Reality poses a problem for film composers. For decades, filmmakers in Hollywood have leaned towards an avoidance of non-diegetic music in films that seek a realistic aesthetic.¹ The post-millennial examples of this phenomenon are perhaps most recognisable in the found footage genre, which includes such films as Quarantine and Cloverfield.² However, there have been a number of film productions in the last ten years that bear many hallmarks of illusory realism yet include the use of musical scores. It appears that this contradiction of realist aims with practices that include non-diegetic music results in film scores that feature distinctive designs and occasionally compromise the scope of their functions. One of the most recent of these films is Spotlight, a docudrama directed by Tom McCarthy and co-written with Josh Singer.³ This film’s relationship with truth and realism can be described in terms of its subject, social position and craft. The score was written by Howard Shore. Having previously worked on

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² Quarantine, directed by John Erick Dowdle, DVD (Culver City: Screen Gems, 2008); Cloverfield, directed by Matt Reeves, DVD (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 2008).
productions by David Cronenberg and the *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, Shore is not widely known for creating scores that go unnoticed. Nevertheless, the score for *Spotlight* contains many features that make it a textbook case of unobtrusiveness, drawing on old traditions of Hollywood while adding a number of new features. These features can also be observed in other recently produced film scores, representing a style that is frequently employed by significant composers working on serious dramatic settings.

The film *Spotlight* recounts the *Boston Globe*’s investigations that exposed the concealment of known acts of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic Church’s clergy. It delves into a number of themes around this highly charged topic with institutional power and community complicity both explored in particular detail. The film resembles a procedural drama in its form and through this the process of investigative journalism also becomes a central theme. After a short prologue depicting events in 1976 in which an arrested priest’s actions are covered up, the main body of the film recounts experiences of the journalists between 2001 and 2002. The plot is driven largely by the journalists’ revelations: an investigation that begins with events around a single priest eventually uncovers a conspiracy on a scale previously unheard, revealing the protection of dozens of perpetrators by the Catholic Church with the complicit assistance of other major Boston institutions. In addition to the script’s structure, the film imitates the act of truth telling and investigation in journalism with an exaggerated transparency in its modes of presentation, of which music forms a significant part.

**Social Position of the Film**

The title card seen at the opening of *Spotlight* indicates the film’s overarching aesthetic: ‘based on actual events.’ This statement points to a blurred line between fiction and non-fiction or, in terms of genre, between documentary and narrative. It recreates recent events, using real names of people and institutions. In addition, the subject it addresses is still a matter of contention and strong emotion and, with hearings either appearing or scheduled worldwide at the time of release, the film had the potential to affect the reputations of real people. Nonetheless, it constitutes a docudrama rather than a strict re-enactment because of the degree of dramatic licence being applied; for example, some events, while they did actually take place, are played out by different characters for narrative expediency. These factors placed the filmmakers in a position where their production needed to be fair to interested parties and seen as objective in its presentation of content. The film may be said to be successful on this front in various ways; some representatives of the Catholic Church, such as Bishop Robert Barron, gave a carefully positive, if qualified review of the film. Yet it failed on other fronts. Jack Dunn, one of the people depicted in the film, successfully sued the filmmakers for misrepresentation, forcing them to publish a statement in which they ‘acknowledged that the filmmakers attributed “fictionalized dialogue” to him “for dramatic effect,” and that he was not involved in the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal.’

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This admission came after the filmmakers had fought and defeated the suit on two previous occasions. Even this impact on misrepresented people can be regarded as confirmation of the liminal place this film takes in terms of truth and reality.

**Realism as a Practice in the Production of Spotlight**

Questions of what exactly constitutes filmic realism can unspool quickly. Andrew Kania discusses some of the major paradigms that can form a starting point, the most relevant being filmic illusion and transparency. Most of *Spotlight*’s presentation can be described as relating to a style generally referred to as ‘Hollywood Classical Realism,’ making use of techniques that have been evolving since the era of silent film, such as continuity editing, continuous cinematic space and linear narrative time. These features on their own are hardly remarkable—it could be argued that most Hollywood productions bear these traits—but they are essential in contributing to an audience’s bond with the world of the film. Particular efforts were made to ensure that *Spotlight* did not draw attention to itself as an artificial medium. Post-production editor Tom McArthur expressed that audience absorption was a clear aim in the editing process and the filmmakers actively avoided alienation throughout a ten-month editing process that involved frequent audience testing.

Other elements of the production and post-production of *Spotlight* point to realism as an overall objective of the filmmakers. According to Meredith Goldstein at the Boston Globe, the actors playing major characters became familiar with their real-life counterparts. Mark Ruffalo, for instance, shadowed Boston Globe reporter Michael Rezendez before production and the journalists offered advice to the actors during the shoot. In interviews, other members of the production team indicated their intentions to create a film that was as true to events as was possible. Cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi has stated: ‘for *Spotlight*, the marching order was really to be true to what happened, the reality of it … it was like we could almost just bring the camera in and capture it.’ The language of this statement speaks to the indexical, realist nature of film in general, perceived or otherwise. This notion is extended to techniques employed in production, such as the extensive use of handheld photography outside the Boston Globe office, although locked off shots were preferred for the interior to imply the focused work of the Spotlight team. The use of hand-held camerawork may be regarded as an affectation of realism, imitating the effects of direct cinematic approaches and emulating an indexical signifier of documentation. While this affectation does not extend to the film’s sound—all character’s voices have the clarity of close microphone technique, for example—the sound

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12 Tapley, ‘On the Reserved.’
13 Hubbert, ‘Whatever Happened to Great Movie Music?,’ 180.
design generally adheres to practices of perceptual realism as outlined by Birger Langkjær, such as the use of continuous soundtracks during scenes, as opposed to creating a separate sound world for each shot. Editor Tom McCarthy also commented on the soundtrack, stating, ‘I like to do a full eight-track mix on the Avid—sound effects, backgrounds, tone, temp score, etc. I really want the soundtrack to not have any holes and to have the right feel.’

Realism as an Aim in the Spotlight Score

This poietic aim of perceived realism extends to Howard Shore’s approach to the score. Shore indicated that the piano was chosen as the principal instrument because it ‘has such a black and white, ebony and ivory quality to it … there’s a certain truthfulness to the sound as well.’ In another interview, Shore added: ‘I thought it would work well for a story based on the discovery of the truth.’ Shore’s conception of the ‘truthfulness’ of the piano appears to be based partially on a visual analogy of the instrument’s black and white keys to newspaper print and partially on the instrument’s tonal possibilities, which could ‘[express] the ideas that were emotional when it wanted to be [but] could also pull back and be more cool and more differential [sic].’ Whether this instrument is generally accepted as a conveyor of truth remains open to debate, although one reviewer did compare Shore’s score to others written for similarly-themed films, such as Hans Zimmer’s music for Frost/Nixon and Brian Tyler’s for Truth. These musical depictions of journalism do vary in instrumentation—the piano is not always at the forefront in these other scores—but rather the near ticker-tape/Morse-code pace and texture of some cues evoke what may be interpreted as a ‘news’ or ‘journalism’ topic, which is echoed by some of Shore’s sharper articulations for the piano in cues such as ‘The Directories’ (01:03:21). Overall, the small ensemble of piano/electric keyboards, harp, percussion, fiddle, accordion, electric bass, electric guitar, acoustic guitar and two French horns represents a partial departure for Shore; Bill Desowitz writes that, ‘he has worked with many of the musicians before, but not in a chamber format.’

The score can also be distinguished by what it does not aim to do. Shore states: ‘I didn’t concentrate on individual characters—I focused on events in the narrative and the overall

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15 Hullfish, ‘Art of the Cut.’
20 Ron Howard, Frost/Nixon (Universal City: Universal Pictures, 2008), DVD.
21 James Vanderbilt, Truth (New York: Sony Pictures Classics, 2015), DVD.
22 Titles of cues are based on their titles in the officially released soundtrack: See Howard Shore, Spotlight: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack, Howe Records HWR-1021, 2015, CD.
23 Desowitz, ‘Howard Shore’s Spotlight Score.’
story arc. The mystery and pace of the unfolding and the revelations. This limitation of the motifs of the score to represent events and themes rather than characters stands in stark contrast to his work on the *The Lord of the Rings* films, in which leitmotifs were frequently used for individual characters. Claudia Gorbman discusses the ways in which non-diegetic music can shift the subject of a film from the particular to the universal, or the literal to the symbolic. In limiting the realm of the score to addressing abstractions of the story rather than specific people, it reduces the chance of the score turning the real people depicted in the film into characters or archetypes. The support that the score gives to the perceived realism of the film is not just limited to choices around musical themes, as Shore also contributes to the transparency of the film through structural designs that reduce the tendency for the score to distract from the narrative.

### ‘Inaudible’ Music

Concepts and practices relating to unobtrusive score writing are by no means new. The topic can be identified as first appearing not long after the invention of the sound film and was well covered in academic texts by the early 1990s. Gorbman’s book *Unheard Melodies* introduced the term ‘inaudibility’ as a musical parallel to the film theory concept of *transparency*. In spite of its inverted commas, ‘inaudibility’ turned out to be a problematic term, as it was taken either too literally or too broadly by a number of subsequent academic critics. The basis of the theory is not that ‘inaudible’ music goes literally unheard but rather that it works unconsciously on the audience whose attention is drawn into the narrative. Annabel Cohen has supported the theory with a cognitive psychology model that may explain how ‘inaudibility’ works: musical information (structural and emotional) is bonded with the visual narrative before passing on to long-term memory, leaving the cognitive processing of the music *qua* music as a separate mechanism. The phenomenon also forms a large part of Katherine Kalinak’s thesis in *Settling the Score*, in which a number of features and compositional techniques are outlined. Moments where non-diegetic music fades in slowly, or its beginning is masked by a loud diegetic sound such as a slammed door, are labelled ‘sneaking,’ which Kalinak explains is an industry term. Fading at the end of the track is the obvious bookend to this. Tracks may also begin at points of change in the narrative structure, where the score commences just before a scene or sequence cut. Kalinak also includes the privileging of dialogue through underscoring techniques and even mickey-mousing as other examples of musical structures contributing to ‘inaudibility.’ While concessions that the musical score must make to the dialogue seem an obvious and self-evident addition to this list, music does not always behave in this way, as will be shown later. Including mickey-mousing—the extremely close alignment of visual and musical events—as an example of unobtrusive scoring is perhaps the most contentious point and the reduction of its use

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24 Newman, ‘Composer Howard Shore.’
outside comedy from the 1950s onwards may suggest that it should not be regarded as a contemporary practice of ‘inaudibility.’

Music for the Films: A Handbook for Composers and Conductors by Leonid Sabaneev is frequently cited in discussions on this topic. Sabaneev (or Sabaneyev) lists a number of other practices that occurred at the time: music’s cessation should be followed by other elements in the soundtrack; the volume/scale of the music should parallel the visual; close-ups should be accompanied by smaller sounds and wide shots by larger ones; the rhythms and metres of the music and images should align; and the music should accord with the mood of the scene. Additionally, Sabeneev mentions that music should be ‘pleasantly harmonious’ when it sits in the background. It should be noted that while it is a useful starting point, this text is one of its time and its arguments for simplicity and avoidance of music under dialogue were undoubtedly shaped by the quality of recording equipment available in the early 1930s. Sabaneev’s text also discourages originality and modernism and contempt for film audiences is another common theme. As such, it can be read as a signpost to possible practices but is by no means an accurate description of current scoring techniques.

Unobtrusive scoring practices are generally framed as being part of a broader filmmaking practice in Hollywood, referred to in turn as ‘classical realism,’ ‘naturalism,’ or simply ‘realism.’ It is broadly acknowledged that music does not always defer to dialogue or screen events: the score comes to the foreground at times and, as Gorbman writes, ‘in the case of diegetic production numbers, narrative moments of spectacle, comedy, beginning and end credits, and so forth.’

‘Inaudible’ Practices in the Spotlight Score

Shore’s Spotlight score contains multiple examples of the ‘inaudible’ practices described above, the most obvious being in relation to the ways cues begin and end. The beginnings of five of the thirty-six cues in the film are masked by loud diegetic sounds, such as a door slamming or a phone ringing. Of the remaining thirty-one, all but seven have creeping entries and all but one fade out gradually. The fades generally involve an ambient or pedalled background texture with melodic material placed in the foreground at strategic points in the film. Unexpectedly, it was more common for cues to fade out more gradually than they fade in. Figure 1 gives a typical cue structure with durations based on median averages: a bass pedal is introduced before the melodic foreground—usually played by the piano—is heard and the pedal generally takes twice as long to fade out as it does to fade in.

29 Possible exceptions to this are the many cases of highly synchronised music in action sequences, although synchronisation could be argued to aid the provision of specific functions required for these sequences (such as narrative clarity) rather than point to a desire to make the music go unnoticed.
31 Sabaneev, Music for the Films, 37.
33 Kalinak, Settling the Score, 28.
34 Royal S. Brown, Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 31.
Figure 1. Typical cue structure in Shore’s Spotlight score

As shown in Figure 2, in a significant number (about a third) of the cues, particularly ones that support transitions through action-based sequences, the melodic foreground’s first appearance synchronises with a scene or sequence cut.

Figure 2. Typical structure of transition music in relation to editing in Spotlight

In scenes or sequences in which there is an absence of dialogue for more than a few seconds, the score’s foreground melodies will tend to fill the gaps. This could be regarded as contributing to a ‘smooth’ or continuous soundtrack, which softens the edges created by editing and montage. Generally, the music defers to the dialogue (as would be expected) but there is one exception that occurs two minutes into the movie (starting with the Universal logo) in a scene where a priest speaks quietly to some children at a police station (00:02:01). The content of the dialogue here is less important than the delivery; while the music may obscure some of the words, it helps to emphasise the hushed tones with which they were spoken.

One of the most striking features about the score for Spotlight is the distribution of its cues and the change in score function as the film progresses. The first half of the film contains fifteen score cues adding up to less than ten minutes of music, whereas the second half contains twenty-two cues that add up to thirty-two minutes; therefore, the second half of the film has three times more non-diegetic music than the first. While the frequency of the cues increases somewhat in the second half, the average length of the cues almost doubles (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Comparison of cue distribution in first and second hours of Spotlight
This feature also coincides with a change in functional emphasis for the score. After the flashback opening, non-diegetic music remains largely restricted to supporting transition sequences with a limited underscoring of dialogue that almost harks back to Sabeneev’s rule that music should not appear at all when dialogue is present. Shore himself mentioned in an interview that the score appears in many places without dialogue. However, from the fourteenth cue onward (00:47:51), the tendency for music to underscore dialogue increases significantly, as does the tendency for music to support sustained action sequences. In the above-mentioned interview, Shore speaks of the goal of the score, which was to heighten the energy of the film as the case unfolds. Nevertheless, this effect might also point to an inversion of a previously held belief relating to suture theory. Kalinak and Gorbman posit that one of the functions of film music is to reduce the critical faculties of the audience, making the flaws of the film’s structure less noticeable and thus increasing the perceived realism of the film. This does not appear to be the case with this score, where the distribution of cues suggests the opposite effect may be taking place, as though the score works harder to hide its presence until the audience’s attention is more deeply absorbed by the story.

Restraint and Neutrality in the Spotlight Score

Spotlight recounts a tragic story unveiled by the journalists but the depth of suffering is only alluded to. One character, after we have met one of the sufferers, quips that ‘he’s one of the lucky ones; he’s still alive.’ That same victim earlier tried to hide the needle marks that betrayed his internal destruction. Another victim mentions his subsequent problems with alcohol, while one of the perpetrators reveals that he was also once raped. The filmmakers have decided not to score these revelations; it appears that these horrors are presented as facts, recounted rather than dramatised. While the individuals represented in the film are not characterised through the score, a number of story themes are symbolised musically. According to Shore, they include ‘Pressure of the Church,’ ‘City on the Hill,’ ‘Investigative Journalism,’ ‘Deference and Complicity,’ ‘Pain and Anguish’ and ‘The Children.’ Additionally, the Spotlight team has a theme that plays several times throughout the film.

The ‘honesty’ that Shore attributes to the piano as the principal instrument can also be read in the emotional restraint reflected in various elements of the score’s musical structure. Although many cues fade in from silence, the melodic material, once introduced, tends to remain at the same volume level and there are no cues that have dramatic crescendos or diminuendos. The extreme high register is generally avoided by the melodies with only three of the cues reaching above the range of the treble staff (00:15:06, 00:25:22 and 00:31:08).

The principal ‘Spotlight’ theme features ambiguity in terms of tonality and harmony, due to melodic avoidance of the third degree of the scale and a harmonic framework that emphasises open fifths, suspended fourths and seconds, as well as extended chords that omit the third.

36 Newman, ‘Composer Howard Shore.’
37 Kalinak, Settling the Score, 35; Gorbman, Unheard Melodies, 5.
38 Desowitz, ‘Howard Shore’s Spotlight Score.’
39 At 00:00:27, 00:07:17, 00:27:05, 01:01:26, 01:02:55, 01:04:36, 01:25:53, 01:33:06 and 02:01:32. Additionally, fragments of the theme appear at 00:02:01, 00:08:20, 00:28:46, 00:36:52, 00:44:22, 00:47:51, 00:51:00, 01:05:33, 01:11:58, 01:21:59, 01:23:31, 01:24:46, 01:55:38 and 02:05:54.
40 It is notable that the tonality is also expressed by the frequent use of the flattened sixth in the melodies; the point being made here, though, is that there is a tendency to downplay the minor tonality by avoiding the tonic triad.
In the theme’s first four phrases, the mediant is only played once against the tonic chord; even then, it is introduced obliquely as a resolution of a suspension on beat four in anticipation to the third bar (see Ex. 1).41

**Example 1.** Shore, *Spotlight*, ‘Spotlight’ theme: phrases A, A² and A³

![Example 1](image)

It is interesting to note that while the melody is written in B Dorian, the B-minor triad is only created on this one occasion and the tonic triad is not repeated again in any form during the ‘Spotlight’ theme. The emphasis on open fifths in the harmony is continued throughout and the omission of the third of the tonic chord is also a common feature of the second section (see Ex. 2).42

**Example 2.** Shore, *Spotlight*, ‘Spotlight’ theme: phrases B and B¹

![Example 2](image)

Triads, when they do appear, are all major chords. This inversion of harmony against the melody in the Riemannian sense is also a characteristic of another major theme of the film: children (see Example 3).43

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41 All examples from the score are based on Shore’s published score with the addition of key signatures and chord names. See Howard Shore, *Spotlight* (Los Angeles: Alfred Publishing, 2016), 2.
42 Shore, *Spotlight*, 2–3. 00:00:47.

If we interpret the anacrusis and the chord of the opening bar in Example 3, the theme is in E\(^b\) Major (or Lydian) with the F\(^#\) seen in the second bar being a rapid movement away from the tonic. There is an alternate interpretation: reviewing the melody alone, the tonality of G minor also appears as a possibility. As seen in Figure 4, comparing the chord sequence in terms of traditional function also suggests that an interpretation of G minor is simpler, containing fewer chromatic deviations and a substitution of chord VI for chord i.

Figure 4. Comparison of chord function of ‘Children’ theme (chromatic chords are highlighted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chords:</th>
<th>E(^b)</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E(^b)</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E(^b)</th>
<th>Cm(^9)</th>
<th>Gm/D</th>
<th>E(^b)</th>
<th>A(^7)/C(^#)</th>
<th>D(^#)</th>
<th>B(^b)</th>
<th>etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E(^b) major:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>(\text{vii})^#</td>
<td>iiic</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>#IV(^7)</td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G minor:</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>iv(^9)</td>
<td>ic</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>II(^7)</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Example 3, the A\(^7\) chord in bar 9 in particular makes the most sense in terms of traditional harmonic function if it is described as a secondary dominant to the D\(^5\) chord of the next bar. This infers that the ‘Children’ theme leans functionally towards a minor key but the major chord VI consistently substitutes the minor chord i, undermining the tonality presented by the melody. Temperley and Tan have previously found a positive link between modality and emotion in listeners with raised scale degrees generally interpreted as being happier.\(^{44}\) Schneller expands on this through an investigation of John Williams’s use of modal interchange to exaggerate, for example, a major tonality in particularly heroic passages.\(^{45}\) Rather than exaggeration, Shore’s portrayal of the victims of child abuse in the theme discussed above involves a contradiction in musical messages: minor melodic material invoking negative valences is simultaneously heard with major chord substitutions that suggest the opposite effect. This goes some way to explain the interpretation of emotional attenuation that critic Jonathan Broxton infers in the piece: ‘a bittersweet piano solo that

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emphasises but does not over-sensationalise the plight of those most harmed by the events of the story.\textsuperscript{46}

This contradictory juxtaposition of minor and major can be observed in another score by Shore: \textit{The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring}. In the ‘Fellowship’ theme, major chords accompany a minor melody, as in the cue ‘Many Meetings.’\textsuperscript{47} As such, this could be regarded as another example of Shore’s use of harmonic novelty that avoids clichés. However, there is a significant difference here: the ‘Fellowship’ theme makes use of the parallel major key against the minor melody, locating the tonal centre at the heart of the harmony as well as the melody. In the case of the ‘Children’ theme above, some degree of ambiguity is preserved by the oblique placement of the tonal centre.

A third example from \textit{Spotlight} can be observed with the cue heard twenty-five minutes into the film when the \textit{Boston Globe} journalists are being discouraged from pursuing their investigation (00:25:25). The ambient background establishes C\# as the tonic; the melody fills out a Dorian mode and when the melody does reach the mediant (again, on weaker beats) it continues its movement to finish on an unstable tone (see Example 4).\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{Example 4.} Shore, \textit{Spotlight}, transitional cue at 00:25:25

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{46} Broxton, \textit{‘Spotlight: Howard Shore.’}
\textsuperscript{48} The melody once again makes use of the upper tetrachord and consequently the flattened sixth (on weak beats) but again the tonic triad is given less emphasis. Note that Examples 4 and 5 have been transcribed from the film by the author.
In contrast, the ‘Investigative Journalism’ theme used for several action-based sequences does make extensive use of the minor mediant (see Example 5).\footnote{At 00:15:06. Other versions of this theme are heard at 01:13:20 and 01:22:49.}

**Example 5.** Shore, *Spotlight*, ‘Investigative Journalism’ theme

![Example 5](image)

In this case, a faster rhythmic framework accompanies the clearer tonality, while the pulsing bass contributes momentum and the melody is constituted entirely out of rising motifs. This clearer tendency for minor tonality extends to another theme: ‘The Directories,’ again a faster-paced track written to accompany action sequences (01:03:21). The overall tendency points to scenes of pathos and sobriety to be accompanied by material that downplays a minor tonality, whereas faster action sequences tend to feature it.

This reversal of expectations leads to a reduction in emotional emphasis and musical distinctiveness that is also reflected by the consistency in the orchestration of the themes. Thirty of the thirty-six cues feature a background pedal; twenty-four of these cues are ambient textures created by sustained tones held by instruments such as French horn, fiddle and guitar, possibly played with an EBow (electronic bow). The other way pedals are presented is via repeated notes played by piano, fingerpicked guitar or harp, either strictly repeating notes or through figurations. The lead melodies are almost always played by either piano or electric piano, the few exceptions being cues (usually underscoring ones) where only a bass line resembles a prominent melody. With these closely related textures, tessituras and instrumentation, themes tend to sound similar to one another. This lack of distinctiveness may point to one of the limits of the leitmotif, a function where music perhaps behaves more like language than in any other (Western) setting. If language relies, according to Saussure, on difference in order to function, the score for *Spotlight* may represent a point at which melodic difference alone is not enough for audiences to discern motifs.\footnote{Ferdinand de Saussure, Wade Baskin, Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 118.} This in turn would suggest that the score has traded functional clarity in order to support filmic transparency and realism.
Truly Inaudible?

Writing a score for *Spotlight*—a film based on real events with a difficult topic and marked by an aesthetic featuring transparency and attempts to heighten perceptual realism—is a formidable task. Howard Shore met this challenge through semantic choices such as the ‘honesty’ of the piano and produced an exaggeratedly unobtrusive score that features long fades, ambient textures, deference to narratively important dialogue and judicious cue placement, paralleling but not entirely overlapping the features of the Classical Narrative film scores from the Golden Age of Hollywood.

Some of these features appear in other recent Hollywood scores and seem to be typical of an aesthetic popular among contemporary film composers. Similar ambient textures are featured, for example, in two of Shore’s more recent film scores: *Cosmopolis* and *Maps to the Stars*, both directed by David Cronenberg.\(^\text{51}\) However, there are some significant differences between these scores and that of *Spotlight*. *Cosmopolis* uses alienating devices such as unnatural dialogue and its music is not as finely woven into the fabric of the film. The weaker relationship between the score’s structure and the rhythm of the film’s edit, combined with a pop sensibility arising from Shore’s collaboration with Canadian band Metric, creates a score that has greater prominence overall. Likewise, the music in *Maps to the Stars* is used as a device to represent a break with reality, supporting the film’s themes of narcissism, schizophrenia and Hollywood.

While some ‘inaudible’ techniques are undoubtedly employed, the score also frequently features sudden cuts, much less use of foreground instruments and more frequent mid-scene appearances. A closer comparison can be made with the film *Hidden Figures*.\(^\text{52}\) Hans Zimmer’s cues in the score clearly employ several ‘inaudible’ techniques in moments of seriousness but also display a more straightforward tonal relationship between harmony and melody and use of traditional motivic sequencing techniques; together, this results in a style that supports a more sentimental form of storytelling.\(^\text{53}\) Zimmer’s cues also contrast with contributions to the *Hidden Figures* soundtrack by Pharrell Williams, whose style combines vintage popular styles with contemporary production techniques. Williams’s cues are also more prominent in the soundtrack mix and frequently used to support lighter comic moments. An overlap of these ‘inaudible’ techniques can even be observed in parts of Henry Jackman’s score for *Captain Phillips*,\(^\text{54}\) which features similar textural designs and some cues featuring harmonic ambiguity; of course, the demands of the action genre that drives *Captain Phillips* also lead to more prominent music appearing throughout the film. Going back almost two decades, the theme from Thomas Newman’s score for the film *American Beauty*\(^\text{55}\) can be interpreted as a predecessor to the prevailing style heard in *Spotlight*: an ethereal pad supporting a theme played by piano.\(^\text{56}\) One major difference between the *American Beauty* and *Spotlight* cues is, once again, a more straightforward harmony, featuring an alignment of melody, chords

\(^{51}\) *Cosmopolis*, directed by David Cronenberg (Toronto: Entertainment One, 2012), DVD; *Maps to the Stars*, directed by David Cronenberg (Toronto: Entertainment One and Focus World, 2014), DVD.

\(^{52}\) *Hidden Figures*, directed by Theordore Melfi (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2016), DVD.


\(^{54}\) *Captain Phillips*, directed by Paul Greengrass (Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 2013), DVD.

\(^{55}\) *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendez (Universal City: DreamWorks Pictures, 1999), DVD.

\(^{56}\) While this is the most iconic theme from the score, it is not representative of the score overall, which involves a wide range of textures created with unusual combinations of instruments.
and ambient pedal that arguably results in a more emotionally explicit outcome as suits the poetic moment at which it appears. Conversely, the overall restraint in the musical style of the *Spotlight* score—especially harmonic, dynamic and range restriction—also supports realism by avoiding emotional exaggeration and it is the consistency of ‘inaudible’ features that makes it an exemplar. A careful examination points to a subtlety of design and an intricate interplay of motifs that is indicative of an experienced and accomplished composer. As one example, many of the themes are linked together by the common use of a descending bassline, perhaps further inferring the interconnectedness of the city’s institutions in the story. Nevertheless, this interplay of musical themes has generally gone unnoticed by commentators.

The apparent success of the *Spotlight* score in supporting realism though ‘inaudibility’ is also borne out in its reception, or lack thereof, by fans, journalists, and the film industry. Shore’s *Spotlight* score has received relatively little recognition. To date, there are no academic articles written on the subject and the few newspapers that cover the topic either feature interviews with the composer or contain a notable repetition of phrases that suggest the involvement of public relations in the generation of their content rather than journalistic interest. The iTunes app\(^\text{57}\) contains no reviews for the album release of the soundtrack and Amazon\(^\text{58}\) contains only five—compare this with the fifty-plus reviews of a film score of a similar age, such as *The Hateful Eight*.\(^\text{59}\) Fan texts found on sites such as IMDb contain very few comments that mention the score at all.\(^\text{60}\) This silence is echoed by a distinct lack of industry recognition; the score missed out on nominations for the BAFTAs, Golden Globes and, perhaps most significantly, the Academy Awards.\(^\text{61}\) While it is tempting to make assumptions about the Academy’s choices for Best Picture, it is noteworthy that *Spotlight* won Best Film but only Best Screenplay in addition to this, making it the first film to receive the top accolade but receive only one other Oscar since *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1953. Is it possible the film’s craft, score included, is a victim of its own transparency? In the conclusion to his article on the craft of the film, Kristopher Tapley reminds us that:

It may be struggling for recognition outside of a best picture/best director/best screenplay framework, but if anything, ‘Spotlight’ is a reminder of subtlety in crafts, and how being refined and reserved can serve a story brilliantly, if the story calls for it.\(^\text{62}\)

About the Author
Andrew Callaghan is a PhD candidate at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, investigating scored music in relation to filmic realism in narrative and documentary media. As a composer, he has produced music and sound design for film, TV, albums, podcasts, live art and gallery installations.

\(^{58}\) ‘*Spotlight* (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack),’ *Amazon*, [www.amazon.com/Spotlight-Original-Motion-Picture-Soundtrack/product-reviews/B0170GBHK8/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp_only_reviews&sortBy=recent](www.amazon.com/Spotlight-Original-Motion-Picture-Soundtrack/product-reviews/B0170GBHK8/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp_only_reviews&sortBy=recent).
\(^{59}\) ‘*Hateful Eight* (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack),’ *Amazon*, [www.amazon.com/Quentin-Tarantinos-Original-Soundtrack-Explicit/product-reviews/B018H8EDDG/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_top?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp_only_reviews](www.amazon.com/Quentin-Tarantinos-Original-Soundtrack-Explicit/product-reviews/B018H8EDDG/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_top?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp_only_reviews).
\(^{62}\) Tapley, ‘On the Reserved.’