

The practice of songscoreing: typology and transtextuality

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I. Four kinds of songscoreing: a short contextual typology

The practice of ›songscoreing‹ has already been researched extensively (Romney/Wootton 1995, Donnelly 2001, Wojcik/Knight 2001, Inglis 2003, Reay 2004, Dyer 2011 among many others) and there have been many substantial efforts to produce a comprehensive overview as well as numerous dedicated case studies. Thus the following introduction does not aim to reinvent or sum up these ample results but try to outline two different typological approaches to songscoreing which are contextual and transtextual respectively. They are merely meant to serve as a humble introduction to the subsequent articles about the history, theory and practice of songscoreing assembled in this edition as a result of a conference called »›Play it again, Sam!‹ The history, theory and practice of songs in film‹ held in Kiel in 2014.

For the contextual typology I am going to introduce four different approaches to describing the use of songs in films. The first approach can be regarded as an accumulation of examples directed or supervised by the same »auteur« – comparing directors' or musical supervisors' use of songs in different films. Some directors have constant collaborators (e. g. the liaison of Martin Scorsese and Robbie Robertson, see Rabenalt 2015) or habitually account for the selection of pre-existing film music themselves. This practice may have become extremely popular in recent decades because of

Quentin Tarantino whose ›mixtape technique‹ is sometimes regarded by film critics to be something completely new. Although said technique can be attributed to Tarantino it was already used long before, e. g. by George Lucas for his film *AMERICAN GRAFFITI* (USA 1973) in which the soundtrack is set to imitate one consecutive radio program containing a retrospectively picked selection of greatest hits from the 1950's. Many songs are played in the background for several minutes while others are only used as short interludes in the foreground. The introduction of the accompanying ›jukebox‹ of the film begins in its paratext already: as the company logos appear on the screen the sound of a radio being tuned can be heard, signifying the inextricable link between the film's diegesis and its songscoring.

There are other famous instances of directors picking the music or at least interfering heavily with the sound adviser's suggestions. There are some case studies about the songs in Robert Altman's (Magee 2014), Quentin Tarantino's (Coulthard 2012, Garner 2013), Martin Scorsese's (Hubbert 2013, Strank 2015) or the Coen Brothers' films (McDonald 2012, Smith 2013) among many others.

The second type of songscoring addresses the visualization of or by songs, using the word visualizing as a metaphorical attribute and as a verb simultaneously in the phrase »visualizing songs«. This concerns the music-video-like depiction of songs as well as the functionalization of songs in the filmic context. Songs can contribute to a narrative, to the setting of a film and even turn the original meaning of the lyrics around. They can add intertextual layers of text and music simultaneously, e. g. in a scene from Quentin Tarantino's *JACKIE BROWN* (USA 1997) that recalls a filmic and a musical stereotype at the same time and uses it ironically by connecting it to

a *male gaze* perspective. In the film, bondsman Max Cherry (Robert Forster) picks up the empowered criminal stewardess Jackie Brown (Pam Grier) when she is released from prison. This scene can be seen twice in Tarantino's film, once from Max's perspective and once from Jackie's. In the first of those two scenes, Max can seemingly hear a song in his head as Jackie comes walking towards him. He projects a cliché on Jackie while the film projects a cliché on the spectator. The cliché evokes a filmic intertext of introspective love songs popping up in a character's head as well as a musical intertext by using a soul hit called »Natural High« by the band Bloodstone, released in 1972, whose label London Records tried to imitate the famous Motown sound, thus stressing the sexual aspect of the love song. The second scene (from Jackie's perspective) verifies the hypothesis that the song was playing only in Max's head as it is not underscored with music at all. Thus it's the song that »visualizes« the situation; it uses a filmic stereotype to appropriately depict the character's mindframe.

The third type of songsoring concerns the diegetical performance of songs which is often connected to the extrafilmic star image of the performer. Earliest examples of this practice go back to the silent film era and they range from musical inserts in mainstream films to contemporary digital media outlets. Musical inserts and cameos that interrupt the narration for a short performance of a song that may or may not be related to the diegesis belong in this category as well as the cultural background of a seminal performance that may influence contemporary performances – for example, Carey Mulligan's disenchanted and fragile performance of »New York, New York« in Steve McQueen's SHAME (USA 2011) that could be compared to Frank Sinatra's generally upbeat performances or – in filmic terms – to Liza Minelli's exuberant performance in Martin Scorsese's NEW YORK, NEW

YORK (USA 1977) to underline the cultural development of the semantic potentials of the song by way of intertextuality.

The last type of songscoring introduced here could be described as the invocation of historical and regional contexts by songs in films. Music in general – and specifically songs – come with a context that is connected to the filmic enactment and non-filmic contexts. One could argue that the meaning of songs doesn't lie in the songs themselves but in their relation to other media and cultural knowledge – background noises, the visual aspects of film, the lyrics, instrumental conventions, singing conventions and many more. My research about recurring songs and recurring pieces in films over the last years has shown that the results are very much comparable. I have first traced the folk song »Shall we gather at the River?« in films from the 1930s until today and then looked for instances of Samuel Barber's famous *Adagio for Strings* in films from the 1950's until today. Both have gathered more semantic layers over the years and are now readable as both songs or tunes that signify their historic origin as well as all of the new contexts they have been used in. Like the first movement of the composition *Also sprach Zarathustra* that is now invariably linked to Stanley Kubrick's film 2001 – A SPACE ODYSSEY (USA 1968) songs tend to generate new intermedial contexts every time they are used but also acknowledge at least some of the former contexts they have been in.

II. Songscoring and transtextuality

In 1982, Gérard Genette presented five types of transtextuality in his seminal book *Palimpsestes*. Genette referred to literature when he wrote it

but I have applied his five types to film-musical intermediality and used them to determine the contexts that are created in the process of songscoreing. The types are called intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality. In a free interpretation, intertextuality could refer to the presence of another filmic, musical or film-musical intertext in the current song.

A film-musical intertext would be the use of the song »Across 110th Street« in Quentin Tarantino's *JACKIE BROWN* which has even been used in the same position – as the opening and closing track – in the eponymous 1972 film *ACROSS 110TH STREET* by Barry Shear.

Paratextuality would refer to surrounding texts such as the title, a commentary, interviews with the composer and/or the filmmaker. In some instances the lyrics could serve as a paratext as well. An example could be the use of The Shins' music in the aforementioned film *GARDEN STATE* which has been heavily commented by the director of the film, the band and is also commented onscreen in the film itself.

Metatextuality would be described by Genette as a critical commentary on the text; in the field of songscoreing it could mean the revision of a semantic potential, such as the re-interpretation of a song in a new filmic context. An example would be the song »Suicide is painless« in Robert Altman's film *M*A*S*H* (USA 1970) which is re-interpreted by the opening sequence. The song itself re-interprets and thus critically comments the New Hollywood convention of playing an upbeat pop song over the opening credits which was customary at the time.¹

¹ For example in *BONNIE & CLYDE* (USA 1967, Arthur Penn), *GREETINGS* (USA 1968, Brian De Palma), *MEAN STREETS* (USA 1973, Martin Scorsese) and many more.

Architextuality refers to the type of the text. Every song in a film can be seen as part of a genre, a set of rules or a convention. For example, the songs in *AMERICAN GRAFFITI* mostly relate to the rock'n'roll song scheme while some of them represent the newer <surf pop> type. This notion can be interesting when talking about the historical origin or tradition of a song. Some films build a network of cultural references through songs – like the Coen Brothers' film *INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS* (USA 2013) that portrays the early 1960's Greenwich Village scene and complements this portrayal with the use of folk songs that are contemporarily interpreted in the style of the 1960's.

Hypertextuality describes the relation between two distinctive texts – Genette illustrates this with the analogies between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey*. A common example of hypertextual film music is the form of parody, like the use of Barber's *Adagio for Strings* in the NBC sitcom *SEINFELD* (USA 1996, S08E06: »The Fatigues«), obviously referring to Oliver Stone's *PLATOON* (USA 1986). Other examples include the multiple variations of the famous »Bohemian Rhapsody« scene² in *WAYNE'S WORLD* (USA 1992, Penelope Spheeris) or the internet meme based on Haddaway's europop song »What Is Love«³.

As with any theory, most examples can best be described as a combination of some, if not all types of transtextuality. In many instances the application of Genette's theory proves that songs in film are not only the combination of

² For example the one by the Porkka Playboys: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irLsjBDPe5c> (last access: 26.06.2015).

³ This is based on a 1996 *Saturday Night Live* sketch that was revived as an animated gif in 2005 and subsequently developed into a wide-spread meme (see: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/what-is-love>; last access: 26.06.2015).

two media – song and film – but of many more contexts and intertexts as well.

One final example from the film (500) DAYS OF SUMMER (USA 2009, Marc Webb) shall illustrate that the network of allusions can be fairly complex whereas it seems very simple on the surface. It constitutes a singular event in the narration of the film: a surreal musical insert that illustrates the main character Tom's (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) having recently fallen in love, inciting the participation of virtually all passers-by he meets on his way to work while most of them are improbably dressed in blue – just like Summer (Zooey Deschanel), the woman Tom is in love with.

This scene obviously alludes to the tradition of the musical film. Paratextually, its title »You make my dreams« refers to the surreal quality of the scene and the subjectivity of Tom's perception throughout. The performers Hall & Oates represent white soul music and thus replace Tom's usual brand of new wave and melancholic indie music with an upbeat love song. Furthermore, while the choreography alludes to a musical the song itself is thus adjusted to the rock & pop soundtrack of the film. The archtext can be described as a crowd song or a crowd dance typical for musicals and musical inserts in narrative films alike. It is metatextual in reflecting the musical tradition ironically, also emphasizing the fact that the whole film is narrated from Tom's point of view (which is the key to understanding many of the scenes much better). It can also be regarded as an ironic variation because the whole film undermines and deconstructs the independent romantic comedy which is one of the most popular genres at the time of its release. The sheer exuberance of the scene is a counterpoint to the rest of the film which is more downbeat or at least melancholic. The animated blue birds also point to the main hypotext of the scene which is Disney's

ENCHANTED (USA 2007, Kevin Lima), released two years earlier. Of course, ENCHANTED itself relates to many other Disney films, notably CINDERELLA (USA 1950, Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske) (which the animated blue birds may have originated from). The five transtextual types of relations to other contexts thus build a complex network of analytical possibilities while maintaining a structure for possible comparison with other examples of songscoreing.

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