent Kernels without the large circles so I exclude them from my diagrams.

(3) Chatman’s “oblique lines” show narrative paths not taken. Because this tool is being developed exclusively to address music that does exist, there will be no need to diagram hypothetical paths that are not taken. For this reason, possible paths will not be included in my diagrams. Figure 1.15 is an illustration of the primary changes I will be making to Chatman’s diagram. It contains the same structure as Chatman’s original in Figure 1.10.

![Illustration of the primary changes made to Chatman's notation for this dissertation.](image)

(4) Chatman identifies three types of Satellites. They are the Satellite, the retrospective Satellite (backward-facing arrow), and the anticipatory Satellite (forward-facing arrow). The unmodified Satellite (referred to only as “Satellite” in Chatman’s writings) is the type defined above, which represents a working out of a previous decision made at a Kernel. The retrospective and

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64 There is no set number of possible paths per Kernel even though Chatman’s diagram always shows three paths. In actual practice, only one path is actually taken.

65 I have not been able to imagine the practical use of a discussion concerning the hypothetical use of music. The idea, however, is quite provocative to me and I do not dismiss it as irrelevant.
anticipatory varieties are Satellites that respectively refer to a Kernel that has already taken place (as in a flashback) or to a Kernel that has yet to happen (as in a flashforward or successful foreshadowing).” I find distinguishing between the unmodified, retrospective, and anticipatory Satellites to be a very important, and intuitive, distinction for the proper interpretation of any given film. Ideally, the arrows that protrude from the retrospective and anticipatory Satellite’s black dots would be drawn from the black dot to the related event. However, such a practice, though quite revealing, ultimately results in cluttered diagrams that require many different lines to cross over each other and potentially requires lines that span the entire diagram. To improve visual clarity, I have maintained Chatman’s short arrows.

Chatman visually indicates retrospective and anticipatory Satellites in two ways. They have arrows stemming from them that point in the direction of the Kernel to which they refer and they are not on the main line that connects all of the other Kernels and Satellites. For reasons that relate to visual clarity, when multiple characters are represented in parallel it will be beneficial to indicate these Satellites with only one of the two indications used by Chatman. Ultimately, these Satellites do belong on that line because it indicates the main direction of the story’s logic, so I will be placing them back on the main line but retaining their directional arrows.

(5) Because this tool is being adapted/developed for the analysis of film music, it is beneficial to create two more specific types of Satellites to help show exactly how music is being used in a given film. One of the regular functions of film music is to provide transitions between scenes.66 Music is regularly found at scenes that simply provide an image indicating a change of setting (sometimes called an establishing shot). In Fargo, for example, a statue of Paul Bunyan is shown when scenes in the city of Brainerd are about to take place and similar scenes are usually accompanied by music (see Figure 1.16).

66 James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 92.
There is no music just before or after these transitions. The structural function of these scenes is negligible (n.b. this does not imply they have no importance) and they might not even make their way into an analysis that focused only on narrative structure. However, in order to capture the identity of such scenes on a narrative structure diagram, they will be represented like a standard Satellite but will be enclosed in a diamond shape so that they can be easily distinguished from other Satellites. I will refer to these as *Element-of-Setting Satellites*.

(6) I will use Character-Building Satellites to indicate an event that cannot be linked to any other by cause or effect and whose function seems to be to develop aspects of a character’s personality. This type of Satellite is also represented like a standard Satellite (i.e., it includes a small black dot) but is enclosed in a circle instead of a diamond shape similar to that for like Elements-of-Setting Satellites.

(7) The final adjustment to Chatman’s diagraming technique concerns its large-scale organization. To provide a sense of hierarchy the narrative structure analysis will be mapped onto Gustav Freytag’s dramatic pyramid. When combined with Chatman’s narrative structure, Freytag’s pyramid allows for the film to be discussed and graphically represented at three hierarchically different levels. Freytag’s pyramid will form the background structure (represented by Super Kernels as shown in Figure 1.17), adding the other Kernels to the background makes up the middleground, and adding the Satellites to the middleground makes up the foreground.
Most films contain a large number of events. \textit{Fargo} has 70, \textit{Barton Fink} has 58, and \textit{Miller's Crossing} has 62. The most common situation is that each scene can be understood as having one event. This is not intended to be a statement of fact but, as a general rule of thumb, will prove useful. In \textit{Fargo}, for example, there is a scene where Jerry Lundegaard (the secondary protagonist) eats dinner with his wife, son, and father-in-law. At least two events happen in this scene but when interpreting the structure of the film only one is worth mentioning. The son, Scotty, asks to be excused from the table to meet his friends at McDonald’s. This leads to an awkward short discussion by everyone else at the table about whether or not Scotty should have been given permission to go to McDonald’s. After this, Jerry asks his father-in-law, Wade, about an investment opportunity that Jerry thinks will bring in a large sum of money for him. Because Jerry’s primary goal in the film is to acquire a large sum of money and because the discussion about Scotty and McDonald’s is ultimately inconsequential (beyond developing the characters involved in the

\footnote{Alfred Hitchcock’s \textit{Rope} and Louis Malle’s \textit{My Dinner with Andre} are notable exceptions.}
discussion), the structural interpretation of this scene is that it has one function, which is that it anticipates a later Kernel involving Jerry, Wade, and Wade’s accountant where Jerry’s lucrative proposition is ultimately rejected. The standard length of a film is around two hours and if progress is ever to be made in large-scale understanding of film music it will be imperative that analysts are comfortable omitting essentially irrelevant information (i.e., things that will not further an understanding of how film music works in a given film).

**Conceptual Similarities with Schenkerian Analysis.** Music theorists will most easily compare this approach to narrative structure with that of Schenkerian-style analysis. Schenkerian analysis uses a similar concept of hierarchal, structural levels and similarly assumes that works are closed structures with musical notes that are related in some way to all of the other musical notes (i.e., well-formed Schenkerian analyses have no uninterpreted notes or “islands”). Analysts always aspire to produce the most convincing representation of their understanding of the music but, of course, Schenkerian analysis is understood as having some level of subjectivity.68

The structural analysis of a film’s narrative may also include subjective elements but, as Chatman claims, such an analysis is quite intuitive and he speculates that it should be easy to “see how easily consensus is reached about which are the Kernels and which are the Satellites of a given story….The distinction between the major hinge events and the minor supplementary ones in a narrative is a psychological reality that anyone can prove to himself.”69 While the mediums are different, these two methodologies share the concepts of hierarchy, reduction, and recursivity.

**Benefits for Music Analysis.** On the function of narrative theory, Chatman states that his approach “does not assert that authors should or should not do so-and-so. Rather, it poses a question: What can we say about the way structures like narrative organize themselves?”70 This

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68 Whether or not subjectivity is acceptable in Schenkerian analysis is a topic of much debate among music theorists.
69 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 55-56.
70 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19.
question can also be asked of the film’s music in the following way: “What can we say about the way that music is organized around narrative structures?” This is the question that drives the present dissertation and while my analyses attempt to shed light on this question, this study can only provide a starting point for considering that question.

1.5 Chapter Outline

Each of the three films in this dissertation present unique aspects of large-scale musical usage that only emerge once the entire score is considered within the film’s complete narrative context. In this section, I will summarize these unique aspects and the primary arguments of each chapter.

1.5.1 Chapter Two: Super Kernels & Musical Style, Regulating the Release of Musical Tension, and Intertextual Criticism in Carter Burwell’s Score to Fargo

The score to Fargo presents a unique pairing of Burwell’s three musical styles with the film’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure. This chapter demonstrates how a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram can be applied to an entire film and show how the film’s Super Kernels are musically supported with cues set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style. Burwell uses the large-scale association of Super Kernels and Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style to thwart and manipulate the audience’s expectations during the film’s climatic “woodchipper” scene. Fargo’s main theme is based upon the Norwegian folk tune “Den Bortkomne Sauen” (“The Lost Sheep”). Fargo is then viewed through the text of this tune—which is based on Jesus’s parable about leaving an entire flock behind to find and return a single lost sheep—to suggest that introducing criminals (i.e., lost sheep) into “correctional facilities” is a far cry from returning lost sheep to the flock from which they escaped.

1.5.2 Chapter Three: Large-Scale Dramatic Irony in Carter Burwell’s Score to Barton Fink

Burwell’s score to Barton Fink combines a cumulative process with large-scale dramatic irony and proves to be one of the film’s most important narrative guides. His score follows Barton’s
struggle with writer’s block as he attempts to complete a screenplay for his new Hollywood employer. Eventually, Barton writes his script, but as the music communicates to the audience early on in the film, his work will ultimately fail. The score features a large-scale modulation from a major key to its relative minor that culminates at the film’s climatic scene. This disjunction between success in Barton’s eyes and failure in the audiences’ puts the viewer at a distance with respect to Barton’s completed manuscript. This analysis showcases how Burwell’s music can provide large-scale focus to an entire film even if the film contains perplexing narrative elements (e.g., the mysterious murder of Audrey that takes place while Barton sleeps next to her).

### 1.5.3 Chapter Four: Tom’s “Twister”: More than 180° in Miller’s Crossing’s Love Triangles

This chapter challenges the commonly held view that Miller’s Crossing is primarily about the brotherly love between Tom and his boss Leo. I assert that Tom’s love interest, Verna, plays an equally important part of Tom’s motivation and that Burwell’s score is one of the strongest indications of the strength of their relationship. I show that the presence of the film’s main theme draws attention towards this romance through association and also how Burwell employs a large-scale harmonic disturbance to clarify and parallel its Narrative/Dramatic Structure. Finally, I demonstrate that Burwell foreshadows Tom’s divided desire during the film’s title cue through the melodic/harmonic discrepancy found during its first attempted cadence.

### 1.6 Conclusion

This dissertation provides a flexible methodology for creating visual representations of a film’s complete narrative structure. It allows for films to be perceived all at once within a single, potentially complex, diagram. This method paves the way for a new direction in film-music analysis that strives to open up the discussion of how film music is being used at the highest level. Once this level is established, middleground and foreground uses of music can then be considered in their
global context providing the opportunity for long-range connections to become foregrounded and new interpretations and meanings to emerge.

Carter Burwell’s works with Joel and Ethan Coen have been chosen for this study to draw attention towards this poorly understood aspect of works that are readily acknowledged as among the most important films of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. My analyses of *Fargo*, *Barton Fink*, and *Miller’s Crossing* reveal the unique ways that music has been deployed across their complete filmic structures. Additionally, I have shown that Carter Burwell uses his music to direct the audience’s attention towards moments in the film that might have otherwise been overlooked. In the conclusion of this dissertation (Chapter 5), I will discuss the ways in which I plan to extend this study and speculate upon the types of benefits this approach could have with other director/composer teams and genre-specific studies.
CHAPTER 2

SUPER KERNELS & MUSICAL STYLE, REGULATING THE RELEASE OF MUSICAL TENSION, AND INTERTEXTUAL CRITICISM IN CARTER BURWELL’S SCORE TO FARGO

2.1 Introduction

Perhaps the best known of all the Coen brothers’ films, Fargo presents a unique opportunity for large-scale exploration of the relationship between the film’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure and its music. Fargo serves as an introduction to realizing a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram in practice (Chapter 1 provides the theoretical background for the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram). Of the three films analyzed in this dissertation, Fargo has the strongest link between its Super Kernels and Burwell’s three cue types, which were described in Chapter 1 (see section 1.2.4). After exploring the large-scale construction of the film, I will provide an analysis of its two primary themes and then “zoom in” to the dramatic climax of the film, the iconic “woodchipper” scene. In the “woodchipper” scene I will demonstrate how Burwell employs various musical devices to control the dramatic tension within a single scene through the gradual resolution of musical “problems” in multiple domains. Additionally, I will explore how the use of “Den Bortkomme Sauen” as the theme for both Jerry and Marge casts a negative critical shadow over the film when considered in the light of the creators’ initial motivation for selecting it for Jerry alone.

2.2 Synopsis

The following is a detailed synopsis. Readers already intimately familiar with the film are encouraged skip this section and begin with the “Analytical Points” instead (section 2.3). Fargo takes place in North Dakota (Fargo) and Minnesota (Brainerd and Minneapolis) during the winter of 1987. The story features two protagonists (Marge and Jerry) and two antagonists (Carl and Gaear).
Jerry is a husband, father, and ethically questionable car salesman who has unexplained financial troubles and spends the entire film pursuing illegal ways of acquiring large sums of money. His primary scheme involves the kidnapping of his wife in order to collect a large ransom ($1,000,000) from his father-in-law, Wade. Jerry hires Carl and Gaear, via a mutual acquaintance (Shep Proudfoot), to carry out the kidnapping and offers them a new car and $40,000 to complete the job. To secure the bulk of the million-dollar ransom for himself he lies and tells them it is only $80,000 and that they will be getting exactly half.

Soon after, Carl and Gaear complete the first part of the mission and kidnap Jean, Jerry’s wife. After picking her up in Minneapolis, they head across the state to their hideout at Moose Lake. Before arriving, however, they are pulled over in the city of Brainerd for not displaying proper vehicle registration. Since Jean is in the car and they have no vehicle registration, Gaear takes drastic measures and kills the officer that pulled them over. He also kills two passers-by who witnessed part of the scene and the two criminals escape and continue their travels. Marge Gunderson, the police chief of Brainerd, is called in to investigate the murders and, after examining the crime scene, begins her investigation by conducting interviews and chasing down leads.

Meanwhile, Jerry convinces Wade to pay the $1,000,000 ransom, but Wade changes the details of the exchange and makes the handoff with the kidnappers himself. Carl is expecting to see Jerry at the hand-off and Wade’s presence greatly frustrates him. The two men exchange gun fire resulting in Wade’s death. Carl narrowly escapes after being shot in the face and discovers that Wade gave him $1,000,000 instead of the $80,000 he was expecting (Carl demanded that Jerry give him the full $80,000 after their initial encounter). Carl buries $920,000 in the snow on his way back to the hideout before giving Gaear his share of the money in order to keep the unexpected surplus for himself. Shortly after arriving, he and Gaear get into an argument about the car Jerry gave them at the beginning of the film. Out of anger, Gaear kills Carl with an ax.
Marge’s research, particularly her interview with a bartender, has finally led her to explore the area around Moose Lake. She discovers the criminals’ car and engages in a dramatic confrontation with Gaear wherein she shoots and arrests him. Soon after, Jerry is arrested for unspecified reasons (likely due to his involvement with Wade and Jean’s deaths and/or his various financial/criminal pursuits). The film ends with Marge snuggling up with her husband, Norm, as they talk lovingly about their soon-to-be born child.

2.3 Analytical Points

2.3.1 Analysis of the Main Themes

Unlike Barton Fink and Miller’s Crossing (whose monothematic scores are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively), Fargo incorporates two main themes that I call the Sheep Theme and the Criminal Theme. The Sheep Theme is based upon the Norwegian folk tune “Den Bortkomne Sauen” (“The Lost Sheep”), and is associated both with Jerry and with Marge throughout the film. In this section, I will provide an overview of the construction of both themes. Their structures are fairly straightforward, though the Sheep Theme lacks traditional cadential formulae (e.g., it contains inverted dominants) and the Criminal Theme completely omits cadences. Even though the traditional tonal specifics are modified or missing, tonal motion and goals are still salient enough to be represented using a voice-leading graph.

2.3.1.1 The Sheep Theme

The Sheep Theme, which is always associated with Jerry or Marge, is first heard during the cue titled “Most are Dead,” which is presented during the title sequence of the film (Event 1, Cue 1). Figure 2.2 shows two versions of this cue’s phrase structure. The first version is a more basic

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1 Figure 2.6 is the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure of Fargo and will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. The figure provides: (1) a brief description of each event, (2) that event’s musical contents (if any), and (3) its time point in the film according to the Blu-Ray release of the film. Cue titles are borrowed from the commercially released soundtrack. Mr. Burwell was incredibly generous to me by making the complete score for Fargo available for this study.
representation while the second shows how the theme can be viewed as a variation of rounded binary form. Cue 1, “Most are Dead,” presents the Sheep Theme in three large sections (labeled “Section 1,” “Section 2,” and “Section 3” in Figure 2.2). All sections use the same basic material but are realized with fuller orchestration each time. Formally, however, there is a notable difference between Section 1 and the two that follow. Section 1 is incomplete and its end is defined by the entrance of the Section 2, which interrupts the first abruptly (shown with an incomplete arc in Figure 2.2). The implied rounded-binary formal structure found in Section 1 is never realized in the film. Instead, it is replaced by an a b b' a' subphrase structure in both Section 2 and 3 of this cue and throughout the rest of the score. Though the complete a b b' a' subphrase structure is presented twice in this cue, the final a' subphrase is incomplete in all subsequent instances of the theme throughout the film until the very end (Event 68, Cue 16) when the primary dramatic issues have been resolved. This large-scale technique of presenting partial statements of the film’s main themes is also present in Barton Fink (see section 3.7) and Miller’s Crossing (see section 4.4.2), though each film realizes it in different ways. The b' subphrase is essentially an echo of subphrase b. Taking the echo into account, the theme’s phrase structure can be understood as a variant of a small-scale rounded-binary form, which is illustrated in the lower diagram in Figure 2.2.

The voice-leading sketch in Figure 2.3, which shows a single presentation of the theme (equivalent to Section 2 or Section 3 in Figure 2.2), represents this variation (the echo) by showing a standard interruption scheme with the first branch repeated (3−2 | | 3−5 | | 3−2−1).
FIGURE 2.1: Section 2 from the Sheep Theme.

Form (without internal interpretation)

Form (with rounded binary interpretation)

FIGURE 2.2: Form and phrase structure of the Sheep Theme as realized in the cue “Most are Dead.”
FIGURE 2.3: Voice-leading sketch of the Sheep Theme as realized in Section 2 or 3 of the cue “Most are Dead.”
While the theme is unquestionably tonal, the second branch of its tonal structure deviates from established tonal paradigms. The end of subphrase a' (subphrases and corresponding measure numbers are shown along the top of the sketch) shows a lack of independent underlying counterpoint between the outer voices (n.b. the tenor line in the sketch is the sounding bass line and the functional bassline has been derived from it). No root-position dominant is presented but the B and B in m. 15 is where the structural dominant is expected. The parallel structural motion in this cue between the soprano and sounding bass is common in Burwell's music (see also mm. 4-5), but are often realized with surface-level differences between the parallel voices, as is the case here. Though somewhat unusual, the unfolding of the subtonic with the dominant in m. 11, which only occurs in some presentations of the theme, is considered a possible tonal paradigm by Matthew Brown and Heinrich Schenker.²

The most important motive in the Sheep Theme is a reaching-over figure. This motive, Motive X (labeled “x” on the sketch), incorporates a single tone that is embellished by an incomplete lower neighbor followed by an incomplete upper neighbor. This motive is important in the b and b' subphrases but is emphasized the most in subphrase a due to its nested appearance (see m. 3 of the foreground sketch in Figure 2.3). In subphrases b and b', the last note of the interrupted fundamental structure (2, mm. 7–8 and 11–12) is elaborated with a shorter version of Motive X that embellishes 2 instead of 1 as it did in phrase a. The motive does not appear in subphrase a' due to its recomposition.

Though this theme is associated with both of the film’s morally opposed protagonists, Marge and Jerry, it captures both characters’ sense of seriousness through the minor mode and slow tempo. While the slow, step-wise bass line parallels Marge’s always careful, graded approach to tracking

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down the criminals, it provides a notable counterpoint to Jerry’s bumbling, mistake-laden idiocy that, while “careful,” is so incredibly dimwitted. Burwell and the Coens enjoyed the pairing of such a somber theme with Jerry’s character because they believed it captured his pathetic quality. For me, however, the theme’s serious affect captures both characters’ quiet and unsmiling dedication to their goals. Their disparate moral compasses provide the listener with distinctly contrary implications. For Jerry, the music’s sincerity reflects his belief that he is doing the right thing. This discrepancy (i.e., he is not doing the right thing) places the audience at a distance and allows Jerry to be viewed and judged from a position of higher moral authority. Marge, on the other hand, is a righteous character who makes decisions that are likely to elicit audience alignment. So, within the same film the Sheep Theme can be heard sympathetically with Marge and mockingly with Jerry. The difference is simply one of feeling distance versus compassion with characters it accompanies. Near the end of this chapter, a darker interpretation will be considered by applying Burwell’s characterization of the theme as “pathetic” onto Marge’s character as well.

2.3.1.2 The Criminal Theme

The Criminal Theme, which is associated with the film’s antagonists—Carl and Gaear, is triadic and centric but not tonal (see score excerpt in Figure 2.4). Even so, many important aspects of this main theme can be captured with a voice-leading sketch (see Figure 2.5). The sketch’s notable aspects include: (1) cyclic tonal motion, (2) the use of triads with added notes (or possibly extended tertian harmonies), and (3) its Dorian mode. The first presentation of the theme is incomplete (Cue 2, Event 6) though a realization of its full version can be found in Cue 13 (“Safe Keeping”) that occurs during Event 59 and is repeated during the end credits.

The entire theme mechanically alternates between D minor and C major triads. Though the harmonies have a sort of equality due to the regular harmonic rhythm (one measure per chord), D

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3 Carter Burwell, Interview with Tom Kenny in “An Ironic Twist on Film Scoring,” *The Mix* (October 1997), 276.
minor is asserted as the primary harmony because it initiates and ends the cue and because the primary melodic material emphasizes D. D is stressed through a descending octave progression from D₆–D₅ (mm. 33–43) that is composed out through a descending arpeggiation of a D-minor triad (D₆–A₅–F₅–D₅).

The Criminal Theme does not exhibit tonal harmonic norms and it employs only a remnant of dominant to tonic cadential movement. In mm. 63-67, a minor dominant triad proceeds to the tonic in mm. 63–67. The cue’s goal is primarily melodic and involves the octave progression that ends in m. 43. This is the end of any melodic motion and its arrival is complicated by the entrance of an emphatic G major triad in the upper parts that is present from mm. 43–51. The G-major triad seems harmonically unaffected by the alternating D-minor and C-major triads that alternate below it. This G-major chord could possibly be understood as a form of the neighbor 6/4 chord that is

FIGURE 2.4: Excerpt from the Criminal Theme (mm. 33–40 from Cue 13, “Safekeeping”).

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missing both its 5/3 preparation and resolution, though these could be implied from the D-minor harmony that is still occurring in the lower strings. Instead, I consider the D as the structurally important note and the B and G below it to be functioning in a coloristic and pandiatonic capacity as the D’s lower 3rd and 5th. This is also the case in mm. 33 and 34, where the melody is again harmonized by its lower 3rd and 5th. These notes could also be explained as added notes or triadic extensions, but Burwell rarely, if ever, makes use of extensions in this film, Barton Fink, or Miller’s Crossing.

Another explanation, as suggested in Krin Gabbard’s writings on the music in Fargo, is that Burwell may be borrowing from more popular idioms. Gabbard believes the “walking bass” found in the Criminal Theme (Figure 2.4, mm. 33–36) is a stylistic element borrowed from blues and/or jazz.

The music implies mischief within an overall ominous setting. Written in waltz time, the music consists primarily of whole notes played by strings while reeds, a harp, or a synthesizer develop more melodic material. In addition, it always includes a “walking” bass line. This kind of bass pattern is not completely absent from European classical music. It can be heard in compositions as diverse as Debussy’s Golliwog’s Cakewalk, Elliott Carter’s Cello Sonata, and Ralph Vaughan Williams’ Fourth Symphony. Nevertheless, a walking bass pattern is most typical of African American musics such as jazz, blues, and boogie woogie….The walking bass submerged in Fargo’s soundtrack seems to tell us simply that Carl and Gaear are up to no good.4

The impression of a “walking bass” from either the blues or boogie woogie traditions is, however, not salient to me. The bassline is too simple, triadic, diatonic, and repetitive to evoke either. Its repetitive nature evokes the ostinato patterns of cool jazz (John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme,” for example) or minimalism and its simple triadic arpeggiations are, as Gabbard suggests but understates, ubiquitous in the Western Art Music tradition.

Another interpretation of the repetitive nature of the arpeggiated accompaniment and the colorful melodic harmonizations mentioned above is also possible. The bass arpeggios can be understood as a way to highlight the fact that the criminals have a very simple goal and that they are essentially obsessed with the desire to see it through to completion. The bass continues its cycle through the D minor and C major triads even when the harmonization of the melody in the upper parts suggests an alternate course.

The emphasis on harmonic cycles, illustrated by the repeating harmonic movement in Figure 2.5 (d minor to C major), reflects the continuous criminal nature of Carl and Gaear. They start the film as criminals, accept a job as kidnappers, go on a situational killing spree, and never positively progress as people, instead they are involved in an endless cycle of ever-worsening violence. Like their cyclic harmonic theme, these criminals only have a sense of motion towards more criminal activity. Like many other criminals, Carl and Gaear are, unfortunately, trapped in an endless succession of committing crime, serving prison time, and being released only long enough to begin the process anew, and Burwell’s harmonically repetitious theme captures this.

2.3.1.3 Conclusion

This section illustrates that Burwell’s music, especially music in his Stable Tonal Style (represented by yellow-colored boxes without dotted borders in Figure 2.6), can be discussed using Schenkerian techniques even if most of its cues have non-traditional tonal elements (e.g., no tonal movement in the Criminal Theme and inverted structural dominants and parallel voice leading in the Sheep Theme). It also illustrated that Fargo’s Sheep Theme, which is associated with two wildly different characters, provides an unusual interpretational opportunity within a single film because it demonstrates how an audience’s sympathies can allow for a single theme to take on multiple, contrasting meanings in the space of a single film. In the following section I will turn to Fargo’s large-scale construction by utilizing a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram.
2.3.2 *Fargo*’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram

2.3.2.1 Large-Scale Thematic Distribution

**Introduction.** Figure 2.6 is the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram of *Fargo* and will serve as the reference point for all of the analysis to follow. It is necessarily dense, so a number of its components will be explained before the analysis proper takes place.

**Character Lines.** The left side of Figure 2.6 has three horizontal lines that start at headshots of the film’s main characters. Each line represents a main character or group of characters that ultimately serve a single purpose in relation to the goals of the protagonists. *Fargo* has two protagonists (Marge and Jerry) and two antagonists (Carl and Gaear). Marge and Jerry are main characters that are essentially independent of one another and are therefore represented by their own horizontal lines. Jerry is represented by the top line (green) and Marge is represented by the bottom line (yellow). The middle line represents both of the antagonists (light blue). They share a single character line because their purpose is, on the whole, unified. The arrangement of the characters’ respective lines is not fixed for any reason, but because the antagonists in *Fargo* are the link between the two protagonists it seems logical that they would be visually situated between them.

**Two Independent Dramatic Structures.** As discussed in section 1.4.2, multiple instances of Freytag’s Dramatic Pyramid can be employed within a single film to portray multiple, large-scale goals. In figure 2.6, the chosen layout of character lines allows for the dramatic structure of the protagonists (i.e., Freytag’s pyramid) to be shown simultaneously without the excess clutter that would result from the dramatic pyramids being shown between character lines or on top of one another. Jerry’s dramatic structure is represented by the green triangle at the top of the diagram while Marge’s is represented by the yellow triangle at the bottom. Her triangle has been flipped upside-down, again to avoid clutter.
FIGURE 2.5: Voice-leading sketch of the Criminal Theme as realized in the cue “Safe Keeping.”
FIGURE 2.6: Complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram of Fargo.
Satellites and Kernels. The character lines are punctuated with Super Kernels, Kernels, and the different types of Satellites introduced earlier in Chapter 1 (see section 1.4.3). When a Kernel or Satellite is on a character’s line it usually means that character is in the scene. Even if a character is not on screen during an event it can still affect another character’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure (see the Super Kernel at Event 18 which happens while Carl and Gaear are on screen but is the inciting incident for Marge’s dramatic structure). In *Fargo*, the main characters do not have many scenes together, but when they do, both characters have the same symbol at the same time in vertical space and are connected by a vertical strip of thick gray dashes (see Figure 2.7).

When characters on non-adjacent character lines are in the same scene together the strip of thick gray dashes must pass through the character line of a character that was not in the scene. In these few situations the characters actually involved will have a Satellite, Kernel, or Super Kernel on their line (see Figure 2.8) whereas uninvolved characters will have no event on their line.

**FIGURE 2.7:** The vertical strip of thick gray dashes that connect an event that includes more than one main character.
There are 70 events in *Fargo*, numbered from 1 to 70. The events are listed chronologically as they are presented in the film. There are no flashbacks or flashfowards in *Fargo*, *Barton Fink*, or *Miller’s Crossing*, so the question of how to handle them in a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram is left unanswered by this dissertation.

Figure 2.9 shows a close-up of the beginning of *Fargo’s* Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram and it will be used to introduce some of its notational aspects. Event 1 happens to Jerry alone, Event 2 happens to Jerry and the criminals, and Event 3 is just Jerry again. Because Event 3 is an anticipatory Satellite, a second event number is given in parentheses. The number in parentheses (in this case 13) is the event that this particular Satellite anticipates. Numbers in parentheses have been used instead of long lines that connect all the way to the event to which they refer. Event 4, for example, would have required a line that reached across the entire diagram and would overly complicate the already intricate diagram.
Music, Colors, and Dots. The boxes of varying color (yellow, orange, or gray) placed behind the Kernels and Satellites represent all of the musical cues that occur in the film. There is a key at the top of the diagram that describes the different types of non-diegetic music used in the film. Diegetic music is represented at the bottom of the diagram along with the names of Carter Burwell’s cues. To reflect their differing roles, the names of Burwell’s cues are black and the descriptions of the diegetic music are gray. Such a strong division is possible in the three films analyzed in this dissertation because the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music is so clear. In films where this line is blurred, a different solution should be considered.

The identity of a theme is tied to its color. For example, all orange boxes represent the Sheep Theme and all yellow boxes represent the Criminal Theme. When a theme is cast in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style, it is represented by a solid color on the diagram. Non-thematic cues in Burwell’s
Dramatic Tonal Style are represented by the color gray. Though not present in *Fargo, Barton Fink, or Miller’s Crossing*, non-thematic cues in Burwell’s Unstable Style would also be gray but differentiated with a border of thick black dots. Often, important motives from the theme are used in cues that are written in either Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal or Unstable Styles. When this happens, the color associated with the theme that presented the motive is inserted into the middle of the gray box. Event 12, for example, shows a gray box surrounded by thick black dots and has a yellow center. This cue is cast in Burwell’s Unstable Style and it includes motives from the Criminal Theme.

**Characters and Themes.** One of the almost instant benefits of the graphic representation in Figure 2.6’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram is how clearly it demonstrates the relationship between the themes and characters in *Fargo*. The Sheep Theme (orange) and the Criminal Theme (yellow) are the main themes used in this film, and a brief inspection of Figure 2.6 shows that they constitute most of the film’s music. In fact, 13 out of the 18 cues are comprised of these two themes in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style and only one cue does not include material from either of these two themes (Event 15, “She’s Gone”). The remaining 22% of the cues in this film are cast in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal and Unstable Styles and employ motives from either of the two main themes. This regular association of themes with characters is consistent with Burwell’s assessment of his own approach to scoring when collaborating with the Coens.

Yet another question I often grapple with is what should define the score’s musical themes—to what should I attach them? Each character can have a theme. Certain situations can have themes. Parts of the story line can have themes. Typically in Joel and Ethan’s [the Coen brothers’] work, I do attach themes to characters because their writing is very character-oriented. Often their films will simply have one or two characters, and you see almost the entire film through their eyes. So most of my composing for their films will be based around a theme that attaches to character.5

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Figure 2.6 also makes it abundantly clear that the Criminal Theme (yellow) is only associated with Carl and Gaear, the antagonists, and the Sheep Theme (orange) is only associated with Marge and Jerry, the protagonists. As characters, Marge and Jerry are quite different and the decision to use the same theme for both of them will be discussed later.

2.3.2.2 Burwell’s Music in Relation to Fargo’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure

There are a number of striking relationships between the film’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure and Carter Burwell’s score. In this section I will discuss these relationships, which concern Element-of-Setting Satellites and Super Kernels.

**Music and Element-of-Setting Satellites.** *Fargo* contains six events (Events 1, 6, 17, 25, 55, and 68) that I have classified as Element-of-Setting Satellites. These events are essentially establishment shots that depict a change of location. For example, at Event 17, Carl and Gaear enter the city of Brainerd. This event depicts their car driving past a large statue of Paul Bunyan (see Figure 2.10). This film has more Element-of-Setting Satellites than *Barton Fink* (3) and *Miller’s Crossing* (0) and it is the only one that uses music with this type of Satellite.

Five of these six events (Events 1, 6, 17, 25, and 68) contain instances of the main themes composed in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style. Event 55, however, is the single event that breaks the consistent pairing of event type with cue style because its cue is cast in Burwell’s Unstable Style. In it, Jerry is shown pulling into his home after seeing the botched results of the exchange between Carl and his father-in-law on the top floor of the parking garage. This event is part of a large group of events that involve the final stage of Jean’s ransom and the entire situation (Events 46–56) is scored with Burwell’s Unstable Style (Cue 12, “Delivery”). This is the film’s longest cue and it includes prominent motives from the Sheep Theme (see motivic comparison in Figure 2.11). Cue 12 ends when Jerry walks in the door of his house (Event 69) just before Scotty tells him that Stan Grossman called while he was gone. The consistency of musical style across Events 46–56 creates a
continuity to the entire money delivery sequence of events. The dramatic continuity might have otherwise been lost if the style switched into Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style in order to maintain the consistent pairing of Element-of-Setting Satellites and stable presentations of the film’s main themes. Momentary switches between contrasting cue styles was quite normal in films of Hollywood’s so-called “Golden Age.” Max Steiner’s score for *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is good example of this scoring practice.

The fact that *Barton Fink* and *Miller’s Crossing* do not pair Element-of-Setting Satellites with thematic statements set in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style is surprising. The result of this type of scoring in *Fargo* seems quite natural and I suspect that musical conventions relating to genre might establish a precedent for pairing stable thematic statements with Element-of-Setting Satellites.

![Fig. 2.10: Establishing shot of the city of Brainerd (represented by this large statue of Paul Bunyan) is accompanied by the Criminal Theme set in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style.](image)
FIGURE 2.11: Illustration of the prominent motives from the Sheep Theme found in "Woodchipper."
**Kernels at Points of Dramatic Structure.** The use of music at Kernels is handled with great care in this film. The film has a total of 21 Kernels and Super Kernels and only five of these are accompanied by music. This does not include Events 45 and 62 which only contain music at the very end (Event 45) or very beginning (Event 62) of the scene. Significantly, four of the five Kernels that include music occur at Super Kernels and none of these is set in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style. Of the film’s 70 events only six are Super Kernels (three per dramatic pyramid) so there is a high correlation between Super Kernels and cues set in either Burwell’s Unstable or Dramatic Tonal Styles.

Event 61 contains the only instance in Fargo of Burwell’s music being used during a regular Kernel (Cue 14, “Chewing on it”). This event has received a fair amount of attention from those trying to understand the function of Marge’s interactions with her old friend Mike Yanagita. When asked about Yanagita’s seemingly tangential function in the story, Joel Coen said he and his brother “wanted to give another point of view of Frances’ [Marge] character without it being related to the police enquiry.” This view suggests that the phone call Marge received in Event 60 about Mike Yanagita being a liar is unrelated to the following scene (Event 61) where Marge is driving around Minneapolis eating Hardee’s in her police cruiser. Krin Gabbard suggests that the significance of Marge and Mike eating is unclear at best but he hints that it may be more significant than a Character-Building Satellite.

Immediately after making these discoveries [about Mike lying] Marge drives wide-eyed to a fast food restaurant while ‘The Lost Sheep’ plays on the soundtrack. The music could be referring to the lost soul Mike Yanagita as well as to the mood created within Marge by what she has learned about him. Marge’s face, however, betrays no emotion at all, and she may only be thinking about food. We do not know if Marge has been touched by her experience with Yanagita, and he is never mentioned or seen again as Fargo moves toward its conclusion.6

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6 Gablard, *Black Magic*, 125. The cue does use the “Sheep Theme,” as Gablard says, but it is actually titled “Chewing On It” on the soundtrack; an indication that she is, in fact, eating and thinking during this sequence.
The most convincing interpretation of Event 61 comes from a comment posted on *Cracking Yarns Screenwriting Blog*. Kathleen A. Ryan, who was responding to Allen Palmer’s (the blog’s owner) accusation that the Mike Yanagita subplot is an example of a “useless subplot,” said:

> Marge is presented as an intelligent cop; however, she can be very trusting and slightly naive about the nature of people. She bought Mike’s story, and was shocked after learning Mike lied (and so convincingly). This, in turn, propels her to return to Jerry (because maybe he lied, too…and the evidence does point to that business). Without this scene, what would have prompted Marge to reinterview Jerry? Her instincts are confirmed when he ‘flees the interview.’

Taking Ryan’s interpretation elevates Event 61 to the level of a Kernel because during it Marge’s path changes. As the only regular Kernel with non-diegetic music, the scene’s importance is emphasized by the presence of Burwell’s score.

The large-scale deployment of music in *Barton Fink* and *Miller’s Crossing* is quite different from that in *Fargo*. *Fargo*’s music is intricately tied to its narrative and dramatic structure, a feature I suspect may be found in similar genres. However, *Fargo* is considered to be a blending of genres (e.g., thriller, neo-noir, detective) and identifying which genre has a primary influence in this dimension, if it can be pinned down to just one, will require a great number of additional large-scale film-music studies. In any case, this section has illustrated that the relationship between non-diegetic music and Super Kernels is intricately linked in *Fargo* and is of great importance for understanding how Burwell’s score functions across its complete filmic structure.

### 2.3.3 The Woodchipper Scene: Controlling the Release of Dramatic Tension

Marge’s dramatic climax (Events 65 and 66) occurs between the time that she locates the criminals’ (Carl and Gaear) car and the time that she apprehends Gaear. Carl, ends up dying (Event 64) before she reaches them so Gaear’s capture fulfills Marge’s goal of capturing the criminals who

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upset the peace in her town of Brainerd, Minnesota. The score primarily functions to emphasize and control the release of tension presented in the image track. Burwell accomplishes this by setting up four musical problems which are discussed below (section 2.3.3.1).

The scene begins with Marge’s discovery of the tan Oldsmobile Cutlass Cierra that she has been searching for throughout the film. The discovery of the vehicle is the climax/turning point of the film because it means that she has found the criminals and her long search is now over. In order to resolve her primary goal, Gaear must be apprehended. Her dramatic climax (Event 65) and resolution (Event 66) happen in the space of the same scene. This density of dramatic structure is common and adds to the intensity of affect that many viewers experience at this point in the film.8

**Tonal with Non-Traditional Tonal Elements.** The woodchipper scene is suspenseful and quite gruesome.9 The cue used during this scene (“Woodchipper”) is primarily tonal but, like the themes themselves, includes some elements that are uncharacteristic of the traditional tonal idiom. The voice-leading sketch in Figure 2.12 will be referred to throughout this section.

The first non-traditional tonal element is the lack of a root-position structural dominant (this is also the case in the Sheep Theme discussed above). In its place is a root-position vii°7 chord. This chord is a member of the dominant harmonic class so its use as the structural dominant is only a slight variation of the expected 1−5−1 bass arpeggiation, though its use does create an unexpected structural bass line (1−7−1). The structural vii°7 chord is prolonged for 18 measures (mm. 50–68) and receives substantially more elaboration than any of the other chords in the cue (most of which only last for four measures) and is the primary source of musical tension in “Woodchipper.”

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8 Of course, the intensity is further increased because the scene gruesomely depicts Gaear grinding Carl’s dead body with a woodchipper.
9 “Image track” is the term used by Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer (*Hearing the Movies*) to refer to all of the visual components of the film. According to them, the image track and sound track make up the complete film.
The parallel triadic motion in mm. 73–84 is the other uncharacteristic tonal element in this cue. These triads occur after the primary harmonic goal of the cue (vii° resolving to tonic in m. 69) has already been reached. The parallel motion in mm. 73–84 does introduce some harmonic tension but its primary function is to prolong the tonic after the successful structural close in m. 69. After m. 69, all parts are primarily ascending (especially mm. 73–84) and the upper voices seem to be generated from the ascending fourth from G2–C3 in the tenor line (see middleground sketch in Figure 2.12). Each tenor note has a 5th and 10th (i.e., these are root-position triads) above it whose primary voice-leading function is to fill out the texture and to harmonize this ascending line. The use of the subtonic instead of the leading tone in the chord at m. 80 (B-flat major) is one of the reasons that the return to tonic in m. 84 is tonally weaker than the one that preceded it in 69. I consider this harmonized ascending 4th as a motion from an inner voice (from the tenor to the bass) partially because of its register. When the register is normalized (as in the middleground sketch) the G could be considered a superposed inner voice that is transferred below the bass before making its ascent back to the tonic in m. 84.

2.3.3.1 Four Musical “Problems”

Importantly, Burwell’s music amplifies the suspense in this scene by setting up four musical “problems” whose tension he resolves slowly throughout the cue. This gradual resolution of musical tension (first harmonic, then hypermetric) cleverly parallels, yet subtly deviates from, the gradual release of tension shown on screen. “Woodchipper” (Cue 15, Event 66) is the single cue used for this scene. The cue is in the key of C minor, establishes eight-measure then four-measure hypermeter, and is characterized by widely spaced chords that are sustained for relatively long periods of time. In this section I will demonstrate how the primary tension-controlling device is harmonic and that Burwell resolves the harmony just as Marge gains the upper hand in her struggle against Gaear. I will then show how Burwell manipulates the cue’s hypermetric structure with
deletions, additions, and hemiola to further sustain musical tension while Marge shoots Gaear as he runs across a frozen lake.

**Harmony.** The first musical problem introduced in this cue concerns the manipulation of tonal tension. Figure 2.12 is annotated to show where the pivotal parts of the scene lie in relation to the cue’s tonal structure.

The suspense in this scene concerns when Marge will confront the criminals and whether/how she will manage to bring them into custody without becoming yet another victim. Burwell’s music is subtly faded in against the loud whirring of the woodchipper that Gaear is using to grind up the dead body of his partner, Carl, so the actual moment of the cue’s entry is almost imperceptible.

The music begins with a tonic triad (m. 42) just after Marge has laid eyes on Gaear (Figure 2.12, “Marge sees Gaear”). The harmony quickly changes to an inverted dominant with 7 in the bass (V#, m. 50–68). A dominant functioning chord with 7 in the bass lasts for approximately 40 seconds though it changes from V# to vii7 in m. 54. The change to a more tension-filled dominant harmony is coupled with a steady increase in volume as the upper strings continually arpeggiate the fully diminished seventh chord upward until the 1st violins reach all the way to B6 (they started on G3). Burwell has set up the well-established tonal problem of prolonging an active dominant while increasing dynamics and moving into extreme registers in order to intensify the feeling of suspense that is created by continually delaying the expected resolution to tonic.

Though this is not a traditionally tonal piece, the cue’s tonal tension can easily be mapped directly onto the tension in the image track. Measure 69, the structural close, corresponds to the first moment in the film that the antagonist (Gaear; Carl is dead as this point) has finally lost the power

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10 The first 40 measures of Burwell’s cue are not in the film but are present on the commercially released soundtrack.
over others he has wielded throughout the film. For the first time he must cower before another
(Figure 2.13).

FIGURE 2.12: Harmony and voice-leading sketch of Cue 15, “Woodchipper.”
It is clear at this point (mm. 69–84) that Marge will inevitably prevail and Gaear’s impending capture is simply a detail to be worked out and not the most dramatic element of this scene. Carter Burwell’s score encourages the tonic resolution at m. 69 to be read as the most important point of dramatic resolution in this scene instead of the moment later (m. 73) when she actually shoots him. The parallel triads discussed above do not add much tension to the overall cue (though they do add some). This parallels the drama on screen because finding the criminals and rendering them defenseless is the more pressing issue and this occurs before the parallel triads enter during mm. 73–84. The exact way in which Marge manages to place Gaear into custody after rendering him defenseless is a considerably smaller dramatic issue in this film.

Burwell’s decision to place the harmonic resolution earlier in the scene than one might expect is consistent with his film-music philosophy. He prefers to use music to indicate something not already present, or at least not obvious, in the film. Burwell’s score directs the viewer’s attention away from the more obvious point of Gaear being shot and towards the importance of the reversal of power between Marge and Gaear.

An Extended Anticipation. The second musical issue Burwell sets up occurs simultaneously with the harmonic problem discussed above. As Figure 2.12 shows, there is an
unexpected F over the initial C-minor tonic harmony. Using only the music in the film, this F must be explained as an anticipation of the dominant harmony that follows the initial tonic chord. The problem that the F introduces is that the initial tonic is not presented in its purest form and, in order to provide ultimate resolution, its pure form is required. The tension the F creates is complicated by the fact that Eb (3) is clearly present during the initial tonic chord, meaning that if this F were to be considered a 4–3 suspension, then its resolution has already been spoiled. The F persists throughout the lengthy inverted dominant/vii°7 that follows and only resolves down to the Eb as Gaear runs from Marge and the dominant is resolved to an unspoiled tonic triad (m. 69) that has finally managed to rid itself of the lingering F. The pure C-minor triad is quite satisfying at m. 69 and this is mainly due to the resolution of vii°7 to tonic as discussed above, but it is also indebted to the resolution of the unexpected F that harmonically contaminated the cue’s initial tonic triad.

**Manipulating Hypermetric Expectations.** The third way that Carter Burwell manipulates the musical suspense in “Woodchipper” is through the careful avoidance of expected hypermetrical downbeats. For ease of demonstration I have split the cue into two parts. Part 1 is from the beginning of the cue until the tonic resolution discussed above (mm. 46–69) and Part 2 picks up from that point of tonic resolution and continues until the end of the cue (mm. 69–89). I discovered the hypermetric manipulations in a rather unconventional way. While listening to Part 1 I felt a sense of metric urgency that I could not quite explain. Because the tempo of the cue is so slow, I decided to speed up the recording considerably. This allowed me to identify the source of the urgency as a hypermetric deletion. This same technique yielded similar results in Part 2 of “Woodchipper.” The analysis that follows captures these hypermetric disruptions using techniques introduced by Lerdahl & Jakendoff and Christopher Hasty. I would like to note that these disruptions are difficult to hear

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11 The entire cue can only be heard on the commercially released soundtrack. In the full version, the note in question is a form of suspension but it originates as a dissonant passing tone whose three-note journey is interrupted. Before it can finish its course it becomes a sort of incomplete suspension against the C-minor chord that begins the cue.
accurately at the original tempo and I encourage readers to alter the speed of the recordings in order to experience its metric interest more accurately.

The hypermeter in Part 1 is established by a constant pulse on the bass drum every two measures that is paired with the articulation of a new chord member every four measures that occurs in the upper strings during the arpeggiation of the vii\(^{07}\) chord (mm. 54, 58, and 62). Figure 2.14 shows the hypermetric organization of Part 1. Each new chordal skip (Metric Level 2) lasts for four measures and articulates the 1\(^{st}\) and 2\(^{nd}\) beats of an eight-bar hypermeasure (indicated by the “Hypermeter” row in Figure 2.14). The decision to start the excerpt with hyperbeat two instead of one is certainly unusual but there are a few details surrounding this moment that necessitate this interpretation. The first is that the actual beginning of the cue is very difficult to determine because its entrance is masked by the sound of the woodchipper, as mentioned previously. Only in retrospect does it become clear that the cue begins about four measures before measure 50 but its nearly imperceptible beginning makes it a poor initiator of any hypermetrical structure. The second detail is that measure 50 (the first hypermetrical downbeat) involves a change of harmony. A large-scale harmonic syncopation (that is, the harmonic change would have started on the weak part of the hypermeasure and carried over past the next downbeat without changing harmony) would have resulted from considering the beginning of the cue as the first hypermetrical downbeat.

Another indication is provided in the version of the cue found on the commercially released soundtrack because it contains the four measures that precede the beginning of the cue in the film (see mm. 42–45 in Figure 2.15). These unused four measures are almost identical to the first four measures found in the actual film (mm. 46-49) except that they initiate a change of harmony to C minor. This C-minor chord lasts for a total of eight measures (mm. 42-49, commercial soundtrack version) before the inverted dominant occurs in measure 50, and it clearly establishes the eight-
measure hypermeter proposed in Figure 2.14. Figure 2.15 is nearly identical to Figure 2.14 but it includes these unused measures and clarifies the initiation of the cue’s eight-bar hypermeter.

**FIGURE 2.14: Hypermetric structure of Part 1 (film version of “Woodchipper”).**
Burwell introduces the first hypermetric problem at m. 65. This moment is highlighted with the peach color in Figure 2.14. At m. 65, both the four-measure pattern of arpeggiation and the bass drum pattern enter a measure too soon and create a sense of urgency due to the hypermetric deletion. The established four-measure hypermeasure is momentarily reduced to a three-measure hypermeasure and this introduces hypermetric instability into the cue. The instability stems from the uncertainty of how the hypermetric pattern will be projected after this deletion. Hasty defines projection as “the process in which a mensurally determinate duration provides a definite durational potential for the beginning of an immediately successive event.” The black arrows below Figure 2.14 illustrate the successfully realized four-measure projections that result from the hypermetric regularity discussed above. The dotted arcs with the red x’s show places where a projected potential was not realized and the black arrows above these show the actual duration that was realized in its place. So, the one-measure deletion that disrupted the expected hyperbeat at m. 66 produces a three-measure grouping (mm. 62–65) and so it projects another three-measure projection from m. 65 to m. 68 that is also not realized. The next hypermetric beat is at m. 69 (the important moment of

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harmonic resolution discussed above), four measures from the previous beat (m. 65) and so the projected hypermeter returns to the previously established four-measure hyperbeats.

The entrance of the hypermetric resolution at m. 69 is also hypermetrically problematic because, while it resolves the most pressing musical matter (harmony and voice leading, in this case), it does so on the weak beat of the hypermeasure (hyperbeat 2) instead of on a strong beat as has been previously established (see the hypermetric counts in Figure 2.14). Thus, the harmonic resolution at m. 69 requires hypermetric reinterpretation (2=1). This allows Burwell to relieve the tension relating to the harmonic and melodic aspects of Part 1 while still maintaining enough tension to accompany Part 2 where Marge fires at and captures Gaear.

The hypermetrical reinterpretation at the end of Part 1 becomes the new hypermetric downbeat for the different material that begins in Part 2.\textsuperscript{13} Figure 2.16 shows the metric structure of Part 2. Chord changes occur every four measures at the beginning of Part 2 and so a four-measure hypermeter is adopted for the remainder of the cue. Though Burwell reestablishes hypermetric regularity in Part 2, he quickly disrupts it in m. 77 by avoiding any rhythmic articulation on what should have been a hypermetric downbeat (see the peach-colored vertical strip at m. 77 in Figure 2.16). Instead of the expected hypermetrical downbeat on m. 77, a new hypermetric length is introduced on beat three of m. 77. Again, Hastian arrows have been used in Figure 2.16 to illustrate this metric disturbance. The hyperbeat that started in m. 76 should have ended on the downbeat of m. 77 that would have included some rhythmic activity and, more importantly, a change in harmony. Both of these are missing on the downbeat of m. 77. This results in the failure of the projected potential started in m. 76 to be realized (see red “x” on the dotted arc). The next attack occurs in the middle of m. 77 and so the projection begun in m. 76 can be retrospectively understood as being a

\textsuperscript{13} Part 2 of this cue is comprised of “different material” for this section. The motive used in Part 2, however, comes from the Sheep Theme.
dotted whole note in length. Unlike the metric disruption in mm. 65–69, this new length (a dotted whole note) is perpetuated and rearticulated in mm. 77 (beat 3), 79 (beat 1), 80 (beat 3), and 82 (beat 1); this results in a brief hemiola from mm. 76 to 82. The rhythmic attack points are now 1½ measures long and this metric broadening also creates a written-out ritenuto. The reduction of tempo at m. 76 establishes a calmer affect and parallels the slowing tension of the film. As Figure 2.16 illustrates, mm. 77 (beat 3)–84 establish a new four-measure hypermeter (each measure is a dotted whole note in length). Significantly, this hypermetrical pattern is the one that rectifies the problem of the weak hypermetric downbeat that preceded it in m. 77. Measure 84 produces an expected hypermetrical downbeat on tonic that is not disrupted by (1) hypermetric reinterpretation (m. 69), (2) the introduction of new material that initiates a new hypermeter (m. 69), or (3) the beginning of a harmonic interpolation (mm. 77–83; the expected tonic resolution in m. 77 is delayed by the submediant and subtonic harmonies that follow the dominant in m. 73). This event is noteworthy because it solves the interesting metric problem of avoiding hypermetric downbeats that was created during the moment of harmonic resolution in m. 69, which unexpectedly entered during the weak part of the prevailing hypermeter.

Balancing the Deletion of Time. The final problem that Burwell creates in this cue involves the curious borrowing of time in Part 1 and its two-part repayment in Part 2. Part 1 of “Woodchipper” has an almost constant hypermetric regularity but an unexpected deletion occurs at m. 65 (Figure 2.14), which causes the hypermetrical downbeat to enter a measure too early, almost as if anticipating or preparing for the larger disruption that occurs four measures later at the moment of harmonic resolution in m. 69. Burwell cleverly returns this lost time (one whole note or one measure) in two half-measure (a half note each) installments that seem to be in league with the problematic hypermetric downbeats discussed above.
FIGURE 2.16: Metric structure of "Woodchipper," Part 2.
FIGURE 2.17: The measure deleted in m. 65 is restored in two half-measure increments in mm. 77 and 83.

**Metric balance restored**

\[
\frac{1}{2} \text{ measure} + \frac{1}{2} \text{ measure} - 1 \text{ measure} = 0
\]
The return of the first half measure is the cause of the avoided hypermetrical downbeat in m. 77 (Figure 2.16) that initiated the hemiola. The second installment is repaid at the last possible moment as it precedes the final chord in m. 84. Though the introduction of the second additional half measure complicates the passage’s hypermetric regularity, its effect is more of a brief delay which gives measure 16 the effect of a *ritardando* instead of an actual metric disruption. Figure 2.17 summarizes this manipulation of time by showing both the original one-measure deletion (m. 65) and the two half-measure additions (mm. 77 and 83). When added together (1 lost measure plus two additional ½ measures) the lost time from Part 1 seems to have been restored in Part 2.

**Conclusion.** Burwell’s score parallels, yet subtly manipulates, the resolution of musical tension with the on-screen dramatic tension in rather imaginative ways. From harmony, to voice-leading, to hypermetric manipulation, an awareness of the musical “problems” in the score can increase the audience’s engagement with the film upon repeated viewings of this striking scene.

### 2.4 Police as Shepherd, Citizens as Sheep?: Intertextual Criticism

While it is perfectly logical that the antagonists (Carl and Gaear) have the same theme (their purpose is unified, they are in almost every scene together, they are both portrayed as dangerous and volatile, etc.), it is not self-evident why the two protagonists (Marge and Jerry) would have the same theme. Their moral character is at opposite ends of the spectrum. Marge goes out of her way to pursue violent criminals that have, almost by accident, passed through her city of Brainerd. There really is no reason to believe that Carl and Gaear would return to Brainerd. As the police chief, she could have decided not to pursue this case herself, passed the assignment onto a lower-level officer, or passed the burden on to a higher level of law enforcement. Instead, she leaves behind a loving husband and her home to bring a sense of safety back to the ones she has sworn to protect. Jerry, on the other hand, has demonstrated on three occasions that he intends to obtain money by any means possible. He has his wife kidnapped in order collect a ransom from her father, takes out loans for
cars that do not exist, and tries to borrow large sums of money for dubious investments. Yet, these two protagonists have been given the same theme. In a lecture Carter Burwell gave about his work, he discusses why this theme was used for the film. His primary explanation involves Jerry’s character.

It’s just a coincidence but ‘The Lost Sheep’ [The Sheep Theme] seemed to match very well William Macy’s [the actor that plays Jerry] situation in the movie. He’s the one who sets things in action at the beginning of the film. And so I did a quick arrangement of it and played it for the Coens. They immediately laughed and I laughed and we enjoyed it.14

In an interview, Burwell describes the relationship between Jerry’s character and the Sheep Theme:

“The Lost Sheep” [the Sheep Theme] is just perfect. His [Jerry’s] character is a lost sheep. Of course he’s despicable, but the way he’s played, and the way I would choose to play him, is as a lost sheep. It just brings out to me the humor of the situation by playing it as pathetically as possible.15

But again, Marge and Jerry have the same theme. Does its use for both characters mean that Marge’s character is pathetic as well? Is she a lost sheep? I think the answer to both of those questions could be argued in the affirmative depending on the angle from which they were approached. There are many things about their lives that could be evaluated as pathetic. For example, the food eaten by Marge and her husband Norm (Arby’s, buffet-style dining, Hardee’s, bags of chips) could be viewed as a typical middle-class American way of life and, on the other hand, could be ridiculed because it represents a form of extremely unattractive cultural homogeneity and is indicative of the type of blandness and excess for which Americans often receive criticism. If the use of the Sheep Theme for Marge and Jerry has a consistent meaning, and we proceed with Burwell and the Coens’ intentions, it must mean that both characters are pathetic. After all, the three creators had all laughed at the

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thought of using this music for the theme of the film. Though it is possible to associate the theme’s pathetic character with Jerry and its solemn character with Marge, it feels somewhat disingenuous to do so.

Because the Sheep Theme is based upon a pre-existing hymn, another possibility for assigning meaning to the film’s main theme is to engage in an intertextual reading using the text associated with the source of the Sheep Theme. The source of the theme is the Norwegian folk tune “Den Bortkomne Sauen” (The Lost Sheep). This hymn’s text is derived from Jesus’s parable of the lost sheep from Luke 15: 1-7. In this parable Jesus suggests to the Pharisees that when a shepherd loses one of his 100 sheep that he will pursue it even though it means leaving the remaining sheep behind. After finding and returning it to the flock he will celebrate and rejoice with his friends and neighbors. Jesus concludes that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

The parable of the Lost Sheep can be mapped onto the story of Fargo when the theme and its development are traced throughout the entire picture. The theme is presented during the introductory credits and appears many times throughout the film in either its original form, a shorted version, or in an altered form as it is when cast in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal and Unstable Styles. Every instance of the theme is associated with either Marge or Jerry.

Both Marge’s capture of Gaear and the police’s capture of Jerry use versions of the Sheep Theme and these are the two incidents that seem to relate the most to the “Lost Sheep” parable. In Fargo, many of the characters could be considered lost sheep. “Lost sheep,” in this case, being those who have left the societal “flock” (i.e., outlaws). These are Jerry Lundegaard, Carl Showalter, Gaear

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17 The assumption that lost sheep are the outlaws of society makes more sense with Jesus’ parable regarding the return of the prodigal son.
Grimsrud, and Shep Proudfoot. Below I will explain why each could be considered a lost sheep by examining their criminal activities as well as any applicable socially unacceptable behaviors.

**Jerry Lundegaard.** Jerry has left the “flock” in order to deal with his unexplained financial problems. To do this he gets involved in some financially manipulative activities at work (borrowing money on cars whose VIN numbers are not real), tries to get a loan from his father-in-law/boss (Wade) who rejects his proposal for a large loan ($750,000), and (most importantly for the sake of this film) hires two people to kidnap his wife to secure the ransom from her wealthy father while lying to the kidnappers about how much money the deal actually involves. Had his plan worked, the kidnappers would have only received a measly 4% of the actual sum.

**Carl and Gaear.** These two are easy candidates for “lost sheep” because they most likely have a criminal past (indicated by their association with Shep Proudfoot, who is an ex-convict) and because they accept Jerry’s highly illegal proposal to kidnap his wife to profit from the ransom it would raise. They both end up killing a number of people, most importantly some people in Brainerd who were essentially innocent bystanders. Carl ends up killing Jerry’s father-in-law, Gaear apparently killed Jerry’s wife after she “started shriekin’ you know,” and Gaear kills Carl after a disagreement about splitting the car that they were given as part of their arrangement with Jerry. The fact that Carl’s disagreement with Gaear results in Carl’s demise is tragic because his death is the result of a simple scuffle with Gaear over how to split the Oldsmobile between them. Just before his death, Carl learned that he got $1,000,000 for the ransom instead of the $80,000 he was expecting. So his argument with Gaear, though somewhat reasonable, is also fuelled by greed.

**Shep Proudfoot.** Shep is the only “lost sheep” that seems to have an interest in returning to the “flock.” He can be considered a “lost sheep” because he sets Jerry up with Gaear and because he visits Carl and beats him mercilessly. Though these actions imply that he is lost, he seems to be the only one trying to repent and return to society by working a regular job at Wade’s auto dealership.
Of these four characters, Jerry and Gaear are the ones who have really gotten separated from the “flock” and require a “shepherd’s” intervention to bring them back home. Carl can no longer return to the “flock” because he is dead and Shep seems to be making the effort to return on his own.

The “lost sheep” metaphor has a few important elements that do not line up with any of the characters in Fargo. One is that the sheep in the parable do not seem to be deliberately separating themselves from the flock. They are not trying to break away, they have simply become lost. The second issue is that of repentance. The lost sheep parable (and the parable of the lost coin that follows it) actually has a return of the sheep to the flock and the return is celebrated by the shepherd and his friends and neighbors. Jesus likens this to sinners returning to God (“there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”). None of the criminals are brought back into the “flock” through repentance (I am considering the flock to represent regular members of society in this metaphor). Jerry and Gaear are forced into it by an external power, the police. So, if any parallel can be drawn between Jesus’s parable and Fargo, it is that the police are the shepherds of our society (Marge, of course, being the actual shepherd) and that their job is to find and return wayward citizens back to the accepted way of leading one’s life. The reality of this metaphor takes a considerably darker, and possibly more Coenesque, turn when taken one step further and the role of incarceration compared with friendly celebration. What happens to Gaear and Jerry after they are arrested? Will they be returned to the “flock” and their return celebrated? Not exactly. Their equivalent of celebration will likely be a lengthy prison sentence. Viewing this film as a metaphor for the parable of the lost sheep provides a stark contrast between the seemingly positive sentiment of Jesus’s message and the reality of repercussions faced by modern-day criminals.


2.5 Summary/Conclusion

Though the Coens like to keep their commentary involving meaning in their films to a minimum, such discussions are still fruitful for those interested in exploring the relationship between the internal world of the film and the variety of external experiences audience members bring into the theater. Trying to incorporate Burwell’s opinion that the Sheep Theme brings out Jerry’s pathetic character with its later use as Marge’s theme brings up the important question of whether or not both protagonists are being mocked in some way or that they should be viewed from a similar, critical distance. Viewing Marge as a respectable hero is quite easy, but it may also be worthwhile to consider viewing the “pathetic” qualities of the culture she represents. North Dakota and Minnesota have the two highest populations of Norwegian immigrants in America (36.5% and 33.9%, respectively) and the biblical text associated with “Den Bortkomme Sauen” (the Sheep Theme) may naturally resonate with those viewers when they listen to Burwell’s score. Knowing the meaning of the parable and its association with Fargo should, if nothing else, cause the audience to ponder how exactly such diverse stories, the lost sheep and Fargo, should be interpreted in light of their association in this film.

The harmonic and voice-leading aspects of Fargo’s main themes were explored in this chapter to demonstrate what they suggest about their associated characters. The Sheep Theme takes on a dual meaning through its association with Marge and Jerry and the cyclic nature of the Criminal Theme represents the sadly unswerving path of Carl and Gaear as career criminals. Additionally, Fargo’s consistent pairing of its Super Kernels with cues set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style (with motives from the Sheep Theme) leads to a violation of musical expectation during the initiation of Marge’s dramatic climax, resulting in an uncomfortably loud absence of music that further dramatizes the film’s iconic “woodchipper scene.” It was demonstrated that Burwell employs a fine level of control over the cue’s release of dramatic tension by strategically solving four musical
“problems” involving harmony, voice leading, and the exploitation of hypermetrical expectations. Finally, the Sheep Theme’s associated biblical text, the lost sheep, was used to provide an intertextual reading that calls attention to the difference between a shepherd rejoicing over finding and returning a lost sheep to his flock and the naïve view of a police officer like Marge who believes that they are providing a similar function in society by returning lost sheep (i.e., criminals) back to the flock (i.e., prison).
CHAPTER 3
LARGE-SCALE DRAMATIC IRONY IN CARTER BURWELL’S SCORE TO BARTON FINK

3.1 Introduction

The notoriously problematic narrative of Joel and Ethan Coen’s Barton Fink has inspired numerous interpretations that attempt to synthesize the film’s rich web of symbolism. The most common approaches reject the film’s literal meaning and instead filter its events through one of three hermeneutic lenses: (1) a commentary on Barton’s ever-worsening delusional state (Bedford); (2) a satirical perspective of Hollywood parasitic treatment of artists (Cameron); (3) a critique on the Cartesian notion of creation within a contextual vacuum (Conrad).¹ Though these lenses enrich filmic interpretation, they neglect the importance of Carter Burwell’s sparse score, which reveals dramatic irony at the film’s largest level and provides some much-sought-after clarity to the work’s narrative structure. This chapter does not, however, solve all of the film’s mysteries. Charlie’s association with heat, the Hotel Earle’s mosquitos, and the painting of the woman at the beach are left up to future analysts to elucidate.

While Burwell’s score includes less than 24 minutes of music, it charts a single course through Barton’s tortured creative process in the face of a debilitating case of writer’s block which stems from constant external distractions. To illustrate, I will showcase the use of music across the film’s complete structure using a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram (see the methodology portion of Chapter 1). Like in Fargo and Miller’s Crossing, Burwell’s score for Barton Fink introduces

significant narrative information about the film. In *Fargo*, it exposes the close synchronization between the film’s Super Kernels and the cues set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style (with prominent motives from the Lost Sheep theme) and demonstrates how this establishes expectations that are violated for dramatic effect. In *Miller’s Crossing*, the score clarifies Tom’s love for Verna, and nullifies the common view that he only manipulates her for the benefit of his boss, Leo. Across *Barton Fink*, however, Burwell parallels Barton’s creative frustrations by accompanying each failed attempt to complete his manuscript with emphatic half cadences. It is only when Barton has accomplished his primary goal of finishing his screenplay that his pent-up frustrations are mirrored by the score’s authentic cadences. These cadences, however, confirm the score’s tragic modulation from B♭ major to G Minor and are a significant and previously unnoticed instance of large-scale dramatic irony.

Contrary to existing readings of the film, I demonstrate that Burwell’s score provides an alternate and sympathetic, though ironic, understanding of Barton’s struggle to create a screenplay that meets his uncompromising standard of artistic integrity.

### 3.2 Synopsis of *Barton Fink*

The following is a detailed synopsis. Readers already intimately familiar with the film are encouraged skip this section and begin reading the Review of Literature instead (section 3.3). Barton Fink is Jewish playwright from New York whose most recent work, *Bare Ruined Choirs*, has been confirmed by critics and audiences as a real success. He, however, feels the play is “merely adequate” and dreams of creating a work that truly captures something real about the experience of the “common man.” His agent, Garland Stanford, alerts him to a job offer in Hollywood as a screenplay writer for Capitol Pictures. Though he is initially insulted by the thought of working in Hollywood, Barton accepts the job in hopes of making a difference with the motion-picture audience, which is
considerably larger than he has been able to reach with the comparatively smaller Broadway theater audience in New York.

In an effort to live modestly in Los Angeles, or at least to avoid what he perceives as the distasteful Hollywoodesque characteristics of southern California, Barton takes up indefinite residence at the Earle, a rundown hotel that—while large—is suspiciously absent of guests other than Barton and his next-door neighbor Charlie Meadows. Early on Jack Lipnick (the loud and exaggerated studio executive at Capitol Pictures that Barton interacts with throughout the film) exposes the fact that Barton knows almost nothing about film and has no experience writing screenplays, and yet he believes that Barton will make the transition quite easily and assigns him to write the script for a wrestling picture starring the well-known actor Wallace Beery.

Almost instantly, Barton’s progress with the script is obstructed by an unshakeable case of writer’s block. His writing attempts are thwarted by unexpected interruptions from Charlie, other loud neighbors, and Audrey Taylor. Barton and Charlie’s initial introduction is an awkward affair because they only meet after Barton calls down to Chet (the employee working the front desk) to complain about the noises (laughing and possibly crying) that Charlie is making in the room next door. This is Barton’s failed attempt at silencing Charlie without having to confront him himself. After being hushed by the hotel staff, Charlie becomes instantly aware that Barton was the likely complainer and promptly confronts him about it. He appears to forgive Barton and afterwards they develop what, at first, seems to be a healthy and mutually beneficial friendship. However, a side effect of this new-found relationship is that Charlie keeps interrupting Barton just as he is about to start work. This causes Barton’s stress level to rise as he becomes increasingly overwhelmed by his inability to work.

Barton eventually seeks the help of the film’s producer, Ben Geisler, who advises him to seek the help of another writer. Barton, who—of course—knows no one in the film industry, asks
W. P. Mayhew for assistance. Mayhew is a well-known novelist whom Barton greatly respects and who has even written the types of wrestling scenarios that Barton himself has been tasked with writing. Mayhew has since become far more interested in alcohol than writing. The only creative advice he has to offer is that he “just enjoys makin’ things up.” As a substitute, Audrey Taylor (Mayhew’s personal secretary and extramarital lover) has captured Barton’s attention and in a moment of deep panic he calls her to his room at the Earle for help with his writing. After a brief discussion of writing and a confession that she has been the true author of Mayhew’s recent works they engage in sex instead of writing. Barton awakes and is shocked to find that Audrey had been murdered while he slept. After a brief emotional breakdown Charlie offers to help Barton and “takes care of” Audrey’s bloody corpse.

Barton is, of course, completely shaken at this point and buys time with Lipnick by claiming that sharing his current progress on the script could destroy his conception of the work before he has had time to perfectly articulate it. Meanwhile, Charlie goes on a brief trip to New York to take care of some things at the head office for his insurance job. This news saddens Barton greatly and the stress of being without his only friend, on top of the mounting stress concerning his script, brings him to tears. Barton receives even more bad news when two detectives (Deutsch and Mastrionotti) reveal to him that his neighbor “Charlie” is actually a wanted murderer by the name of Karl “Madman” Mundt who is a suspect for the murder of Audrey Taylor. It is only after Barton learns that Charlie lied and that the box he left behind might contain Audrey’s head that he finally summons the creative energy required to write and finish his script in a single, passionate effort.

Barton celebrates his victory as a writer by attending a USO dance where he stands out incredibly and somehow initiates a fistfight between the army and navy. Barton returns home to find that Deutsch and Mastrionotti have broken into his room, seen his blood-stained mattress, and read his recently completed script. After accusing him of being Charlie’s partner in crime they handcuff
him to his bed and confront Charlie in the hallway. Charlie’s return is accompanied by a heat increase at the hotel that eventually sets the walls of the hallway on fire as he runs down its length brandishing a rifle that he uses to kill the two, apparently anti-Semitic, detectives. Charlie then finally confronts Barton about never listening to him and admonishes him for coming into his home (the Earle) and complaining about noise. This confrontation is brief and Charlie, once again, forgives him easily and frees him from the handcuffs Deutsch and Mastrionotti put him in. Before returning to his room, Charlie implies to Barton that he may have killed Barton’s family while in New York on his business trip. Dismayed and defeated, Barton slowly exits the flame-ridden hallway of the Earle carrying his completed manuscript and Charlie’s box. In the penultimate scene, Barton’s script is rejected by Lipnick who tells him his work will never be published nor will he be released from his contract until he starts writing works that appeal to Capitol Pictures’ target audience. The final scene involves Barton walking along a sunny beach, in his brown suit, with only Charlie’s box in hand. A woman, who looks remarkably similar to the woman depicted in the beach image that hung above his workspace at the Earle, interacts with him briefly. Barton expresses his ignorance of the box’s contents and owner and the film ends with her turning to face the beach while striking the same pose as the woman in the image above Barton’s desk.

3.3 Review of Literature

Of all the Coen Brothers’ films, Barton Fink has received the most attention from critics and scholars. At the 1991 Cannes Film Festival it unanimously won the highly coveted Palme d’Or (the highest prize offered) and the awards for Best Director and Best Actor (John Turturro). Though their films have been nominated for the Palme d’Or eight times since 1991, Barton Fink is the only one of their films to actually win it. Since its release, much has been written that attempts to ascribe

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2 Erica Rowell, The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 104. Rowell notes that, “Thanks to Fink’s 1991 hat trick, films in Cannes can no longer win more than two major awards.”

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meaning to the film’s more unconventional elements. In this section I will point out the more perplexing aspects of the film and then provide a review of the various interpretations that have been put forth that attempt to synthesize it into a more logical whole or to offer intriguing new hermeneutic perspectives. After establishing the wide variety of differing interpretations I will turn to Burwell’s score which, when considered, provides the audience with a strong sense of teleological direction in an otherwise hard-to-follow story.

Most readings of *Barton Fink* promote metaphoric interpretations involving Barton’s chosen living quarters, the Hotel Earle. The Earle has numerous unconventional features. Though the hotel is quite large only two of its guests are visually depicted, Barton and his next-door neighbor Charlie. A shot of Barton’s hallway shows a line of shoes awaiting shoeshine collection and imply that the hotel is, in fact, filled with tenants even though the audience never sees them. In addition, both Barton and Charlie make mention of being able to hear Barton’s neighbors having sex. This is suspicious because, although Barton would likely be able to hear each of his neighbors due to the hotel’s thin walls, Charlie would not because he would have to be hearing them all the way through Barton’s room. Charlie hypothesizes that it must have something to do with the hotel’s pipes and claims that he can hear the sexual noises of Barton’s other neighbors so well that he “can practically see how they’re doin’ it.” The fact that this situation piques Barton’s attention calls particular attention to Charlie’s heightened auditory sense.

The hotel’s wallpaper is another oft-cited oddity. Throughout the film, the wallpaper peels off of the wall as its glue has returned to liquid form and can be seen dripping down the wall. Although this is explained by citing the hotel’s ventilation problems, which are causing condensation to build up inside the walls, it does lend a surreal aspect to the environment. The hotel’s uncomfortable heat is also strange and, for the majority of the film, the heat just seems like an unfortunate feature of the hotel and not the result of a supernatural phenomenon. The final scene at
the hotel, however, confirms that the heat is somehow caused by Charlie and his presence. The heat culminates in the shocking appearance of flames that consume the hallway outside of Barton’s room as Charlie runs down it screaming, “I’ll show you the life of the mind!” Charlie’s chronic ear infection is also associated with the Hotel’s heat and it worsens throughout and culminates in a stream of pus bursting forth from his left ear after he confronts Barton about not listening at the end of the film.

The most common ways that film critics account for the Hotel Earle’s many peculiarities is to invoke a parallel between it and some form of Hell. Whose Hell it is, however, is a point that few seem to agree upon. Greg Hainge believes that the Hell is Charlie’s and suggests this via the parallel depictions of the “the everyday” found in both Barton Fink and Fargo. In Fargo this is manifest by the generic domesticism exemplified by Marge’s pregnancy, Marge and Norm’s bland home life, and their mundane food choices (Arby’s, Hardee’s, smorgasbords, etc.). Hainge argues that Muzak has a primarily anaesthetizing function and proposes that the concept can be extended to capture other non-musical situations such as the aforementioned generic simplicity found in everyday life. In Barton Fink and Fargo this type of figurative Muzak has a similar anaesthetizing effect on its characters. In Barton Fink this takes the form of Charlie’s generic career (door-to-door insurance salesman) and living quarters (the hotel Earle). As Hainge says, the lack of literal Muzak presents us “with a vision of the everyday as living Hell—or, in other words, an extreme version of Fargo’s everyday since it is devoid of even the anesthetic effects of Muzak.”

An alternative locates all of Barton’s Hollywood adventure inside a personal Hell that resides only in his mind. Barton’s adventure can also be viewed as a physical manifestation of his internal struggle to “dredge up something [from] inside” and “plumb the depths” of creativity. He describes writing as a painful process and this pain emerges inside the hotel Earle through his struggle with

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3 Greg Hainge, “The Unbearable Blandness of Being: The Everyday and Muzak in Barton Fink and Fargo,” in Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities 27, no. 2 (Winter-Spring, 2008), 38-47.
While this interpretation is stimulating because it provides a rich connection for Barton’s mid-film statement about dredging up something from inside, it comes up short handed where Charlie is concerned. After all, it is Charlie who has taken up permanent residence in the hotel and can cause walls to spontaneously burst forth with flames, which suggests some sort of fantasy or supernatural environment.

Todd Alcott offers a more specific reading of the film that portrays Charlie as Satan and the Hotel Earle as Hell. Alcott proposes that the Hotel Earle is inside of Charlie’s head. This explains why the goo coming out of the walls and the goo dripping from Charlie’s ears are so similar and how Charlie can hear everything that goes on in the hotel. Mark Conrad offers a similar view of the Hotel Earle as someone’s head but admits that he is unsure whose it is and suggests, as one possibility, that Barton’s room be viewed as the inside of his head where the room is his skull and the windows are his eye sockets. Conrad and Booker both propose that Barton Fink can be read as a Faustian tale because the film’s protagonist has made a deal with the devil (i.e., Hollywood) to trade his skill as a writer for success. This parallel is tenable though weakened by a line of Garland Standford’s (Barton’s manager) found only in the screenplay, though implied in the film, that suggests Barton’s motivation for going to Hollywood is that he will be able to “make a difference” with a considerably larger audience than he could ever reach with his Broadway plays. This is a fundamental difference between Faust and Barton because the former is motivated by greed; instead of “selling his soul” for his own benefit, he is sacrificing his own comfort in the hopes of sharing something genuine with the “common man.” All irony regarding Barton ignoring the stories of the

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7 Conrad, The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers, 181.
“common man” (Charlie) and writing only about himself aside, the source of Barton’s motivation appears to be quite sincere. His sincerity is supported by Burwell’s scoring of the climactic scene. The repeated authentic cadences and filmic montage technique are Burwell and the Coens’ way of encouraging the audience to view Barton’s success with sympathy. As I will discuss below, however, Burwell’s large-scale modulation from major to relative minor complicates this matter by keeping the audience at a distance from his success.

Both Conrad and Michael Dunne suggest that to link together all of Barton Fink’s logically troublesome components into a neat and tidy package is to misunderstand the essence of the film.\(^9\) Dunne, in his provocatively titled article “Barton Fink, Intertextuality, and the (Almost) Unbearable Richness of Viewing,” invokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “monological attitude” in order to criticize readings that attempt to reduce a dynamic play of discursive possibilities into a “manageable number that can be accounted for by the critic’s reading.”\(^10\) Dunne suggests that critics should pursue intertextual readings instead and claims that, “Double, triple, and even more complex texts (literary or cinematic) resist monological interpretation by demanding that the critic maintain simultaneous awareness of many ongoing textual interactions.”\(^11\) He ultimately suggests that a monological reading of Barton Fink “may achieve hermeneutic neatness, but the same interpretive act betrays our ongoing viewing experience of actively attending to many contending voices throughout the film.”\(^12\)

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\(^10\) Dunne further defines the monological attitude as tolerating “only one ‘correct’ view. Any alternative views must be erased or subsumed. Stylistically, monologism incorporates all alternative elements into an ‘organic’ whole, either through a judicious selection of only the details that fit or through a sublation of other details into some ‘higher’ form—irony, for example.” Dunne, “Barton Fink, Intertextuality, and the (Almost) Unbearable Richness of Viewing,” 303.


\(^12\) Dunne, “Barton Fink, Intertextuality, and the (Almost) Unbearable Richness of Viewing,” 310.
Though Conrad agrees that a monological interpretation of *Barton Fink* might not be possible or fruitful, he believes its illogical elements are precisely the point of the film. He proposes, through the contrasting philosophical perspectives of René Descartes and Martin Heidegger, that *Barton Fink* is an illustration of the idea that creativity within a vacuum is devoid of meaning because all meaning is entirely contextual (Heidegger) and not objective (Descartes). Conrad argues that this is manifest by Barton cutting himself off from everyone (especially Charlie, the representative “common man” in the story) and working entirely inside his own head (“the life of the mind”). In so doing, he detaches himself from a context, which results in the loss of meaning that perplexes the film’s viewers.

A number of writers have made the connection between the theme of writer’s block in *Barton Fink* and the case of writer’s block that the Coens suffered while working on their previous film, *Miller’s Crossing* (1990). They say that the complexity of *Miller’s Crossing*’s plot presented problems that they had difficulty solving. Indeed, they stopped in the middle of writing it in order to write *Barton Fink*, which apparently only took them three weeks to complete. Because of this connection between Barton’s and the Coens’ cases of writer’s block many critics have sought to read the film as autobiographical of the Coens’ experience in Hollywood; they suggest that the film makes a statement about the ways in which Hollywood consumes the lives of creative individuals and has no desire to produce works of “real” artistic integrity. The Coens, however, are quick to distance themselves from such a reading and Bergan quotes them as saying, “*Barton Fink* is very far from our own experience. Our life in Hollywood has been particularly easy. The film isn’t a personal comment. We don’t have any rejected scenarios in our drawers. There have been projects on which

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we started work, but we didn’t finish them for one reason or another. Artistic problems that we were unable to solve or the cost was prohibitive.”

Similarly, Booker makes the rather surprising suggestion that the Coens are trying to make a critical statement about World War II era Jewish intellectuals. He says:

Fink’s failure to “listen” seems intended to tell us that leftist intellectuals like him were too busy pursuing their own selfish interests to effectively oppose the rise of fascism, a point that is historically entirely inaccurate: American (and British) writers in the late 1930s put their own proletarian agendas completely aside in order to participate in a Popular Front alliance against fascism, but were ignored by the British and American governments and general populations. That the Coens would choose to level a charge of irresponsibility against the only group in America that actively sought to oppose the rise of fascism is itself highly irresponsible and shows a complete ignorance of (or perhaps lack of interest in) historical reality.

More than perhaps any of their other films, the variety of diverse interpretations forced upon the film’s unconventional and only semi-logical narrative framework. True to Dunne’s suggestion, the film does seem to resist overarching interpretations and has forced commentators to seek richer and more nuanced paths in order to make sense of its more perplexing elements. This issue of consistent narrative logic is the most important reason that Barton Fink was selected for this study. Fargo and Miller’s Crossing are much more logical (though, motivations in Miller’s Crossing can be a bit puzzling) and so Barton Fink is an interesting test case because it allows for an exploration of how my Narrative/Dramatic Structure approach can be utilized when confronted with an unconventional narrative.

The large-scale analysis of Barton Fink reveals that Burwell’s score serves as a guide that focuses the audience’s attention on Barton’s goal of completing his manuscript. As discussed below, the film’s score is cumulative and this feature is what provides focus in the film. It continually builds

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15 Booker, Postmodern Hollywood, 144.
16 Booker, Postmodern Hollywood, 144.
towards Barton’s stated goal of writing a work that is “of, about, and for the common man.” After exploring the differences between Shared and Enhanced Experiences, Barton’s goal and Burwell’s paralleling of that goal will be explored in detail. This will help to place the previous interpretations (most of which fall into the realm of the Enhanced Experience) into context before I explicate the score more closely. This process will reveal that the common search for external explanations (e.g., depictions of Hell) do not need to be brought in so early in order to understand the film’s complex narrative.

3.4 Shared and Enhanced Experiences

Though the perspectives summarized above offer rich interpretations of the more troublesome logical elements in *Barton Fink*, film critics have tended to look past the more literal features of its story when drawing conclusions about meaning. Audrey’s sudden—seemingly impossible—murder, Charlie’s shocking alter ego, fiery hallways that provide heat but do not burn, and bibles that have passages from Barton’s screenplay are among the numerous elements of the story that cannot be understood using the cause-and-effect model of the world that most people commonly share. As Dunne suggests, approaches beyond the typical monological perspective will be required in order to explain its illogical elements. However—and this is where my approach differs considerably from the approaches that I have surveyed—I believe the majority of *Barton Fink* can be understood by staying within the world of the film, a perspective that is substantiated by Burwell’s cumulative score, which stresses Barton’s success as a writer.

The Coens have been criticized for, and have openly admitted to, being formalist. As Woods says, “For all their winking at the audience and taste for classic genres, they are essentially formalists, constructing hermetic worlds whose meanings are self-referential and profoundly abstract.”17 This perspective is clearly supported by Ethan who laments that, “apparently nobody wants to be

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satisfied with the movie, as if they absolutely need explanations beyond the images, the story itself. That always surprises me. But if you don’t comply, journalists get the impression that you’re hiding something from them.”

External explanations should be used with caution because of their ability to create a new work instead of elucidating the one in question. Films can always be read as dreams or delusional states, and the result can change one’s understanding of the film completely. If Fargo were, for example, interpreted with an external layer as Marge’s nightmare (she is, after all, sleeping when introduced and about to sleep when the film ends) we could reinterpret her image from a strong and overly competent protagonist to one that features doubts of being strong enough for parenthood. This type of reading is certainly possible but it would inspire an entirely different understanding of the film and essentially creates a new and quite different work.

I have introduced the seemingly obvious, though ultimately subjective, difference between the internal and external realms of explanation because the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram is intended to capture only the logical content of the film. I use the phrase Shared Experience to refer to the logical, internal content of the work. The Shared Experience of a work essentially results in a plot synopsis and is what the majority of viewers would agree upon after having viewed the film as many times as necessary. It should also include the synopses of others who have given this aspect of the film a great deal of thought. This level of experience is not, of course, purely objective, but the results from different analysts would carry a number of similarities, just as plot synopses of the same film are highly similar. Larger differences between analysts will more often fall into the next category.

I use the phrase Enhanced Experience to refer to everything that is outside of the film or brought in from a particularly individualized perspective (and therefore unlikely for most viewers

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18 Woods, Joel & Ethan Coen, 89.
without a similar perspective to adopt naturally). An Enhanced Experience is primarily what the authors in the surveyed literature brought to the table. Viewing Barton’s hotel room as symbolic of the inside of Barton’s head where the windows are Barton’s eyes and Charlie is a figment of his imagination, as Conrad does, is good example of this. This perspective is heavily interpretive and is not likely to be found within the realm of the Shared Experience. Again, the line between the two types of experience is not fixed but I believe that the majority of internal and external information falls quite easily into either category. Importantly, my Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams are intended as a representation of the Shared Experience of a film. I use the diagrams as backdrops with which to augment a viewer’s understanding of a film once its entire score is taken into account, which up until now has not been considered with such a large-scale and inclusive approach.

3.5 Primary Narrative Goals in *Barton Fink*

Construction of a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram for *Barton Fink* was particularly problematic because of its previously mentioned logical problems. These issues underscore a very important aspect of creating such a diagram when faced with an unconventional narrative: the successful creation of a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram relies on the analyst’s ability to identify the characters’ largest goals. In a more conventional film this task is fairly straightforward. In *Fargo*, for instance, there are two primary goals: (1) Marge Gunderson needs to catch the individuals that murdered the three people in her hometown in order to fulfill her duty as police chief and (2) Jerry Lundegaard needs to find a way to obtain a large sum of money for reasons that are never expounded upon. With these two primary goals in mind the task of creating a cause-and-effect network of the film’s events is fairly straightforward. In *Barton Fink*, however, the situation is less clear and this has, no doubt, resulted in the plethora of Enhanced Experiences offered by the surveyed writings. An examination of the film as a whole (the essential and most time-consuming step in the process of making a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram) reveals that the film does, in
fact, revolve around two larger goals. The first and most important is Barton’s goal as a writer. The second goal is Charlie’s desire to confront Barton about his growing frustration towards him regarding Barton’s initial noise complaint and Barton’s rejection of Charlie as the muse for his script.

3.5.1 Barton’s Goal as a Writer

As stated earlier, Barton accepts the job in Hollywood because he hopes that through his writing he can “create a new living theater, of, about, and for the common man.” This possibility of realizing his desire presents itself to Barton in the form of a screenplay assignment from his new boss at Capitol Pictures, Jack Lipnick. Right from the beginning, the idea of starting the script is difficult for Barton. He spends most of the film battling with its completion but, eventually, he succeeds and writes the work in one sitting. Barton’s stated goal is to make a difference with the “common man” but this desire is thwarted and flat-out rejected by Lipnick who prevents the work from every seeing a real audience. Ultimately Barton’s goal is tragically resolved.

3.5.2 Charlie’s Conflict with Barton

The second, and less foregrounded, goal is Charlie’s desire to confront Barton about his growing frustrations with him concerning Barton’s complaint about too much noise and Barton’s rejection of him as the muse for his script. It is easiest to understand this goal when considering the following four events: (1) Barton calls down to the hotel lobby to complain about the noise Charlie is making next door, (2) Barton rejects Charlie’s stories and instead asks Audrey for help on his screenplay, (3) Charlie murders Audrey, and (4) Charlie confronts Barton at the end for not listening to him and complaining about him making too much noise. Audrey’s murder is a clear dividing point in the film and is moment that viewers begin to feel unsettled with its logic. Even though Barton is peculiar and somewhat egocentric there is no moment in the film, before or after this point, where Barton could be suspected of murdering Audrey. He comes off as an intensely sincere individual and garners the sympathy of the audience due to the difficulty he encounters with
completing his screenplay. The only other likely candidate for her murder is Charlie. It is revealed toward the end of the film that he is a known murder (Karl “Madman” Mundt) and because of this it is easy for us to assume that he is responsible for her bloody demise. And yet, how then could such a murder have been carried out without alerting Barton during the process? Even more to the point, what motive could there possibly have been for her murder?

Charlie is the only likely candidate given that he has a growing reputation as a murderer; his motives, however are not very obvious. David S. Cowen suggests Charlie’s conceivable motives as follows:

Most of the early parts of the film are spent with Charlie trying to help Barton…. [Charlie thinks that] Barton could help fill some of the loneliness in his life. So, Charlie pines to be Barton’s muse. ‘I could tell ya some stories!’ he says, offering to give Barton inspiration…. [But] this doesn't happen. Barton ignores Charlie, instead ranting about modern theatre, interrupting him any time he’s going to tell Barton something useful. Charlie gets ignored by everyone, or everyone is a hostile force in his life. “Opportunities galore,” he says, talking about his sexual exploits -- but you know this isn’t true. The same housewives he talks about there are found murdered by the end of the film. Any sort of emotional contact with a woman is blocked by his weight (“that’s my cross to bear”), despite the fact that he has an interesting, lively personality. When he hears the “love birds” down the hall, this brings out a crushing pain in him about what he’ll never have.

But what brings out a worse pain is the night Barton and Audrey make love. Coupled with the pain of hearing the lovemaking, Charlie feels that Barton has abandoned him as his muse -- Barton has instead chose Audrey as his muse, even though Charlie has a better, more genuine idea of what happens in a wrestling pictures.19

The connections Cowen draws are quite insightful and they unite a number of elements of the film’s plot that most have found scattered and only loosely related. His insights are completely within the diegesis and so they belong to the realm of the Shared Interpretation. Incorporating the internal interpretations of others is an important aspect of developing a convincing Shared Interpretation

and I consider it an integral part of the process. With Charlie’s motivation revealed I can now move on to how Barton and Charlie’s primary goals provide the proper background structure for generating a suitable Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram for *Barton Fink*. Once this is established, the music will be incorporated into the diagram.

### 3.6 Barton Fink’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram

In this section I will briefly review the primary elements involved in the creation of a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram and provide a detailed discussion of how the film’s primary structural events were chosen.

#### 3.6.1 Barton’s Primary Goal

The three Super Kernels of Barton’s dramatic pyramid (inciting incident, climax/turning point, and resolution) revolve around his goal of completing a screenplay that reaches and speaks to the “common man.” As shown in Figure 3.1, the inciting incident occurs when Garland offers Barton the job at Capitol pictures and he accepts. Having accepted the job, Barton’s goal has been established and he can pursue its completion. The climax occurs when Barton finally writes his screenplay. After many failed attempts to get started Barton’s dammed river of creative energy finally bursts forth and produces his script in a single concentrated effort. The tragic turn of the story is revealed during the ultimate resolution of this goal (Barton’s desire to share his work with the “common man”) when Lipnick rejects his script outright. He accuses Barton of writing for the critics and claims that the film’s target audience would not want to see a man wrestling with his soul but instead they want to see a film that emphasizes the actual act of wrestling. Many have interpreted the distance between the audience that would appreciate Barton’s work and the one Lipnick had in mind as more evidence that Barton does not actually understand his audience. I think that view implies Barton wants to provide simple and unchallenging entertainment to the masses (exactly what Lipnick would have preferred). To the contrary, I believe—and Barton states this explicitly—that he
genuinely hopes to show his audience (i.e., “the common man”) something about life that will, in fact, challenge them as viewers and leave them with something they did not have before considering his story. Though Barton has no interest in catering to the simple desires of the typical mass audience, I maintain that he does genuinely hope his story will be heard and experienced by them. The question of whether or not his audience will want to experience his script, which would almost certainly be emotionally deeper than the one Lipnick would prefer, is an entirely different issue than whether or not he is actually writing for the “common man.”

3.6.2 Charlie’s Primary Goal

Charlie’s primary goal is to confront Barton and release the mounting frustration he has felt towards Barton. As shown in Figure 3.2, the inciting incident for this goal is when Barton calls down to the front desk to complain about Charlie making too much noise. This is the event that introduces the two characters to each other but more importantly it is the initial source of tension between them. Charlie immediately marches over to Barton’s room, bangs on his door, and confronts him about the complaint. Charlie forgives Barton quickly and much more easily than Charlie’s aggravated approach would seem to have warranted. It is quite suspicious that Charlie would forgive him so quickly and, ultimately, the audience discovers that the incident just fuels his ever-growing grudge against Barton. As Cowen explained above, throughout the film Barton continually adds to Charlie’s frustration—as does everyone else in Charlie’s life (housewives in Kansas City; the ear, nose, and throat doctor, W.P. Mayhew; and Audrey)—by rejecting his stories and preventing him from being the source of inspiration for his screenplay (i.e., Barton’s muse). This tension, which was initiated

20 Barton expresses his position as creator to his agent, Garland Stanford, early on in the film (Event 3). He tells Garland that he tries to “make a difference” for a living before expressing why working in Hollywood would be the wrong decision. He says, “Don’t you see, Garland? Not the kind of success where the critics fawn over you or the producers like Derrick make a lot of money. No, a real success. The success we’ve been dreaming about. The creation of a new, living theater, of and about and for the common man. If I ran off to Hollywood, I’d be making money, going to parties, meeting the big shots, sure, but I’d be cutting myself off from the wellspring of that success, from the common man.”
with a fairly innocent and maybe even polite phone call, culminates at the climax of Charlie’s goal where he confronts Barton again just after returning to the Earle and laying waste to the two nosy detectives. The confrontation is brief but during it Charlie reveals to Barton that he is angry with him for not listening and for coming into his home (the hotel Earle) and complaining that he is making too much noise. It is only clear at this point that Charlie was still angry about the noise complaint and that he had not taken Barton’s rejections as lightly as it had initially seemed.

Though the Coens downplay Charlie’s side of things, it is crucial to understand Charlie’s incredibly cruel and violent revenge story in order to make sense of a number of the film’s less-obvious phenomena. Knowing how Charlie will eventually torture Barton encourages the viewer to shift focus during subsequent viewings of the film toward Charlie’s reactions during Barton’s rejections, interruptions, and impassioned rants that block Charlie from sharing his personal stories. The resolution of Charlie’s goal, which takes the form of forgiving Barton for his wrongdoings, happens so quickly and easily that it parallels their initial confrontation after the inciting incident of Charlie’s goal (Event 12, “Charlie confronts Barton about the noise complaint”). For a second time, Charlie seems to brush off the offense and, after freeing Barton from the handcuffs, simply returns to his room and even casually offers an innocent-sounding, cliché phrase on the way out (“I’ll be next door if you need me”) as if, in his mind, they can go back to being friends like before. Though Barton’s goal is certainly foregrounded in this film, Charlie’s desire to be his muse must be taken into consideration to understand the film.

3.6.3 The Complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram of Barton Fink

Because a complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram incorporates a considerable amount of data, this section will feature a series of Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams that progress in complexity towards the completed diagram that includes all of the film’s events and the location and type of music used throughout the entire film. This should allow for the complete
diagram to be less overwhelmingly complex and aid in the reading of its contents. Similarly to how Barton and Charlie's primary goals were presented earlier, their Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams will be treated separately until the end (Figure 3.7) at which point the diagrams are combined to represent all of the events in the film and all of the film's music is overlaid.

**FIGURE 3.1.** The dramatic structure of Barton's primary goal.

**FIGURE 3.2.** The dramatic structure of Charlie's primary goal.
FIGURE 3.4. Barton's Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram with music.

1. Waves-Opening Typewriter
2. Interruption #2
3. Interruption #3
4. Interruption #4 ("Big Shoes")
5. Interruption #5
6. Barton Watches Boxing ("The Box" Part 2)
7. "Love Theme from Barton Fink" (film version)
8. "Barton in Shock"
9. "Barton in Flames"
10. "Typing Montage"


events
1. Behind the curtain of Barton's play
2. Dinner with Deek (the producer) and others
3. Private conversation with agent, Garland Stanford
4. Waves crash upon a large rock at beach
5. Barton checks in at the Hotel Earle
6. Barton takes the elevator and walks to his room
7. Barton explores his new room
8. Barton opens typewriter/mosquito prevents sleep
9. Barton meets Jack Lipnick
10. Barton starts writing
11. Writing interrupted by peeling wallpaper
12. Barton visits Ben Geisler at Geisler's office
13. Barton and Ben Geisler eat and talk
14. Barton meets W.P. Mayhew in the restroom
15. Barton meets Audrey at Mayhew's Bugalow
16. Barton hears neighbors having sex (?)
17. Barton attempts to work on script
18. Barton returns to work after Charlie leaves
19. Barton has a picnic with Mayhew and Audrey
20. Mosquito wakes Barton; He tries to write
21. Barton tries to write; distracted by noise
22. Geisler arranges for Barton to watch wrestling picture; Lipnick requests meeting
23. Barton watches wrestling picture
24. Barton tries to decide between orphan or dame
25. Barton calls Audrey for help
26. Audrey arrives at Barton's; they have sex
27. Barton smacks a mosquito on Audrey's body
28. Barton sits at his desk to collect his thoughts
29. Barton visits Lipnick's house to talk about his script
30. Barton reads the Bible while at his desk
31. Barton finally writes!
32. Barton calls Garland for encouragement
33. Barton sits back down and completes his script
34. Barton attends a USO dance party
35. Barton leaves the Hotel Earle for the last time
36. Barton tries to reach his family in New York by phone
37. Lipnick rejects Barton's script
38. Barton sits on the beach; meets a woman (from hotel picture?)
FIGURE 3.5. Charlie’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram without music.
3.7 The Cumulative Musical Process of Barton Fink

While much ink has been spilled concerning the unusual and perplexing issues of the film’s plot, the narrative information found in Carter Burwell’s score for the film has been virtually unexplored. The score, which was initially not requested by the Coen brothers because they conceived of the film as having no score at all, is centered on the completion of Barton’s primary goal, which is to reach and speak to the “common man” through his screenplay. The majority of Burwell’s relatively brief score (less than twenty-four minutes) consists of only one theme (i.e., the score is monothematic). Excluding the title and end credits, there are a total of seventeen musical cues throughout the film. I have included the music during the credits in the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram for the sake of completeness, but from this point forward I will explicitly state when they are included in the discussion; so, when I say “all the music in the film” I really mean all of the music between the opening and ending credits but not including them. Of these seventeen cues fourteen are derived from a single complete theme while the remaining three are unique instances of what I call Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style (Carter Burwell’s three musical types are discussed in section 1.2.4).

3.7.1 The Two Versions of Barton Fink’s Main Theme

Though fourteen of the film’s seventeen cues are derived from Barton Fink’s main theme, these cues can easily be broken down into two larger categories. In order to properly contextualize them, a discussion of the theme’s motives is required. The full theme includes a total of thirteen unique motives (see Figure 3.9). With these in mind, it can be seen that Burwell has divided the

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21 The scores in this chapter are my own personal transcriptions. This, of course, required a number of interpretive decisions to be made and therefore my versions may contain slight inconsistencies if compared to the original scores. Though I took great care to transcribe the scores accurately, the possibility for error is certainly possible and I take responsibility for those errors.

22 Randall Barnes, “Collaboration and Integration: A Method of Advancing Film Sound Based on the Coen Brothers’ Use of Sound and Their Mode of Production,” PhD thesis (Bournemouth University, 2005), 171.
fourteen appearances of the main theme into two distinct groups based upon which of the film’s primary goals they relate to. All of the cues with some version of the *Piano Motive* are associated with Barton’s primary goal and those without it are associated with Charlie’s. Charlie’s version focuses on the main theme’s string motives and it will simply be referred to as Charlie’s version of the main theme. On the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram (Figure 3.7) Barton and Charlie’s versions of the main theme are differentiated through color. Charlie’s version of the main theme is indicated with a mustard color while Barton’s is reflected with a spectrum of the reddish colors red, orange, and peach. The need for a spectrum of colors will be addressed in section 3.7.3 but first there are two outliers worthy of discussion.

### 3.7.2 Outliers of the Prevailing Thematic Layout

As mentioned previously, each version of the main theme is associated with one of the film’s two primary characters. Burwell links Barton with the Piano-Motive version (“Barton’s Version”) and Charlie with versions of the theme that exclude the Piano Motive (“Charlie’s Version”). Figure 3.7 illustrates that this is true in all but two cases. Event 28 is concerned with Barton but has Charlie’s version of the theme and Event 40 focuses on Charlie yet uses Barton’s version. Admittedly, this inconsistency is partially the result of the binary analytical decision to divide all the film’s events between Barton and Charlie. As Dunne warned, monological interpretations often result in all events being subsumed into an “organic” whole by judiciously selecting “only the details that fit or through a sublation of other details into some ‘higher’ form.”23 It should not be surprising that the creation of a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram for *Barton Fink*, being the well-known narrative puzzle that it is, would not fit neatly into any one analytical box. However, the loose box of primary goals that I have constructed fits surprisingly well. Even these two outliers take very little description to see their relevance to the goals of the characters.

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Event 28 (“Barton watches dailies from Sjöderberg’s wrestling picture”) depicts Barton in a screening theater watching the daily cuts from the film *Devil on a Canvas*. Barton is only in the theater to get ideas about the wrestling genre but instead of watching completed scenarios he is bombarded with take after take of large, vulgar-looking wrestlers reading corny lines, performing rehearsed dance-like “wrestling” procedures, and pinning each other into submission on a bouncy wrestling mat. Barton watches the screen with disbelief and is reluctant to stare at it head on. He had previously made it clear that the act of wrestling is unfamiliar to him and admitted his disinterest in the act itself. Earlier in the film (Event 21), Charlie actually attempted to show Barton the basics of wrestling on the floor of his hotel room. Barton was slightly injured during Charlie’s “illustration” and overall he seemed unimpressed by the implications of the scenario. Charlie, however, was very excited for the opportunity to show Barton the basics and there is every indication that a wrestling picture starring Wallace Beery would cater specifically to Charlie and many others just like him (i.e., the “common man”). It seems very likely that while Barton is seated alone in the screening theater he is actively reevaluating his previous understanding of who his neighbor truly is. The screening gives him a glimpse of Charlie’s barbaric inclinations and offers him an indication that Charlie is, by association, a violent man. The cue that plays during this scene (Cue 6: “The Box (Part 2) & Barton Watches Boxing”) includes the slow-string motive (minus the first note), an $8-\downarrow 7-\uparrow 7-8$ motive, followed by the $1-3-4-5$ motive which terminates with the implication of a Subtonic cadence in G Minor (see Figure 3.9 for musical notation). These motives, and the lack of the Piano Motive, are a clear indication that this music is associated with Charlie’s version of the theme and not Barton’s. This is the only instance of Charlie’s music playing while he is not onscreen and its use here foreshadows the violence that Charlie will bring into Barton’s life. It is also coupled with a

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24 Frank Lehman, “Hollywood Cadences: Music and the Structure of Cinematic Expectation,” *Music Theory Online* 19 no. 4 (December 2013). In this article Lehman outlines a number of harmonic cadential patterns that are common in Hollywood film-scoring practice. The *Subtonic Cadence* uses $\downarrow V/I$ as the cadential predominant.
substantial layer of musical sound design. In addition to the diegetic sounds one could expect from the film (i.e., projector noise, sounds of bodies slamming against the wrestling mat, etc.) the film’s sound designer, Skip Lievsay, incorporates a gravel-turning machine (which sounds like a low-pitched washing machine), shuffling glass (or possibly the closing of a metal gate), and the crescendoing of a tea kettle or a similar high-pitched whistling sound. Because this is the first time Charlie’s version of the theme is used in the film its reference can only be appreciated retrospectively and/or through repeated viewings of the film but becoming aware of its presence and meaning increases the long-range suspense of the film while decreasing the shock and confusion relating to Audrey’s murder.

The second thematic inconsistency occurs during Event 40 (“Charlie says goodbye to Barton; Gives Barton box”) where Cue 12 (“The Box’ Part 1A”) occurs. The cue begins with a unique version of the String Motive ($5\rightarrow4\rightarrow3\rightarrow2\rightarrow1$) that is paired with a registrally altered version of the Descending Bass Pizzicato Motive ($1\rightarrow3\rightarrow2\rightarrow1\downarrow7\uparrow6\downarrow6\downarrow5$) (see Figure 3.9). Both motives then transform into a string version of the Piano Motive without the immediate repetitions that are associated with it. Its entrance here, like that of Cue 6 in Event 28, is unique because Barton is not being interrupted or distracted from his work and because Charlie is in the room, although he is not for any of the other occurrences of the Piano Motive. The reason for this inconsistent motivic appearance is tied to the meaning associated with the box that Charlie gives Barton. At the time Charlie indicates that the box is filled with everything in the world that is important to him though he neglects to reveal its specific contents. Later, after Barton has just been informed by detectives Deutsch and Mastrionotti that Charlie is a murderer who is known to decapitate his victims and retain their heads, Barton grows suspicious of Charlie and ponders the box’s true cargo. After a brief visual examination he shakes it in an effort to determine its contents but never opens it. The implication, owing to the size of the box and Charlie’s fondness for head collection, is that it
contains Audrey’s missing head. This is never confirmed, but the audience does know that it is not filled with Charlie’s favorite things because in Event 54 he asserts that he lied about its contents and admits to not being the owner. This, coupled with the fact that Barton actually witnessed Charlie murder the two detectives, further implies that the box may very well contain Audrey’s head.

Burwell foreshadows the inspirational contents of the box by including the Piano Motive in Cue 12 (Event 40). The moment Barton moves the box from his bedside table to his workstation (Event 46) is the exact moment he is able tap into his creative motivation and overcome his crippling sense of writer’s block that has, up until this point, frustrated him greatly. Burwell’s decision to include the Piano Motive during Event 40 is again an instance of foreshadowing that indicates that the box relates to the completion of his primary goal. In Barton Fink these two instances stand alone in their role as brief preparatory indications that Burwell has inserted into the film in an effort to clarify the unorthodox elements of its narrative structure: Charlie’s murderous alter ego and the inspiration Barton receives from his mysterious box.

A third, and completely unique, exception of the Piano Motive occurring outside of the cumulative process can be found in Cue 9 (“Barton in Shock,” Events 34 and 35). This is the one instance in this film of Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style that includes prominent motives from the main theme (the Piano Motive in particular). When this happens in Fargo it is an important marker of structural significance but its usage here is altogether different and considerably less significant. On the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram its presence is indicated with a thick black border around the perimeter of a gray box with a red center at Events 34 and 35 (see Figure 3.8).

The cue presents only the briefest of fragments from the Piano Motive (represented by the red center) and is of a different order than all of the other instances of Barton’s version of the main theme. Its purpose here is as a leitmotivic reference to Barton’s primary goal which, like this instance of the motive, is fading even further from the possibility of completion due to the new and
FIGURE 3.8: Cue 9 (“Barton in Shock,” Events 34 and 35), the single instance of Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style with prominent motives.

34  1:09:53  Barton dismisses Charlie after screaming about Audrey
35  1:10:20  Barton sits at his desk to collect his thoughts

seemingly unsolvable problem of Audrey’s bloody murder having been dramatically thrust upon him.
3.7.3 The Cumulative Process of Barton’s Version of the Main Theme

In this section I will illustrate and focus upon the motivic construction and layout of Barton’s version of the main theme. The theme’s tonal construction, which is of the utmost importance for properly understanding the complete film, will be discussed in the following section. As stated before, Barton’s version of the main theme is represented on the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram with colors in the reddish spectrum (red, orange, and peach). Of the fourteen appearances of the main theme, ten are Barton’s version of the theme (i.e., they include the Piano Motive) while the remaining four are Charlie’s. Setting aside the three exceptions mentioned in the previous section, the complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram demonstrates a gradual color change that represents the most important structural organization of music in the film. The music has been composed and placed in such a way as to force the attention of the listener/viewer towards Event 47 which is the single most structurally significant event in the film. This is the moment that Barton finally overcomes his crippling writer’s block and dramatically taps into his deep well of creative energy that has, up until this point, remained inaccessible to him. The importance of this scene is rarely discussed in most of the literature on Barton Fink and when it is mentioned it is done so in passing or without great focus. I argue that in order to understand what Barton Fink is really about that the viewer/listener must pay attention to the design and structure of Carter Burwell’s score because it is here that he forcefully specifies that Event 47 is the epicenter of the film’s drama.

Barton’s version of the theme is designed with Event 47 (Cue 15) as the theme’s ultimate point of completion and the audience should experience it as such due to the compositional strategy Burwell set into motion at Event 8 where Barton first opens his typewriter. The strategy is one of thematic cumulation where the theme is initially presented only in fragments. As the film progresses
the theme accrues material, motives, length, and intensity until finally maturing into its complete form.

The theme’s process of maturation can be grouped into three distinct stages of completion. Stage One (Barton’s Version – In Progress) is the least complete and is represented with the peach color. At this stage the theme lacks metric regularity and presents only a few of the many motives, which are fragmented in these early appearances. This stage (present in Cues 1, 2, 3, 4, and 17) also encompasses the shift between tonal areas that will be discussed at length below. Stage Two (Barton’s Version – Nearing Completion) is the much more complete version of the theme and is represented with the color orange. This stage (present in Cues 5 and 7) includes the Repeating Bass Motive, Tubular Bells, and the Piano Motive in its nearly completed form. Stage Three (Barton’s Version – Complete) occurs only during Event 47, the significance of which was discussed above.

The full, Stage-Three version of the theme is comprised of many different motives. In order to illustrate the cumulative process more precisely it is necessary to present a catalogue of these motives. Figure 3.9 shows the full forms of each of the theme’s thirteen unique motives. With only a few, minor exceptions (two- and three-note adjustments typically between presentations of differing motives), all eight instances of Barton’s version of the main theme are comprised of only these elements. Their order, instrumentation, and associated scale degrees remain highly consistent from cue to cue. The variety found between instances of Barton’s version of the main theme stem from the number of unique motives included within each cue.

As mentioned earlier, a process of cumulation is what propels Barton’s version of the main theme throughout the pursuit of his primary goal. This process is summarized below in Figure 3.10 which displays all eight instances of Barton’s version of the main theme (excluding, of course, the outlying instance found in Cue 12) in a chronological depiction (from left to right) of their motivic contents. The Stage One cues (1, 2, 3, 4, and 17) are quite minimal in content and texture and
includes the following motives: Repeated Glockenspiel Attacks, Slow String Motive (\(\hat{5}-4-3-2-1\)), Piano Motive, Ascending String Motive (\(1-3-4-5\)), and String and/or Brass Swells. Most of the motives found in the Stage One cues are briefer versions of their later manifestations. In fact, the Slow String Motive and Piano Motive are distinctly truncated so in Figure 3.10 I have distinguished them from fuller manifestations by labeling them partial occurrences. This distinction is further designated with light-gray shading that contrasts with the dark-gray shading indicating motivic occurrences that are more complete.

The Stage Two cues (5 and 7) are considerably more complete than their Stage One predecessors and have full presentations of the following motives: Slow String Motive, Tubular Bell Attacks, Piano Motive, and Descending Pizzicato Bass. Cue 5 (“Interruption #5”) introduces the Ascending String Motive while Cue 7 (“Love Theme from Barton Fink”) introduces the Cimbalom and Rising Fifth motives. The Cimbalom motive is more of an orchestrational or timbral motive. Its scale-degree and rhythmic contents are derived from the Piano Motive, which it always doubles. As Figure 3.10 makes plain, Stage Three (Barton’s Version – Complete) in Cue 15 is the complete presentation of the main theme. It includes all of the motives that had already been heard and adds to them the Alternating Dyad Sextuplets, Muted Trumpet Line, Slow Descending Glissando (Strings), and Repeating Percussive Line motives. In addition to this saturation of motivic activity the cue is also the longest in duration.

After the cumulative process reaches its peak in Event 47 (“Barton Finally Writes!”), there is only one more presentation of Barton’s version of the main theme and it occurs during Event 55 (“Barton leaves the Earle for the last time”), where Barton trudges down the flame-filled hallway with only his manuscript and Charlie’s box in his hands. Barton’s stooped posture and the snail’s pace with which he walks down the hallway portrays a profound sense of defeat. As Figure 3.10 shows, Cue 17 (“Barton in Flames”) has returned to the Stage One level of thematic completion.
and, importantly, has dropped the hallmark of Barton’s version of the main theme, its quintessential Piano Motive. The preference for retaining this cue’s association with Barton’s instead of Charlie’s version of the theme is supported by the presence of the Rising Fifths and Alternating Dyad motives, which were acquired during the cumulative process in Cues 7 and 15 respectively. Carter Burwell has remarked that he felt the high register of the piano was a good choice for Barton because his passionate character reflected a child-like innocence. I think his perspective is quite informative in this last scene specifically because the piano has been omitted from what is clearly, given its motivic contents, Barton’s version of the theme. This omission indicates a loss of innocence. It indicates Barton has accepted defeat and his hopes to reach the “common man” through the Hollywood system have been dashed. In the following section I will show how the harmonic construction of the score further supports this perspective through the disjunction between the elation that Barton exudes while writing his script and Carter Burwell’s concurrent minor-mode music.

3.8 Tragic Modulation: Burwell’s Subtle Dramatic Irony

Although the design and layout of Carter Burwell’s score encourages the audience to rejoice with Barton as he finally triumphs over his writer’s block, the global change of key from B♭ major to G minor introduces a large-scale dramatic irony, or “an irony that plays on a disjunction between character and audience point of view” as Claire Colebrook defines it. The irony stems from the fact that, though Barton has finally reached the climax of his primary goal, his version of the main theme has permanently shifted from B♭ major to its relative key of G minor.

Figure 3.11 shows a harmonic summary of all the instances of Barton’s version of the main theme and illustrates the large-scale modulation that takes place in Cue 4 (“Big Shoes”) and persists

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throughout the remaining cues. Figure 3.12 shows the same summary placed onto a simplified version of the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram and situates the large-scale modulation into its proper context. Most importantly, Cue 15 (“Typing Montage”) is where Barton achieves success with his script but it is this cue in particular that Burwell strongly indicates to us (through repeated confirmations of the key as G minor and not its initial key of B♭) that Barton’s goal will end in tragedy. The final step of Barton’s creative journey requires the script’s approval by studio executive Jack Lipnick. Though Burwell’s harmonic design alerts the audience to Barton’s impending failure, Barton himself remains unaware. Burwell managed to accomplish this modulation without varying the most important identifying feature of Barton’s version of the main theme, pitch classes of the Piano Motive (i.e., pitch-class invariance). As Figure 3.13 shows, the first part of the Piano Motive contains only pitches that fit into both B♭ major and G minor.

Figure 3.13 presents the complete version of the Piano Motive. Only some of the “First Part” is used in four of the Stage One cues (1, 2, 3, and 4). Burwell avoids the leading tone and raised submediant scale degrees in the first part of the Piano Motive to conceal the G-minor nature of the complete motive that permeates the Stage Two and Stage Three cues. During the Stage One cues (excluding Cue 17) the Piano Motive is either heard alone or with pitch-class F in various registers, implying the dominant in B♭ major. As shown in Figure 3.13, a very obvious harmonization of the first half of the motive in the key of B♭ major would begin on tonic and end on the dominant. The lower voice supports this basic tonic/dominant harmonization indicated by the harmonic analysis below the first part of Figure 3.13.

26 Though associating a major key with success and a minor key with failure may seem like an elementary observation, its importance in Barton Fink should not be neglected. This is an association that is very likely to resonate with audience members who are familiar with film music (not to mention tonal music). One need look no further than John William’s famous themes from the Star Wars films to find major keys paired with positivity (“Main Title”) and minor keys with negativity (“Imperial March”).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Motives: Names and Notation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glockenspiel</td>
<td><strong>Repeated Glockenspiel Attacks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Glockenspiel Notation" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continues throughout cues, though often with occasional absences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violins</td>
<td><strong>Slow String Theme (5·4·3·2·1)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="String Theme Notation" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tubular Bells</td>
<td><strong>Tubular Bell Attacks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timbral motive that occurs as single attacks on the beat with multiple measures between individual attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Bass</td>
<td><strong>Descending Pizzicato Bass (1·3·2·1·1·7·5·6·8·8·1)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Pizzicato Bass Notation" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piano</td>
<td><strong>Piano Motive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Piano Motive Notation" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cimbalom</td>
<td><strong>Cimbalom Motive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timbral motive that doubles the Piano Motive (uses tremolando articulation instead of repeated attacks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Strings and Low Brass</td>
<td><strong>Stack of fifths (G-D-A, also occurs with F-C-G)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Stack of Fifths Notation" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 3.9. List of the thirteen motives found in the complete form of Barton’s version of the main theme.**
FIGURE 3.9 Continued.

- **Alternating Dyad Sexuplets**
- **Ascending String Motive (1-3-4-5)**
- **String and/or Brass Swells**
  Timbral motive that involves the dynamic swelling of single pitch classes by either the strings, brass, or both.
- **Muted Trumpet Line**
- **Slow Descending Glissando**
  Timbral motive that involves a very slow and quiet descending glissando. The means of production have not been identified.
- **Repeating Percussive Line**

*(This ending is often altered or missing)*
FIGURE 3.10. The motivic contents of the eight instances of Barton’s version of the main theme.
FIGURE 3.11. Illustration of all eight cues involved in Barton’s version of the main theme via harmonic summary to illustrate the large-scale modulation from B♭ major to G minor.
FIGURE 3.12: Harmonic summary of the large-scale modulation within the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram.
Figure 3.14 shows how Burwell uses invariance between the B♭-major and G-minor harmonizations of the Piano Motive. The sense of B♭ major has been implied in Cues 1, 2, 3, and 4 by removing the Gs found in the complete form’s bassline in the Piano Motive (Cues 5, 7, and 15). The complete bass line of the theme starts and ends on G but between these two endpoints it descends from B♭ down to D in a manner reminiscent of a lament-bass pattern, which allows the theme to secure a PAC with each of its repetitions (though, the leading tone is replaced by the subtonic).

FIGURE 3.13. Piano Motive with basic B♭-major harmonization of its first half.

FIGURE 3.14. Comparison of the initial and complete forms of the Piano Motive.
3.8.1 Cadential Design

The most important way that Burwell parallels Barton’s experience of frustration, writer’s block, and interruption is through his large-scale cadential planning in Barton’s version of the main theme. In this section I will show how Burwell has balanced levels of harmonic closure around the complete form of Barton’s version of the main theme (Cue 15, “Typing Montage”) through his gradual increase of cadential strength from half cadences to authentic ones and from weak key confirmation to insistent key assertions.

Barton’s biggest roadblock to working on his script is the fact that his creative urges are all thwarted by interruptions beyond his control. Most of these interruptions come in the form of Charlie barging into his room every time Barton is entering the creative frame of mind that allows him to be productive. The first interruption occurs during Event 10 when Barton becomes distracted by the laughing/crying fit Charlie is having next door. The walls are quite thin at the Earle and provide only a negligible sound barrier between the tenants’ rooms. Because of this initial interruption, Barton calls Chet at the front desk to complain about the noise that invariably leads to the beginning of Barton and Charlie’s troubled relationship. The second interruption occurs when Barton is distracted by the wallpaper peeling off of the walls in his room in Event 14. Interruption #3 results from Charlie coming over for a casual visit and “showing” Barton how to wrestle by pinning him, in a completely uninstructive manner, in a matter of seconds (Event 20). In Event 25 Charlie interrupts Barton’s work because the shoe cleaners have mistakenly swapped the two neighbors’ shoes. Just after this (Event 26) Barton is again distracted because of his noisy neighbors. His final interruption occurs during Event 31 when Audrey comes over to “help” him write his screenplay. Of course, no helping actually occurs and instead her visit proves to be a most disturbing distraction, although her presence (or maybe just the thought of her head) eventually brings Barton some strange motivation that allows him to overcome his writer’s block. So, in an indirect way,
Audrey does eventually provide Barton with the proper inspiration to complete his script, though the link between them can only be speculated upon.

The most captivating part of Burwell’s score is that it plays upon these constant interruptions by pairing their lack of resolution with the lack of resolution provided by half cadences. I will now turn to the cadential design of Barton’s version of the main theme in order to clarify this point.

Figure 3.11 shows that B♭ major is the only key emphasized in Cues 1, 2, and 3. The cumulative nature of Barton’s version of the theme requires an exploration of Cues 2 and 3 before Cue 1’s sparse context can be clarified. Cues 2 and 3 both present only enough of the theme to imply B♭ major without giving away that its larger harmonic context actually belongs to the key of G minor (as discussed above). Both cues end with dynamic swells on the pitch classes F (in the bass and doubled in higher registers) and C. Though these cues are brief, their pitch contents, location in the cue, and usage of dramatic swells in extreme registers all provide the listener with a sense of an emphatic half cadence in the key of B♭ major. Cue 1, on the other hand, is thinner in texture and pitch content, containing the pitches F6 (sustained continually with the violins) and F7 (evenly spaced glockenspiel attacks). This exact music occurs throughout Cue 2 (minus two measures of glockenspiel hits at its center) and the cumulative nature of the score implies that the Fs in Cue 1 exist in the same harmonic/scalar space as those in Cue 2 and therefore imply that if these Fs are to be assigned a harmonic context they would be the root of the dominant harmony in B♭ major as they are in Cues 2 and 3. This means that all three of these cues end with an impression of the dominant in B♭ major. Cue 4, however, is the first to break that pattern.

Cue 4 initiates the important shift to G minor. The cue begins in B♭ major with a lower and rhythmically reduced version of the Piano Motive played on the tubular bells. The middle of the cue
turns toward G minor and ends with a dramatically emphasized half cadence in that key. This marks the point at which Burwell begins to indicate to the audience that the heroic victory promised by the optimistic half cadences in B♭ major can no longer be assumed. As Figure 3.11 shows, B♭ major never returns.

Cues 5, 7, 15, and 17 are all in G minor but each has unique levels of harmonic closure. Cue 5 is the first cue to begin and end in G minor and it is the last to end with an emphatic half cadence. Cue 5 confirms G minor with a i-v-i-v harmonic structure but the texture is sparse, the motivic content is limited, and the concluding half cadence reemphasizes Barton’s sense of never-ending frustration. Cue 7 is comparably brief and it does actually close on tonic in G minor but this closure is fleeting and is a far cry from the cadential closure that follows it in Cue 15. At the end of this cue the constantly recurring, descending bass line from B♭ down to D is dramatically overtaken by frightening noises from the Hotel’s pipes during the film’s infamous shot of the camera leaving Barton and Audrey’s romance and entering the drain in Barton’s bathroom sink (Figure 3.15).

![Image](image1.png)

*FIGURE 3.15. Noises from the plumbing replace the score as the camera enters the drain in Barton’s bathroom.*

Burwell saves the emphatic cadential resolution for Cue 15 (“Barton Finally Writes”), which occurs during the climactic scene at Event 47 where Barton begins and finishes his script. During this cue all of the harmonic interruptions have finally been removed (which parallels the removal of Barton’s creative distractions) and are replaced by emphatic *authentic* cadences that result from
Burwell’s constant repetitions of the complete version of theme. In total, the theme is completed nearly six times throughout this Super Kernel that is the climax of Barton’s primary goal. Figure 3.16 shows a graph of the Cue’s harmonic structure and underscores the cue’s emphasis on harmonic resolution through its repeated authentic cadences. As shown previously in Figure 3.10 the theme now contains all of its motivic elements and almost provides the viewer with a similar type of resolution that Barton must be feeling as he writes. However, the awareness of the large-scale harmonic shift puts the audience at a distance from Barton because, though the work is complete, the change of mode from major to minor indicates that his work will ultimately be considered a failure. Curiously, Cue 15 ends on a very weak dominant. Up until this point half cadences have been paired with Barton’s interruptions. In this case, however, the cadence is weak and decidedly not emphatic as the others had been. The function of this weakened half cadence indicates that Barton’s journey is still incomplete because he has yet to submit his script and be confronted by Charlie.

The last instance of Barton’s version of the main theme (Cue 17) does not occur until after Charlie returns, kills the detectives, and confronts Barton about how he did not listen to him and that it was offensive for Barton to complain about Charlie making too much noise. Cue 17 (“Barton in Flames”) is the only cue that ends conclusively in G minor and the message it sends is very clear: Barton has failed. As he walks down the fiery hallway with his script and box in hand it seems that even Barton anticipates Lipnick’s upcoming rejection. Cue 17 provides the final confirmation of G minor. Because this cue ends conclusively on tonic, it comes as no surprise to the listener that Lipnick rejects Barton’s script in the following scene (Event 57). The rejection is Barton’s first opportunity to learn what Burwell had first suggested to the audience long ago with Cue 4 and confirmed beyond any doubt in Cue 15, which is that Barton has failed at his goal to reach his target audience and write a work “of, about, and for the common man.”
3.9 Conclusion

Though most of the scholarship on Barton Fink tends to focus on the logical and interpretational difficulties inherent in the film’s unique narrative structure, I hope to have shown that Burwell’s score provides a way into the story that offers new meaning and focus. Following the score does not provide all of the answers to this film and a number of mysteries still remain. I wonder what richer interpretations can be found concerning the fact that the unknown contents of Charlie’s box brings Barton a sudden swell of motivation, allowing him to complete his script. Does he know that it contains Audrey’s head? Concerning Charlie, I think there is more to be said about his character than the often-suggested, external metaphors of “Charlie as Satan” and the “Earle as Hell” that, while intriguing, lack strength in light of a plot that contains so much, often overlooked, internal logic. There are rumors that the Coens and John Turturro have discussed the possibility of reprising the story of Barton Fink. They have suggested they would skip thirty years of story time and pick back up with Barton, still played by Turturro, as a retiring literature professor. If such an intriguing film does ever come to fruition, I hope that it will provide new ways to view this mysterious and inspiring film.
FIGURE 3.16. Voice-leading sketch of the repeated authentic cadences in Barton’s version of the main theme (Cue 15, “Writing Montage,” Event 47). The use of open noteheads indicates that every structure seems equal, not that there are many structural closes.
CHAPTER 4

TOM’S “TWISTER”: MORE THAN 180° IN MILLER’S CROSSING’S LOVE TRIANGLES

4.1 Introduction

*Miller's Crossing*, The Coen brothers’ 1990 foray into early 20th-century gangster cinema, sends its clever, alcoholic, gambling-addicted protagonist, Tom Reagan, through a complex series of ever-changing allegiances that leave the viewer with a few important questions. Was everything part of Tom’s big plan? Is he really the nested-plot mastermind, *consigliere*-type character that his boss, Leo, and others make him out to be? Did he really fool all the gangsters in an entire city by contriving dizzying double-dealings or was it a series of coincidences and his failed attempt to find love with Verna that simply gave the impression of an adept architect capable of such a feat? A common theme in many of Coen brothers’ films is to place a character in an ordinary-enough setting and then proceed to slowly crush them beneath layers of complication until they reach their absolute breaking point.1 Subsequently, the Coens employ a particularly non-magical solution (i.e., without *deus ex machina*) to wrench the character out of his or her quagmire, surprising the character and the audience by solving the baffling and seemingly insoluble set of circumstances without cheating the film’s reality. Overcoming the antagonist in a typically heroic fashion is a real rarity in their films.

Often, the Coens solve their protagonists’ goals through happenstance. In *Burn After Reading* (2008), Linda Litzke manages to get the U.S. government to pay for her elective surgeries due to an accumulation of errors, bad judgments, and general stupidity. In *Miller's Crossing*, the protagonist’s

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1 In *The Big Lebowski*, for example, the accumulation of mistakes and miscalculations results in The Dude charging into the “Big Lebowski’s” home while his sidekick (Walter) knocks him out of his wheelchair. His true breaking point is reached soon after when he finally confronts Walter (John Goodman) about his mounting frustrations toward him. In *A Serious Man*, which is based upon the biblical story of Job, Larry Gopnik is blackmailed, harassed by bill collectors, divorced, forced to pay for the funeral of his wife’s new lover, and, finally, diagnosed with cancer. This film, unlike Job, is a counterexample among the Coens’ films because the protagonist is actually crushed by the weight of his situation and is not able to solve his many problems.
dumb luck is less obvious, but a close listening to Burwell’s music reveals that a large part of Tom’s success is the result of coincidences stemming from his inability to ignore feelings for Verna and use her as a tool. Given his reputation as an intelligent strategist, the characters in the film assume that Tom has simply “done it again,” but his numerous miscalculations, interminable good luck, and line from the final scene of the film (“I don’t know, Leo. Do you always know why you do things?”) inspire skepticism concerning his ability to successfully construct a feint-within-feint-within-feint-type scenario. The literature on the film repeatedly overlooks a single lingering question: is Tom’s love for Verna genuine? The answer lies in Carter Burwell’s score for the film.

Though Matthew McDonald’s analysis of the music from the film’s opening credits provides unique insight into the symbolism behind the film’s ever-present black-hat motive, the perspective provided from a comprehensive understanding of the entire score has yet to be explored. Using the large-scale overview provided by a Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram I will show that the score’s formal structure, cue style, and motivic/harmonic design imply that Tom’s love for Verna is not a cold and calculated means to an end, but rather that it is of equal or greater importance than his love for Leo.\(^2\) I will also illustrate how Burwell employed a large-scale harmonic disturbance throughout the film that clarifies and parallels its dramatic structure and how the film’s opening cue metaphorically parallels the problems that result from Tom’s refusal to be satisfied until both of his goals have been fulfilled.

4.2 Synopsis and Existing Literature

4.2.1 Synopsis

Tom Reagan is the advisor of Leo O’Bannon, the local crime boss of an unspecified city during America’s prohibition era. In a scene that parallels Francis Ford Coppola’s 1971 classic, The

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\(^2\) Event numbers will be provided throughout this chapter. These refer to the comprehensive list of events found on the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram in Figure 4.3.
*Godfather, Miller's Crossing* starts with Leo rejecting the proposal of Johnny Caspar, a man under Leo’s “protection” who is on the verge of outgrowing Leo’s control. Caspar wants permission to kill a bookie that he believes is selling tips on his fixed boxing matches. Unlike the scene in *The Godfather*, Leo protects the bookie, Bernie Bernbaum, and rejects Casper’s proposal because Bernie is the brother of his girlfriend, Verna Bernbaum. Tom, the advisor, thinks Leo has made the wrong decision and ultimately Leo’s decision upsets Caspar and becomes the stimulus for initiating a violent rivalry between the two men that persists until the end of the film.

The violence between Leo and Caspar begins, in Coenesque fashion, because of the accidental murder of “Rug” Daniels (one of Leo’s thugs) who was employed to keep an eye on Verna but was instead killed by Mink—lover of both Eddie “Dane” and Bernie—who thought, mistakenly, that “Rug” was following him. This leads to a series of back-and-forth attacks between Leo and Caspar that turn the city into a dangerous and unpredictable place. In the meantime, Tom has been having an affair with Leo’s girlfriend, Verna. Tom makes numerous attempts to pry Verna from Leo so that she can stop “spinning Leo in circles,” that is, manipulating Leo into doing things that compromise his position of power. Tom’s attempts are unsuccessful so he reluctantly admits the affair to Leo, which results in Leo rejecting both Tom and Verna.

Now a free agent, Tom “joins” Caspar’s side in a convoluted effort to overthrow him from the inside. His first assignment is to give up the location of Verna’s brother, the bookie Bernie Bernbaum, which he does. A possibly unexpected side effect of giving up Bernie is that Caspar asks Tom to kill the bookie. Faced with carrying out the murder himself, Tom buckles and lets Bernie escape while leading Caspar to believe that he has taken care of the job. Caspar’s right-hand man, Eddie “Dane,” suspects Tom is untrustworthy and insists on seeing proof of Bernie’s murder. To make Bernie’s fake death believable Bernie kills his lover Mink and places the body at the scene of the crime but disfigures Mink’s face to obscure his identity. The ploy works and Bernie stays hidden...
for a while. He eventually grows tired of hiding, however, and blackmails Tom by threatening to expose Tom’s scheme.

Meanwhile, Tom’s relationship with Verna turns sour after she learns of Bernie’s “death” and Leo’s position of authority is nearly supplanted by Caspar’s growing power. Always suspicious of Tom, Eddie “Dane” continues his investigation into Tom’s true plan and plots a dramatic confrontation against him in Caspar’s presence. While Tom is almost choked to death by Eddie, Caspar has a change of heart—due to Tom’s numerous suggestions that Eddie “Dane” and Mink are double crossing him—and decides that Eddie is guilty of double-dealing, not Tom, and kills the “Dane” himself. Tom continues his charade and stages a final battle between Caspar and Bernie that results in Caspar’s death.

At this point, both Tom and Bernie have freed themselves from Caspar’s grip and they could potentially return to their previous roles. Tom, however, bears a grudge against Bernie for blackmailing him so Tom murders him and stages the scene to imply Caspar and Bernie killed each other. With Caspar, Eddie “Dane,” and Bernie out of the way, Tom attempts to return to his original position as advisor to Leo, but before this opportunity presents itself Leo reveals that he has accepted Verna’s proposal for marriage. Tom is shocked that Verna has chosen Leo instead of him and refuses Leo’s offer of employment and comradery. The film ends with Tom alone in the forest having lost both Leo and Verna.

4.2.2 Relationship Triangles

One of the main sources of complexity in the film’s plot is its two love triangles, the homosexual triangle (Bernie, the “Dane,” and Mink) and the heterosexual triangle (Tom, Verna, and Leo). In this section, I will argue for a more nuanced variant of the dual-love-triangle view espoused by many film scholars, including Joel Coen himself. The relationship triangle I propose will be used to: (1) highlight Bernie’s importance and relationship with both triangles, (2) provide a stronger
parallel between the triangles, and (3) use Carter Burwell’s score as evidence that Tom’s love for Verna is genuine and of central importance to understanding his concealed motivations.³

Erica Rowell indicated that Joel Coen imagined the two triangles as mirror images, or, “two triangles staring at each other.”⁴ Because the triangles are not equal concerning character importance, I have categorized them as primary and secondary triangles. The primary love triangle (heterosexual) involves Tom and Leo who both desire Verna. The secondary triangle (homosexual), which is secondary because it concerns secondary characters, involves Bernie, Eddie “Dane,” and Mink. The secondary triangle is comparatively backgrounded in the film and only directly suggested by Tom through a few off-hand remarks.⁵ The “Dane” considers Mink to be his personal mate and

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⁴ Erica Rowell, *The Brothers Grimm*, 81.

⁵ During a short conversation with Mink (Event 10), Tom suggests that the “Dane” would grow jealous if he found out about Mink and Bernie’s relationship (“If Eddie ‘Dane’ finds out that you got another ‘amigo’ … well, I don’t peg him
his anger towards Bernie is caused by his knowledge of Mink and Bernie having a relationship of their own. Each triangle contains one character who is the object of affection for two characters. Tom and Leo desire Verna while Eddie “Dane” and Bernie desire Mink. Figure 4.1 is a visual representation of this relationship. I will alter this perspective in an effort to capture two important features of the story: (1) to show how Bernie functions as the actual connection between the two groups of characters; and (2) to include Caspar—the central character that is noticeably absent from the love-triangle arrangement—to show the parallel position that he and Leo hold.

Figure 4.2 displays the character connections in a way that emphasizes three one-way relationships between them—protection, service, and affection. These three relationships are, of course, not intended to capture all of the connections between characters in the film, but are important for a more complete understanding of these characters, and they illustrate the strong parallels between the two groups. Though love is obviously important in these triangles, I have changed the focus from affection to the more general word “relationship.”

The relationship triangles in Figure 4.2 show that Tom and Eddie “Dane” have a mirrored position in their respective triangles because both operate as advisors to their respective bosses, Leo and Caspar, and are therefore serving them throughout the film. They also parallel each other by carrying on a secret love affair with the third member of their relationship triangles, Verna for Tom and Mink for Eddie. Tom’s love for Verna is often considered to be subordinate to his service to Leo but, as I will show below, Burwell’s music suggests that Tom desires to be with Verna throughout the film. The relationship parallel between the two crime bosses, Leo and Caspar, is that they are both unknowingly protecting their respective assistants’ secret love interests. A key

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for the understanding type”). Later, during Event 37, Tom tries to convince Caspar that Eddie “Dane” is lying to protect his lover, Mink (“Course, there’s always that wild card when love is involved.”).
difference is that Leo is romantically involved with Verna and Caspar is not in love with Mink but, importantly, they are both blinded to the fact that Verna and Mink are manipulating them.

As Figure 4.2 shows, Bernie is the central connection between the two relationship triangles. Both Verna and Mink spend most the film trying to protect Bernie (a favor that truly goes underappreciated, especially for Mink who eventually dies at Bernie’s hands). Verna protects Bernie because he is her brother and Mink protects him because he is his lover. As the diagram indicates, Bernie is the one responsible for bringing the two crime bosses together and the crime bosses’ allegiance to the ones they protect keeps them from freeing themselves from the results of Bernie’s devious dealings. Both Tom and Eddie “Dane” wish to sever their respective triangle’s association with Bernie. Eddie wants to keep Mink to himself while simultaneously fulfilling his duty to protect his boss, Caspar. Similarly, Tom wishes to have Verna to himself and to serve Leo by keeping him in power. In addition to showing that Bernie brings the two triangles together, the relationship triangle
in Figure 4.2 also shows how similar Tom and Eddie’s goals are, even if they always seem to be at each other’s throats. If either of them could manage to sever Bernie’s connection, the primary barrier to Tom and Eddie’s respective goals would be eliminated.

Tom’s two goals, supporting Leo and winning Verna, seem diametrically opposed due to Leo’s competing interest for Verna’s affection, but Tom’s goals are different in nature; one is a business decision and the other is a personal, romantic one. He knows that Verna is putting Leo in a compromised position by protecting her brother, Bernie, and for that reason, Tom is trying cut the tie between the two siblings. While this is the purely professional aspect of Tom’s mission of protecting Leo, it also has important repercussions involving his relationship with Verna. Tom believes that Verna is only interested in using Leo to protect her brother, Bernie. If Verna and Leo’s relationship could be severed, she would no longer have a reason to divide her affections between the Tom and Leo, and Tom could have her to himself. Additionally, Verna’s separation from Leo would protect his position of power because Leo could give Bernie to Caspar without worrying about Verna’s reaction.

Though Tom has the opportunity to independently achieve both of his goals during the course of the film, he never has the opportunity to achieve them simultaneously, which is the only scenario he intends to accept. Once Leo discards Tom and Verna, after becoming aware of their relationship, Verna presents herself to Tom as a single woman during Event 28 giving him the opportunity to achieve his goal of attaining her affections.⁶ During this event, Tom’s reaction to Verna’s offer appears to be mixed and he certainly never indicates relief or victory. The situation only presents an opportunity for another sexual encounter between the two. Concerning his other goal, keeping Leo in power, Tom has two opportunities to achieve it: Event 62 when Leo literally

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⁶ Again, the event numbers provided throughout this chapter are referencing the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram in Figure 4.3.
begs Tom to come back and work for him and Event 33 when Tom has the unexpected opportunity to kill Bernie himself at Miller’s Crossing. Ultimately, he cannot pull the trigger on Bernie thus ruining his opportunity to solve his goal of returning Leo to power. Knowing why Tom spares Bernie’s life at Miller’s Crossing is paramount to understanding his relationship with Leo and Verna. Assuming it was not part of Tom’s plan to be blackmailed by Bernie after sparing his life at Miller’s Crossing, Tom must have spared Bernie to save Tom’s relationship with Verna, knowing she would never take him back if he killed Bernie. At the same time, Tom hoped that Bernie’s “disappearance” would be enough to satisfy Leo and get Caspar to trust him long enough for him, Tom, to successfully infiltrate Caspar’s inner circle and remove his power from the inside. If Tom did not care about Verna he could have just killed Bernie (assuming it was not simply fear that kept him from killing him) and saved himself the danger of exposing his false pretenses for joining up with Caspar. But as the score suggests, Tom’s love for Verna is genuine, making her brother Bernie’s murder a sensitive issue.

Eventually Tom does kill Bernie but only on his own terms. After carrying out the scheme (i.e., framing Caspar for the murder to remove himself from suspicion) we finally see Tom in his only happy state. He seems almost smug after finding a way to return his boss to power while keeping his relationship with Verna intact.

Of course, as in so many other Coen films (e.g., Barton Fink, The Man Who Wasn’t There, A Serious Man) the protagonist gets a final dose of bad news rendering his entire quest a failure. In the final scene, when Tom meets Verna and Leo at Bernie’s embarrassingly desolate burial, it becomes clear that Verna has not fallen for Tom’s ploy and resents him for Bernie’s death (Event 62). For a moment, Tom keeps his spirits up until the Leo reveals that he has accepted Verna’s proposal for marriage. The lightness in Tom’s expression, which he had carried with him since killing Bernie, washes away instantly as he realizes that Verna is officially out of reach. He could have pieced
together that Verna and Leo had patched things up by virtue of the fact that Leo was attending Bernie’s funeral but, for Tom, this was no indication that Verna was completely unavailable. Even her final comment to him (“Drop dead”) cannot be taken too seriously because the last time she said this to him (Event 22) they ended up in a passionate embrace only minutes later. Tom’s failure only truly sets in after when Leo delivers the news of the engagement. At that moment Tom realizes that attaining his two goals, both Leo and Verna, is not possible so he rejects Leo’s offer of employment, which results in Tom being alone and unsuccessful at end of Miller’s Crossing. He had opportunities to have Verna and Leo separately but ultimately renounced them both. As Tom stands alone at Bernie’s burial, the film’s main theme plays and bridges the gap from the last scene into the end credits. Below I will discuss how Carter Burwell’s score establishes Tom’s love for Verna throughout the film and how the film’s final cue provides insight into why Tom refuses to join up with Leo at the end of the film.

4.2.3 Literature Focusing on the Function of Music in Miller’s Crossing

In this section I review the small amount of literature concerning the interpretation of Carter Burwell’s score for Miller’s Crossing and I propose an alternative interpretation that is supported by my analysis of the score’s large-scale layout. Though Carter Burwell intended for his music to convey the brotherly love between Tom and Leo, I will show that its primary use during scenes with Verna and Bernie suggests Tom’s love for Verna, not Leo.

The assassination attempt on Leo that takes place at his home (Event 23) is the one scene frequently discussed concerning the music in Miller’s Crossing. Besides being known as a great “tough-guy scene” for Leo and as probably the most extravagant display of human convulsions that
result from shooting someone with an automatic weapon (yielding what the Coens refer to as the “Thompson Jitterbug”), the scene is also well known for its seamless transition from diegetic to non-diegetic music using a specially recorded version of the famous Irish folk tune “Danny Boy” (sung by Irish tenor Frank Patterson). Discussions of this scene focus on how “Danny Boy” is a song chosen by Leo as he leisurely smokes a cigar alone in bed, but when it leaves the diegesis it becomes a representation of Leo’s inner passion and sentimentality that he masks with his hardened gangster persona.  

This song only appears once in the film, it was not written (or orchestrated) by Carter Burwell, and does not seem to relate to the protagonist, Tom. For these reasons it does not factor into my readings of the large-scale function and meaning of Carter Burwell’s score.

4.2.3.1 Matthew McDonald

There are only two writers who discuss Burwell’s score in any detail: Matthew McDonald and the composer himself. McDonald’s article, which examines meaning in the music of Miller’s Crossing, Blood Simple, and A Serious Man, suggests a consistent lack of concrete meaning in films by the Coens. As he says, “The absence of concrete meanings is not only a feature of the Coens’ films, of course, but one of their primary themes…. in their worldview, things don’t happen for a reason; they just happen.”  

McDonald focuses on the parenthetical nature of part of the film’s first cue, “Opening Titles,” which plays during the opening credits sequence. The visual track depicts a disembodied black hat blowing through the forest (which we latter find out is probably Tom’s hat blowing through Miller’s Crossing when Eddie “Dane” attempts to verify Bernie’s death). The Coens claim that the film’s many hats are inconsequential and McDonald agrees that there is some truth to this. He says, “The parenthetical nature of bars 10-12 underscores the image of the hat

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blowing in the wind as similarly parenthetical.” His larger argument is that even though the hats may not be central to the unfolding of the plot, like many parentheticals in the Coens’ films, it is elevated to the level of the symbolic: “losing the hat is a symbol of sex and death.”

4.2.3.2 Carter Burwell

Carter Burwell has a very clear idea about the function of his score for *Miller’s Crossing*. He intended it to suggest a great love between Tom and Leo:

I thought that while you’re sitting through this film, you might want some emotional reference as to what his motivations might be. I thought that if I could say, right at the top of the film, that there’s a great love between these two men … and if I’ve established a theme for that love, then later on, when Gabriel Byrne [Tom] is by himself and is apparently a traitor, this theme could come back and could remind us what’s going on in his heart.

This plan, however, becomes complicated by the lack of location for establishing the love between them.

There was actually no scene at the beginning of the movie where I could put this theme…. So the best that I could do was to put this theme on the opening titles…. So that’s where I end up putting the theme and hopefully it still did, on some level, what I wanted it to do.

Recognizing the lack of association between the main theme and Tom and Leo’s relationship is, however, critically important because it allows for the theme’s actual association between Tom and Verna to emerge.

4.2.3.3 A New Perspective: Tom’s Split Desire

Though Burwell articulated his own intentions clearly, I have found that they do not entirely match up with my experience or my study of the large-scale structure of the score. Tom’s focus is not solely on Leo but is instead split between wanting both Leo and Verna at the same time. My

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10 McDonald, “Mountains, Music, and Murder, 95.
11 McDonald, “Mountains, Music, and Murder, 93.
interpretation captures Burwell’s intent but problematizes its simplicity drawing on McDonald’s perspective concerning uncertainty of meaning. The film’s large-scale structure will be discussed in following section to show how Burwell’s score indicates a much stronger connection between Tom and Verna than it shows between Tom and Leo.

4.3 Miller’s Crossing’s Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram

Miller’s Crossing differs from Fargo and Barton Fink in that instead of having two primary goals associated with two different characters it has two primary goals associated with a single character, Tom. These goals are, in no particular order: (1) returning Leo to power; and (2) attaining Verna’s affections. As simple as these goals may seem they come with an important stipulation: Tom only wishes to succeed with these goals if he can have them both. In other words, achieving success with either goal is not enough to be successful with that goal. Tom’s goals are illustrated in the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram in Figure 4.3.

Though Tom’s goals involving Leo and Verna are clear enough in the film, the relationship between the two goals is less clear. The contingency of these goals becomes clear when considering that Tom is presented with the resolution for each of his goals individually but ultimately rejects them. In Event 28, Verna arrives at Tom’s apartment and tells him that he can finally have her to himself even if he had to take the long way around to get her. In other words, Tom got Verna away from Leo by admitting their secret affair to him instead of just asking Verna directly to leave Leo. Instead of simply acknowledging victory, Tom rejects this partial solution by continuing his attempt to infiltrate Caspar’s operation, which would be unnecessary if having Verna to himself was his primary goal. Similarly, though in a more direct fashion, Leo practically begs Tom to be reinstated as his advisor and Tom takes no time in rejecting the proposal (Event 62). This is a surprising moment in the film because it seemed to be driving towards this moment of reconciliation but instead it turns out to be the point at which Tom decides his pursuit has ultimately failed. In the following section, I
will demonstrate how the final cue (“End Titles”) serves to remind the audience that Tom’s feelings for Verna inspired him to reject Leo’s offer.

The rejection of both goals (at different times) makes the viewer wonder what Tom must have been trying to accomplish if it was not to attain Verna’s affections or return Leo to power. The answer to this question can be gathered from the two interactions leading up to Tom and Leo’s final talk in Event 62 and is confirmed by the final musical cue. The first interaction, Event 61, is when Tom attempts to reunite with Leo and engages in a friendly exchange with Terry (the man who beat him for being on the wrong team in Event 36). It is critical that Tom’s cheerful mood be taken into account during this scene. The number of times that Tom seems genuinely happy are noticeably few in number. The next scene (Bernie’s burial, Event 62) involves Tom, Leo, and Verna and illustrates that Tom still has the same positive mood that he displayed at Leo’s club.

The telling change in Tom’s demeanor occurs when Leo says he has accepted Verna’s proposal for marriage. Tom’s face drops and he falls silent as he comes to terms with the surprising news. Before this news, it would have been safe to assume that Tom was just about to rejoin Leo, but afterwards it seems as though Tom has sealed the door to that possibility forever. What is it about Verna’s marriage proposal that made Tom reject Leo so quickly? Two reasons come to mind. (1) Verna marrying Leo means that she has finally decided between the two men and it was not in Tom’s favor; or (2) Tom’s goal was to rid Verna of her power over Leo so that Tom could keep her from “spinning Leo in circles.” I believe that option 1 is the most likely because of the lengths he goes through to keep Bernie alive. Doing so means that Tom was still hoping to maintain his relationship with Verna. As I will demonstrate below, the film’s main musical theme, which is associated with Tom’s love for Verna, also indicates that Tom rejects Leo because of his desire for Verna.
FIGURE 4.3: Complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram with music for Miller’s *Crossing*.
4.3.1 The Music Says “Tom and Verna,” Not “Tom and Leo”

As mentioned previously, a consideration of the story within the context of Burwell’s monothematic score clarifies Tom’s feelings for Verna and Leo.\textsuperscript{14} Figure 4.4 provides a concise linear arrangement of all the cues in the film along with representative screenshots that capture the essence of these scenes. All of these scenes feature Tom but each includes or is associated with another character. The top of the figure indicates the additional character the scene is associated with (purple for Verna, light blue for Bernie, and magenta for Leo). As indicated in the legend on the right, Burwell’s three musical styles (discussed in section 1.2.4) are specified with three different versions of a green square. The yellow and orange items in the lower half indicate the interval size of Miller’s Motive (discussed below) during the cues set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal and Unstable Styles. The bottom of the figure indicates the harmony with which the cue ends. The cues that end on tonic or dominant are categorized as “stable” and those that end elsewhere or are not tonal are labeled “unstable.”

The evidence in the figure calls into question the reality of Burwell’s claimed intention for the theme to be about a great love between Tom and Leo. After seeing how strongly the theme becomes associated with Verna and Bernie, and given that the music is only associated with Leo during the final scene, it becomes a tall order to retrospectively interpret the entire score as commenting on Tom and Leo’s relationship. Even the final cue is not very clearly associated with Leo, since this is where Tom realizes that his attempt to be with Verna has failed. This further weakens the perspective that the film is about Tom and Leo and strengthens my position that Tom

\textsuperscript{14} The scores in this chapter are my own personal transcriptions. This, of course, required a number of interpretive decisions to be made and therefore my versions may contain slight inconsistencies if compared to the original scores. Though I took great care to transcribe the scores accurately, the possibility for error is certainly possible and I take responsibility for those errors.
really wants Leo and Verna simultaneously. Because he cannot have them both at the same time, he has to reject Leo’s final offer to work together again.

Figure 4.4 also shows that the large-scale musical layout supports a sympathetic appreciation of Tom’s relationship with Verna. That fact that Tom is able to return Leo to power encourages the audience to believe, as Leo does, that Tom is a master strategist who designed and carried out an elaborate scheme that included the seduction of Verna only for the sake of returning Leo to power. However, the audience knows a number of things that Leo does not. Tom made mistakes (faking Bernie’s death, Event 34), got lucky (Caspar killed Eddie “Dane,” 54), and was wrong about how Verna would react to the staging of Bernie’s death (Event 62). Most importantly, he spared Bernie at Miller’s Crossing because of his legitimate love for Verna, not to protect Leo. This is confirmed by the stable version of the theme presented at Event 34 (“After Miller’s Crossing,” Cue 7) because—as demonstrated in Figure 4.4—it has been consistently associated with Tom and Verna’s relationship, meaning the music suggests Tom spared Bernie for Verna.

Tom’s implicit master plan for Leo is increasingly called into doubt when Tom responds to Leo’s question about why he picked a fight with him in the first place during Event 62 (“I don’t know; do you always know why you do things, Leo?”). Though McDonald suggests caution when determining specific meaning in the Coens’ films, I find the music’s constant association with Tom and Verna (as established in Figures 4.3 and 4.4) to provide a strong case for establishing Tom’s dedication to maintaining his relationship with her. Verna’s part in Tom’s plan is not simply a means to an end, but rather, part of his final goal.
FIGURE 4.4: Illustration of character cue relationships, changing harmonic stability, and motivic alteration.
4.4 Detailed Analysis: Motivic Signification, Large-Scale Tonal Instability, and Foreshadowing the Failure of Tom’s Conditional Goals

In this section I will discuss the importance of the main theme’s oboe motive, which permeates the score and links Burwell’s large-scale tonal instability to the entire film’s dramatic structure. In addition, I will show how the cue “Opening Titles” foreshadows Tom’s requirement that both of his distinct goals be met before he feels satisfied and how “Opening Titles” implies the eventual failure of Tom’s pursuits.

As detailed in Chapter 1 (1.2.4), Carter Burwell typically casts his cues in one of the three styles (Stable Tonal, Dramatic Tonal, and Unstable). All three styles are used in Miller’s Crossing and the score’s most important motive can be found in each one. Cue 3 (“Leo Leaves after Looking for Verna,” Event 7) is a unique version of the main theme that is unusual in this film and in Burwell’s other scores. It is the only instance of a cue that is similar to the main theme in style yet only contains a single motive from it. In this case, the motive is not Miller’s Motive but the \( \frac{4}{3} \cdot \frac{2}{3} \cdot 1 \) motive found in the second phrase of the main theme (Cue 0, “Opening Titles”). The key, instrumentation, tempo, and general style are the same but, unlike every other presentation of the main theme, it is not just a truncation but is instead a statement of “similar” material set in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style. The cue provides the same function as a regular thematic statement, seems to bear no larger signification, and it is an isolated instance of such a cue in the films surveyed so a new category was not used to account for it.

4.4.1 Motivic Modification Indicates the Switch from Threat to Action and Leads to Tom’s Failure

Miller’s Crossing contains an instance of large-scale motivic manipulation not present in either Barton Fink or Fargo. In this section, I will show how Burwell’s manipulation of a short motive from the main theme from major third to minor third becomes an aural signal to the audience that
indicates the type of violence they are about to encounter. The major third implies only the threat of violence but its change to minor suggests actual violence is on the horizon.

### 4.4.1.1 Origin of Miller’s Motive (descending third)

The film’s main theme (first presented in the opening credits) features an Irish folk melody modified and arranged by Burwell for large orchestra (see the excerpt in Figure 4.5). At the time, this was the largest ensemble for which he had ever written and it represents his first attempt at traditional, Hollywoodesque film music. Throughout the score, the melody is introduced in the oboe, and after its initial presentation it is either taken up by the clarinet, bassoon, and/or strings. The descending third presented by the oboe just after the beginning of the tune (which occurs first from D\(^3\)-B\(^4\)) acquires significance throughout the main theme due to repetition at various pitch levels and emphasis in the melodic instruments (oboe, clarinet, and strings). This motive is used throughout the entire score to refer to the main theme. Figure 4.6 shows a voice-leading sketch of the first phrase with the descending third motive bracketed. This is by far the most important motive in *Miller’s Crossing* and it will be referred to as Miller’s Motive.

### 4.4.1.2 Miller’s Motive in Major and Minor

Aside from the fourth instance of Miller’s Motive shown in Figure 4.6 (C\(^5\)-A\(^6\)), the motive always involves the pitch classes D and B or B and G and the first note of the two-note motive is accented. Every instance of the main theme (Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style) includes this motive the same way each time, though truncated versions of the main theme contain as little as one instance (e.g., Cue 9 [“All a you Whores”] and Cue 12 [“He Didn’t Like his Friends”]). Miller’s Motive, then, is always a descending third but the main theme presents it as a minor third and a major third with no discernable difference of affect or meaning accompanying this alteration. However, the cues cast

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15 The tune goes by many names including “Limerick’s Lamentation,” “Lochaber No More,” and “Marbhna Luimni.”
in Burwell’s Dramatic and Unstable Styles rely exclusively on this difference between its major and minor versions. Figure 4.4, discussed above, contains a number of components that will be explained below, but for now I will focus on the green-colored information in the middle row and the yellow and orange information below it.

The middle row (green) places each cue into its stylistic category. The majority of the cues are straightforward thematic statements (solid green) but Cues 6, 9, 11, 13, and 14 are not. Cues 6, 9, and 14 are set in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style while 11 and 13 are in his Unstable Style. All are paired with violence in some way and contain versions of Miller’s Motive but some are realized as a major third while others a minor third (either B-G or B♭-G, respectively). One exception should be noted: Cue 6 (“Miller’s Crossing,” Events 32 and 33) features more of the theme than just the descending third. As shown in Figure 4.7, it features the first five notes of the theme. Because this extended version of the motive expresses a G-major triad and specifically does not include the B flat that is present in all the minor-third versions of the motive, I consider this instance to bear a stronger association with the B-G version of the motive instead of the B♭-G version.

This difference of interval quality (M3 or m3) is an indication of the type of violence that the viewer is about to encounter. During Cue 6 (“Miller’s Crossing,” Events 32-33), Tom is walking Bernie into the forest to kill him, but ultimately decides not to follow through. This instance of the motive, as discussed above, is manifested through a G-major triad and therefore indicates to the audience that only the threat of violence will occur.

Another threat of violence indicated by the major version of Miller’s Motive occurs after Eddie “Dane” breaks into Verna’s apartment to investigate Tom’s motivation for switching from Leo’s team to Caspar’s in Event 40. Verna escapes because Leo’s men distract the “Dane” while they attempt to protect her from harm. They fail conclusively because Eddie kills them, which gives Verna enough time to escape through the window. The scene ends with Eddie scratching his
whiskers with his gun, muttering, “Go ahead and run, sweetie. I’ll track down all a you whores.” This potential foreshadowing is only an idle threat because the “Dane” cannot see it through to completion. Like Event 33, this scene only involves the threat of violence but the victim is Tom this time. Eddie’s use of the plural “whores” is perplexing but telling. He is obviously referring to Verna whom he just accused of “sluttin’ around with Tom.” The other “whore” he is referring to is Bernie. This sexually charged comment is the only confirmation provided by Eddie “Dane” of his awareness of the homosexual love triangle, of which he is an integral part. In these three cues (6, 7, and 9), the M3 version of Miller’s Motive is featured, again indicating that violence will be threatened but not carried out.

After this point, the film’s mounting tension is elevated from threat to actualization and Burwell indicates this in each cue before the violence occurs through his statements of the minor version of Miller’s Motive (B♭-G). Each instance of actual violence occurs against one of the seven characters involved in the relationship triangles (Figure 4.4, Events 54, 58, and 59). This has the same effect of a parallel operation in transformational theory from major to minor, a tried and true indication that a given situation has taken a turn for the worse (akin to Hepokoski and Darcy’s “lights-out” effect). This is indicated by the yellow and orange arrows on Figure 4.4. Cue 11 (“Nightmare in the Trophy Room”) is the least stable cue in the film. Comprised of nontraditional orchestral sounds, extreme registration, no perceivable metric framework, and non-triadic pitch materials, this distinctly post-modern cue is paired with the film’s most gruesome depiction of violence. Indeed, this is the scene where Eddie the “Dane” strangles Tom to within an inch of his life. Besides being generally distrustful and at odds with Tom, Eddie has recently discovered that Mink was murdered and placed out at Miller’s Crossing to pose as Bernie’s body. In typical

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Coenesque fashion, the action now speeds up due to a series of misunderstandings: Eddie acts on an incorrect assumption (Eddie thinks Tom killed Mink but Bernie actually did) and Caspar finally decides, also incorrectly, that Tom is the one telling the truth, which results in Caspar killing the “Dane” to save Tom’s life. This is the violent climactic peak of the film and so, true to Burwell’s style, it is accompanied by the least stable music and the upcoming violence is announced at its beginning with the minor version of Miller’s Motive.

Though Eddie “Dane’s” murder is an important aspect of the narrative structure, the final two violent cues (13 “Tom Confronts Bernie at his Apartment” and 14 “What Heart?”) occur at Super Kernels (Event 58 and 59), therefore they are more structurally essential to solving Tom’s two goals. They both involve actual violence (Caspar’s death, then Bernie’s) and so they feature the m3-version of Miller’s Motive (B♭-G). Similar to *Fargo*, these two Super Kernels occur within the space of a single scene (though they take place over the course of two events). In *Fargo* the two events relate to a single dramatic pyramid but in *Miller’s Crossing* they relate to two different pyramids (the climax in each case). At Event 54, Tom stages a meeting between Bernie and Caspar (the only remaining men who obstruct Tom’s goals). He expects that one will kill the other, and according to him, he bets that Bernie will come out the victor (the only bet he wins in the entire film). Event 58 is where Tom arrives at his own apartment and sees Caspar’s bloody head protruding into the stairwell that leads to his door. The next event, Event 59, is Tom’s final confrontation with Bernie. To reflect the structural importance of this event, as opposed to primarily emphasizing the on-screen violence, Burwell changes the music from his Unstable Style to his Dramatic Tonal Style. This is a the same procedure he follows in *Fargo* where the senseless murders committed by Carl are paired with Burwell’s Unstable Style, but the pivotal “woodchipper scene” that closes off the film’s primary drama is accompanied by Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style with prominent motives from the main theme (The Sheep Theme, in that case).
During Event 59, Tom finally discovers the opportunity to achieve both of his primary goals while exacting his revenge upon Bernie. Again, Burwell employs Miller’s Motive in its m3 form to indicate that actual violence is just around the corner. Tom kills Bernie and stages the scene to give the impression to the police (and hopefully Verna) that Bernie and Caspar killed each other. He knows Caspar’s death will restore Leo to power. He thinks Bernie’s death, at the hand of another, will take away Verna’s need to date and manipulate Leo, thus freeing her for himself. Though his plan is logical, Verna ultimately considers Bernie’s death to be Tom’s fault. The reason for her suspicion is never revealed but her decision to propose to Leo, even with her brother out of the way, is her only way to get back at Tom for Bernie’s death. She may have realized Tom was the only one who could have given away Bernie’s location and is therefore responsible for his murder. As in Barton Fink, Tom’s struggle was all for naught. At the end of the film he is left with nothing to show for his adventure though he exhausted himself throughout its course and took many beatings in the process.

4.4.2 Large-Scale Tonal Instability

A large-scale harmonic instability parallels the motivic transformation discussed in the previous section. For all intents and purposes, the entire score uses G as its tonic. The majority of the film is in G major but the cues that contain the minor-third version of Miller’s Motive are either non-tonal (Cues 11 and 13) or are in G minor (Cue 14). The cues at the opening and ending of the film (Cue 0 [“Opening Titles”] and Cue 15 [“End Titles”]) conclude with either tonic or dominant harmonies but as Tom’s situation spins out of control the stability of the established tonic/dominant cue endings is replaced by endings on vi/VI (e minor/major) and IV/iv (C major/minor). To clarify, the cues that end on vi/VI and IV/iv are not cues set in different keys. These cues begin in G like previous cues (e.g., Cues 0, 1, 3, and 5) but do not end on tonic or dominant. This large-scale departure from tonal stability occurs until Tom resolves the obstacles that prevent him from
achieving his goal, namely finding a way to remove Bernie without killing him directly. After Bernie’s murder (Cue 14 “What Heart,” Event 59), the final presentation of the main theme enters at the end of the last scene (Cue 15, “End Titles,” Event 62) and is used to bridge the gap into the end credits where it eventually concludes on tonic, representing the return to tonal stability. This large-scale tonal instability spans Cue 6 (Event 32) to Cue 14 (Event 59) and is represented in the lower rows of Figure 4.4. The figure shows that the tonal plan from stability, instability, and back parallels the violent portion of the film. The cues that end in the tonic and dominant are only cast in Burwell’s Stable Tonal Style and those that do not may be in any one of his three styles. This type of large-scale harmonic instability is an important part of Burwell’s compositional style and can also be found in Barton Fink and Fargo, and I suspect that studies of his other works would reveal similar tonal plans.

4.4.3 Foreshadowing an Impossible Conclusion: The Large-Scale Melodic/Harmonic Divorce in “Opening Titles”

The conflict between melodic closure and harmonic openness in the first phrase of the film’s initial cue, “Opening Titles,” provides a metaphorical parallel between the inherent conflict in Tom’s desire to have both Verna and Leo and his inability to accept only one. Tonal closure includes both harmonic and melodic components and, in the case of a perfect authentic cadence, this requires a resolution of both the melody and bass to $\text{I}$. I will consider these two aspects of tonal closure metaphorically as a parallel to Tom’s two goals: (1) keeping Leo in and power and (2) winning Verna’s affections. As shown in the voice-leading sketch (Figure 4.8), the contradictory sense of closure in the first phrase ($\text{I}$ over $V$) is unsettling because the melody provides a strong sense of closure when it ends on the tonic but the bass voice refuses to leave the $\text{V}$ that was introduced with the cadential dominant. This dilemma of tonal closure parallels the moment in the film when Verna shows up on Tom’s doorstep and does her best to offer herself to him and Tom asks himself “What
did I want?” This juxtaposition of victory mixed with indecision or uncertainty is mirrored in Burwell’s surprising decision to end the first phrase of “Opening Titles” with 1 over the dominant. The main theme plays in this scene (Event 28) while Verna offers herself to Tom and it adds a contradictory element of stability to the unstable relationship issue presented on screen between them. The scoring of this scene is an example of one of Burwell’s favorite devices. In the following passage Burwell suggests that he prefers to use romantic-style music only in unromantic situations:

I prefer doing romantic music, like *Miller’s Crossing*, when the music’s put up against something unromantic. I feel comfortable doing it in those situations because I know it’s not exploitative of the emotions of the audience. In other words, in *Miller’s Crossing* I’m not pushing anyone’s buttons because you’re hearing romantic or sentimental music but you’re seeing very cold-blooded people acting on screen; whereas in a movie that is openly romantic, doing openly romantic music is a little less interesting for me, and I worry a little that I’m pushing the audience’s buttons, or that the result will come out as a cliché; you hope that it doesn’t but it concerns me a little more. I’m much happier dealing in, let’s face it, darker or more ironical material.18

Burwell’s commentary sheds light on this unusual scoring decision. Like the harmonically unrequited melodic closure in the first phrase of “Opening Titles,” Verna’s call for relationship confirmation from Tom is not reciprocated. Tom wants Leo in power and Verna as his lover but refuses to accept either alone. Because Tom has two goals, the viewer should not expect Tom to exhibit satisfaction with completing half of his puzzle. The harmonically stable presentation of the theme at this juncture is ironic and meant to call attention to the fact that, though it seems Tom should be rejoicing over his victory with Verna, his facial expression indicates that his other major goal, Leo’s return to power, still lingers.

The second phrase presents another obstacle to harmonic closure, which Matthew McDonald has already written about.19 He draws attention to the harmonic “ellipsis” that occurs during the prolonged dominant that ends the second phrase and suggests that its parenthetical

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18 Morgan, *Knowing the Score*, 5.
19 McDonald, “Mountains, Music, and Murder.”
nature draws attention to the similarly parenthetical nature of the hat being blown in the wind on screen. As shown in the voice-leading sketch in Figure 4.8, the dominant is prolonged during the ellipsis (labeled “parenthetical extension” on the sketch) by the bass and soprano lines, which rise primarily by step to reach higher members of the dominant harmony. In the middle of these motions the voices switch registers before continuing their scalar path. The soprano transfers from B⁴ down to B¹ in the bass to continue its ascent from ⁵ to ⁸ (⁵-⁶-⁷-{⁶-⁷}-⁸) and the bass transfers from G² up to F♯⁴ in the soprano to continue the bass’s ascent from ¹ to ⁵ (¹-²-{³-⁴}-{³-⁴}-⁵). The outer-voice intervals used to accomplish this arpeggiation of the dominant harmony are a notable break with the practice of traditional tonal counterpoint (i.e., 5-5-10-5-5-5). Continuing the metaphoric relationship espoused above (melody = the goal concerning Verna, harmony = the goal concerning Leo) the ellipsis parallels the strangled route Tom takes in his attempt to achieve his goals. His adventure is strange and it takes place in unfamiliar territory but he eventually ends up in the same place (dominant harmony, detour via parenthetical extension, dominant harmony) and is left with both of his goals unfulfilled, hence the opening cue ends with both the melody and bass on ⁵.

4.5 Conclusion

Though I find the metaphorical parallel between the contradictory harmonic/melodic arrivals in Cue 1 (“Opening Titles”) and the similarly misaligned arrivals of Tom’s goals in the film (i.e., Verna offers herself to Tom at Event 28 and Leo offers reconciliation at Event 62) to be instructive, I resist the temptation to suggest that this parallel be viewed as the genesis of the film’s form and instead I prefer the interpretation to go the other way: the film’s form has been captured by the cue. In this chapter, I have argued that Verna’s position in the story has been diminished in the available analytical literature in an effort to appoint Tom as a criminal mastermind capable of using anyone to reach his end goal, in this case, restoring Leo to power. However, I have tried to
show that Burwell’s score indicates that Tom’s relationship with Verna is genuine and should be understood as a major contributing factor to Tom’s rejection of Leo’s offer to reconnect at the end of the film. I have also shown that Burwell’s monothematic score is designed with the same stable-unstable-stable paradigm he employs in both *Barton Fink* and *Fargo*, which suggests that such large-scale harmonic devices are part of Burwell’s larger style. It remains to be seen, however, how often Burwell employs similar techniques in his other films with the Coens and beyond.
FIGURE 4.5: Excerpt of the main theme from Miller’s Crossing (“Opening Titles”).
FIGURE 4.6: Voice-leading sketch of the first phrase of the main theme from Miller’s Crossing (Cue 01, “Opening Titles”).

FIGURE 4.7: Illustration of the fuller version of Miller’s Motive in Cue 6 (“Miller’s Crossing”).
FIGURE 4.8: Voice-leading sketch and phrase diagram of “Opening Titles.”
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary

In this dissertation I have provided an analytical method for representing the Narrative/Dramatic Structure of complete films to facilitate large-scale, film-music analysis across entire works. Additionally, this dissertation demonstrated how this method can be realized through a sample study of three collaborations between Joel & Ethan Coen and Carter Burwell. This work has revealed that Carter Burwell’s scores provide unique narrative information that is only available once the entire work is considered as a whole.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of approaches to large-scale form in musical works with text (film and opera) and argues that, in film, the work’s structure is derived from the cause-and-effect structure of the plot (or as Chatman says, the “story as discoursed”) instead of the music as is generally assumed in instrumental music. Because of this, approaches by Edward Latham (opera) and Ronald Rodman (film musicals) that demonstrate large-scale tonal organization have been deemed inadequate for dealing with the world of film beyond musicals, where the music plays a supporting role that does not typically alter the work’s cause-and-effect structure. Though, as demonstrated in this dissertation, the narrative information provided by the score is a vital component of understanding the complete work.

Borrowing the concepts of dramatic structure from Gustav Freytag (Freytag’s “pyramid”) and narrative structure from Seymour Chatman (Kernels and Satellites), I laid out a methodology for creating a visual, hierarchical representation of entire films in a consistent manner. Unlike Byron Almén’s approach to narrative (which borrows narrative concepts from Northrop Frey and James Jakób Liszka), Chatman and Freytag’s concepts allow the analyst to apply their own interpretations of the meaning behind the work’s large structure and free them from the broad categories of
Romance, Tragedy, Irony, and Comedy (terms that are often defined quite differently in the worlds of film and literature).

Chapter 2 shows how to realize a complete Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagram using *Fargo* as its source material. At the largest level, *Fargo* displays a tight integration between its Super Kernels and cues cast in Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style. Burwell exploits audience expectations through his large-scale planning; in particular, he delays the entrance of a critical cue until just before Marge resolves her primary goal during the iconic “woodchipper” scene. This chapter also shows how Burwell exerts a fine level of control over the drama throughout that scene by creating and then gradually resolving four musical “problems.”

In Chapter 3, I discuss how Burwell’s score to *Barton Fink* functions as a teleological guide across the film’s notoriously problematic narrative. The score reaches its cumulative conclusion during Barton’s breakthrough writing experience wherein he completes his screenplay in one concentrated effort. His monothematic score employs a large-scale modulation from major to relative minor that places the audience at a distance from Barton’s success and alerts them to his eventual failure. The score, then, generates a sense of large-scale dramatic irony because Barton believes his success is genuine but the audience knows otherwise because they have received contrary narrative information from Burwell’s score.

The final analysis (Chapter 4) suggests that Burwell’s score for *Miller’s Crossing* contradicts critical readings of the relationships between the film’s characters and even Burwell’s own intention by showing that his score establishes Tom’s love for Verna and not for his boss, Leo. This analysis then shows that Tom’s decision to reject Leo’s offer of friendship in the film’s final scene is the result of Tom’s jealousy over losing Verna to Leo. Furthermore, it argues that what Tom really wanted was Leo and Verna and that he refused to take either alone (a point that is foreshadowed during the film’s opening cue).
5.2 Implications for Further Study

5.2.1 Burwell’s Collaborations with Other Directors

Though Carter Burwell is the Coens’ primary musical collaborator, he has worked with many other directors. He collaborates regularly with independent filmmaker Spike Jonze (Being John Malkovich, Adaptation, Where the Wild Things Are) and his work on three of the films from the Twilight series has become his most popular success. His score for the final episode of the 2011 TV miniseries Mildred Pierce (directed by Todd Haynes) won a Primetime Emmy for “Outstanding Music Composition for a Miniseries, Movie or a Special (Original Dramatic Score).” His score for this episode—which is thematically unrelated to Max Steiner’s work for Michael Curtiz’s 1945 production—is featured during the series’ wrenching confrontation between Mildred and her spoiled daughter, Veda. Burwell’s cue for this scene, “Blindsided,” provides an interesting case of the functional difference between cues set in his Unstable and Dramatic Tonal Styles. Below I will provide a short analysis of this cue that emphasizes its unstable elements in order to compare it to a similarly placed, but functionally different, cue during the climactic scene in Spike Jonze’s 1999 film, Being John Malkovich. This analysis also serves to illustrate that Burwell’s three musical styles (discussed in section 1.2.4) transcend his works with the Coens.

5.2.2 The Functional Difference Between Burwell’s Unstable and Dramatic Tonal Styles:

“Blindsided” (Mildred Pierce) and “Subcon Chase” (Being John Malkovich).

“Blindsided” features multiple ostinati, chromatic parallel fifths, octatonicism, and chromatic wedging. The wedging used in this cue and in “Subcon Chase,” discussed below, are quite similar in

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1 The scores in this chapter are my own personal transcriptions. This, of course, required a number of interpretive decisions to be made and therefore my versions may contain slight inconsistencies if compared to the original scores. Though I took great care to transcribe the scores accurately, the possibility for error is certainly possible and I take responsibility for those errors.
overall construction but the difference between the two cues’ styles suggest that the scenes have different functional significance.

Figure 5.1 shows the primary layers in “Blindsided.” The cue has an ominous effect owing to its slow tempo and often differing harmonic contexts found in its independent layers. Its character is established at the outset by the slow-moving Tritone Layer which is present for nearly the entire cue (see the dark-blue bar in Figure 5.1). This layer switches back and forth between A-EB and G#-D dyads throughout. The dramatic intensity of the cue makes an abrupt shift at measure 36 and continues to build energy until the end. This is primarily the result of the chromatic wedging (involving the Bass and String layers) combined with the steadily increasing volume that peaks at m. 44. Both of these layers are harmonized with parallel perfect fifths (a common element of his style that he begin using in his first score, Blood Simple (1984).

In “Blindsided,” these two layers wedge away from each other at highly regular rates, though with a single irregularity. As shown in Figure 5.2, the lower part of the wedge (Bass Layer) proceeds almost entirely by descending half step. The first transposition in the Bass Layer is the only place where this layer descends by a whole step instead of a half step. This results in a deformation of the descending chromatic fourth found in many of Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal cues, like “Subcon Chase” discussed below. The result of this slight adjustment is that the chromatic bass descends past the perfect fourth to span the tritone from G# to D. This particular tritone is a motivic enlargement of the G# to D found in the tritone layer which occurs simultaneously during the chromatic wedging (see Figure 5.3). The upper part of the chromatic wedge differs from its lower counterpart because

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2 Edward Pearsall, Twentieth-Century Music Theory and Practice (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 102. I have chosen to show distances in pitch space using Edward Pearsall’s TNP notation because these transpositions are very simple and conceptualizing the moves in pitch-class space would complicate the analysis unnecessarily. This notation is used to show transpositions in pitch space. The T stands for transposition, the superscripted P stands for pitch space, and the subscripted N is a variable that stands for the number of semitones (up or down) being traversed. In the example I have subtracted three octaves from the pitch intervals to better illustrate the distance traversed instead of the literal distance apart.
its transpositions are perfectly regular. Each instrument progressively rises by three semitones which results in the arpeggiation of non-overlapping, fully diminished seventh chords and so combine to form an octatonic collection (Oct1,2).

**FIGURE 5.1:** The primary layers throughout the cue “Blindsided” (Mildred Pierce, 2011).

**FIGURE 5.2:** Chromatic wedging involving the String Layer and Bass Layer in “Blindsided” (Mildred Pierce, 2011).
This type of tension-building technique in “Blindsided” is remarkably similar to how Burwell handled the climactic point of “Subcon Chase.” Figure 5.4 shows that section 4 of this cue (“Chase 2”) also features the descending chromatic bassline while the upper part continually ascends (i.e., another instance of chromatic wedging). The end of the upper part also arpeggiates a \(^9\) harmony, though the descending/ascending intervals in both parts of its wedge are considerably less regular than those found in “Blindsided.” The reason for the stylistic difference of spanning a tritone in the bass while expressing an octatonic collection in “Blindsided” (Burwell’s Unstable Style) verses spanning a perfect fourth in the bass and outlining an extended, dominant harmony in “Subcon Chase” (Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal Style) is well supported given the difference in narrative/dramatic function between the two scenes. I will return to this point below after establishing the dramatic context of these two cues.
Each of Burwell’s three styles are employed for different reasons. After providing a brief background of *Mildred Pierce* I will contrast it with *Being John Malkovich* to illustrate how the transition from Burwell’s Unstable Style to his Dramatic Tonal Style in “Subcon Chase” (Sections 3 and 4 in Figure 5.4) is appropriate in *Being John Malkovich* but not in *Mildred Pierce*’s “Blindsided.” Ultimately, this brief exploration sheds light on Burwell’s strategic deployment of these different styles.

“Blindsided” occurs during the end of the fifth and last episode of *Mildred Pierce*. Mildred, the protagonist, struggles throughout the story to provide for, and gain the respect of, her only surviving child, Veda. Veda regularly judges and criticizes her mother for her “lower-class” financial pursuits (cooking and feeding others) and regularly belittles her achievements through condescending remarks, outright disapproval, and elaborate instances of calculated mockery. Their relationship becomes increasingly strained throughout Veda’s childhood and as she matures, she grows distant.

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3 An example of Veda’s unusually calculated mockery occurs when Veda exposes the fact that Mildred is working as a waitress in a diner—a fact which she worked hard to hide from her daughters—by giving their maid Mildred’s work uniform and pretending that she had done so because she assumed the working-class garment was intended for her. In truth, however, she knew all along that it was her mother’s and was only trying to shame her for sinking to such an undignified level in pursuit of a modest income.
from her mother. Eventually, Mildred rekindles her previous love affair with Monty, a man Veda approves of because of his high social status and charm. Mildred and Monty marry and Veda, in a touching and certainly surprising gesture, dedicates a song to her mother during her debut vocal concert. The gesture implies Veda has finally matured and come to love and respect her mother after an entire childhood of shaming and disrespecting her. “Blindsided” occurs soon after Veda’s concert during a dramatic reversal of sides where Mildred discovers that Veda and Monty have been conspiring against her and are the ones that have been in love all along. This news sends Mildred into a violent rage and she attempts to strangle her daughter. Even after this event Mildred does not reconcile or end her relationship with her daughter. Instead, this is only one of the last straws before their eventual permanent dissolution.

This last point is the fundamental difference between “Subcon Chase” and “Blindsided.” “Blindsided” does not lead to a proper resolution of the work’s dramatic structure and is instead an event where everyone loses and no one benefits, which is a hallmark of the types of events Burwell typically reserves for his rarely used Unstable Style. “Subcon Chase,” however, leads to a dramatic confrontation between Lotte and Maxine where the two finally put aside their previous obstacles and become a couple. Both of these cases concern a dramatic confrontation between two important characters (coincidentally love triangles in both instances) but only in the case of Being John Malkovich does this lead to any sort of resolution. This is why the transformation from Burwell’s Unstable Style to his Dramatic Tonal Style is only appropriate in “Subcon Chase” and not in “Blindsided.” In “Blindsided,” such a tonal resolution would have implied that Mildred and Veda had finally concluded their attempts at reconciliation. They have not reconciled, however, and thus the use of Burwell’s Unstable Style properly conveys that the scene will contain no resolution and will instead only be a negative event for the characters involved.
As this analysis indicates, Burwell’s use of three distinct musical styles transcends his work with the Coens and indicates that their usage is a larger element of his compositional style. In future analyses of Carter Burwell’s music, a more nuanced understanding of these styles could incorporate further refinement. I suspect that many composers employ a similar technique of using distinct musical styles to indicate the narrative/dramatic significance of an event or scene. In order to pursue this prospect, a larger, cross-composer study would be required.

5.2.3 The Coen Films that Feature Compilation Scores

Two of the Coens’ best known films, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and their most recent film, *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), feature compilation scores (scores that feature preexisting music, typically popular songs). An extension of this study could explore the ways in which this musical practice differs from their collaborations with Burwell. It would be interesting to see, for example, what type of preexisting music they use during Super Kernels and Element-of-Setting Satellites. In *The Big Lebowski*, for example, the turning point in The Dude’s (Jeff Bridges, the film’s protagonist) dramatic structure is paired with Moondog’s “Stamping Ground,” a piece that could easily pass for film music. The use of “Stamping Ground” during a Super Kernel is interesting because, like many of Burwell’s Dramatic Tonal cues in similar locations, it features a descending bass progression from \( \hat{1} \) down to \( \hat{5} \) (do, te, le, sol).

A number of the Coens’ works (*The Hudsucker Proxy, The Man Who Wasn’t There, Intolerable Cruelty, and The Lady Killers*) combine Burwell’s score with preexisting music and these films could serve as another direction for a future study. Such works might hold the key to understanding the functional difference between how Burwell’s score and preexisting music are used in their films.

5.2.4 Genre Studies

I have largely left the topic of genre out of the present study because the Coens are not known for creating genre films. Critics claim, and I agree, that their works transcend the boundaries
of genre. Attempts that insist on rigid genre classification result in the appearance of constantly thwarted expectations. Similar to attempting to hear a through-composed piece through the lens of rondo form, their works—like many independent filmmakers—are often better understood on their own terms or at least without a restrictive approach to applying traditional genre labels.

I find the Narrative/Dramatic Structure Diagrams helpful in the Coen brothers’ films, but I believe my approach may bear more fruit within the realm of genre studies. In fact, the more “conventional” a film, the more likely my diagrammatic method will capture its similarity with other works in the same genre. Recent action film series such as *Transformers* or *Iron Man* would likely return notable large-scale similarities. An extensive study that combined film genre and large-scale musical usage could establish an effective framework for understanding and interpreting the consistency of particular genres and provide a basis for comparison with non-genre based films like those of the Coens, Stanley Kubrick, P. T. Anderson, Roman Polanski, and others.

### 5.2.5 Future Research and Last Word

My next film-music project will be to explore the musical cues that span extremely long portions of the middle of many of P. T. Anderson’s films. In *Magnolia* (1999), for example, two cues provide nearly half an hour of continuous music (cue 1, 1:31:30-1:41:42, cue 2, 1:43:20-2:01:32) as the many characters in Anderson’s large ensemble cast begin to unravel when they reach their individual breaking points. This appears to be a hallmark of Anderson’s earlier works and can be found in *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002).

The large-scale approach developed in this dissertation has proven useful in capturing the function and meaning behind extended cues across a complete filmic structure. I believe that this approach has the potential to serve other scholars as they approach a wide variety of films, styles, composers, and genres. Ultimately, I hope that my approach will be used by others to establish patterns and paradigms of musical usage in a diverse body of films so that our understanding and
appreciation of this complex medium can be enriched. While the case study of the three Burwell-Coen Brother collaborations found here provides a useful starting point, I believe that by understanding how musical cues relate to large-scale narrative structures across entire films, viewers will gain a much richer and more nuanced understanding of how film music can be used to convey narrative information and meaning in feature films.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brian Edward Jarvis, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, earned the Bachelor of Music degree in Music Theory from the conservatory of music at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2009. While there, he studied music theory with Hali Fieldman, Mary Jo Lorek, and Beth Elswick, and studied piano with Nicholas Phillips, Hillary Demske, and John McIntyre. At UMKC, he received the Shirley Ann Bean Music Theory Scholarship and wrote his culminating theoretical document on the dramatic structure of Charle’s Alkan’s Le Festin d’Ésope under Hali Fieldman’s supervision. He then earned a Master of Music degree in Music Theory from Bowling Green State University in 2011, where he studied music theory with Nora Engebretsen, Gene Trantham, William Lake, and Per Broman and piano with Thomas Rosenkranz. At BGSU, he was a teaching assistant for undergraduate music theory and ear training courses and wrote his thesis on formal structure in Puccini’s Suor Angelica under Nora Engebretsen’s supervision. Brian completed his Ph.D. in Music Theory at Florida State University during the spring of 2015. He served as a teaching assistant at FSU and taught Music Theory I-IV, Sight-Singing I-IV, and Music Fundamentals. While at FSU, he studied music theory with Michael Buchler, Nancy Rogers, Matthew Shaftel, Evan Jones, Joseph Kraus, Clifton Callender, and Jane Piper Clendinning. Brian’s dissertation, “Analyzing Film Music across the Complete Filmic Structure: Three Coen and Burwell Collaborations,” provides a methodology for simultaneously diagramming the story and music of entire films and was completed under the supervision of Matthew Shaftel.

Brian’s primary research interests are large-scale film-music analysis, Schenkerian analysis, and keyboard improvisation. Additionally, he has a strong interest in phrase structure, form, and harmony in Classic- and Romantic-era music. As a keyboardist, he has performed as an accompanist in secular and sacred styles and is the continuo player for FSU’s early music ensemble Cantores.
Musicae Antiquae. Brian pursues computer programming as a hobby and develops software designed to help musicians improve their ear training skills.