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# **‘The Glue of the World’: Popular music in film soundtracks.**

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## **Abstract.**

Popular music has a strong presence in many contemporary films, frequently replacing, or displacing, the 'classical' soundtrack. The question arises of whether a popular music soundtrack achieves similar functions to traditional, 'classical' film music. Investigating this question is the primary aim of this thesis.

An outline of film music theory is followed by an overview of how meaning is produced in popular music. These two areas of discussion are then brought together in the neoformalist analyses of the textual relations between the popular music soundtrack and the narrative, characterisation, and themes of three contemporary films: *Sliding Doors* (1997, Peter Howitt), *Empire Records* (1995, Allan Moyle), and *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* (1997, Harry Sinclair). The uses and functions of the music in these soundtracks are then compared to the conventions of 'classical' Hollywood film music.

This thesis will show that the popular songs in the soundtracks of the three films generally fulfil one or more of six functions which are usually performed by 'classical' Hollywood film music. There are some important differences, however, as the songs frequently draw on features which are specific to popular music. Taken together, the three case studies provide valuable insight into the ways popular music works in contemporary mainstream films.

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## Introduction.

Contemporary movie soundtracks increasingly, indeed almost ubiquitously, utilise popular music, especially rock. Recent films such as *Reality Bites* (1994, Ben Stiller), *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996, Baz Luhrmann), *Men In Black* (1997, Barry Sonnenfeld), *Armageddon* (1998, Michael Bay) and *Scarfies* (1999, Robert Sarkies) have been complemented by the simultaneous release of high profile soundtrack albums. While many consider the starting point for this trend to be during the fifties and sixties, when films like *Blackboard Jungle* (1955, Richard Brooks), *A Hard Day's Night* (1964, Richard Lester), *Scorpio Rising* (1963, Kenneth Anger) and *Easy Rider* (1969, Dennis Hopper) were conspicuous in their use of popular and rock songs in their soundtracks and credit sequences, Altman has noted that popular music has been linked with film since the earliest days of nickelodeon illustrated song slides<sup>1</sup> (1999, n.p.). However, it was during the fifties and sixties that the use of the pop score became widespread<sup>2</sup>. Since then, popular music has come to pervade not just credit sequences, where it initially appeared in films like *Blackboard Jungle*, but sometimes entire films, as in the case of *American Graffiti* (1973, George Lucas) or *Forrest Gump* (1994, Robert Zemeckis). As Romney and Wootton note, "For nearly half a century, the repertoire of memorable pop moments in film has been mushrooming, until they can be fairly said to outnumber the more traditional canon of musical epiphanies on screen" (1995, p.2).

As noted above, the popular music used in a film's soundtrack is frequently incorporated into the marketing strategy for the film. More and more films these days have an accompanying soundtrack album which contains tracks that are used in the film. In some cases, two different albums are released: one contains the orchestral score, while the other contains the popular music from, or inspired by the film<sup>3</sup>. The level of promotional activity surrounding soundtrack albums (high levels of advertising, promotional give-aways and so forth) means that, as Romney and Wootton point out, "It's increasingly hard, faced with a film and its soundtrack CD, to tell which product is really supporting which" (1995, p.4).

Soundtrack albums are 'big business', as Russell Baillie (1999) has noted. For many music-buyers, "...the movies, television and their tie-in albums are where they can hear new or unfamiliar older artists for the first time outside narrow broadcast formats" (ibid.). Roger Marbeck, of Marbeck's Records in Auckland, finds that soundtracks are notable sellers in the New Zealand market, providing a significant percentage of sales per annum (quoted in Baillie, 1999). In mid-1999, the soundtrack to the film *Austin Powers: The Spy who Shagged Me* (1999, Jay Roach) received intensive promotion in New Zealand. Over one weekend in June, a local popular radio station gave away copies of the film's soundtrack album, and played songs from it frequently throughout the two days (such as Madonna's 'Beautiful Stranger' and Lenny Kravitz' 'American Woman'); at the same time, the DJ's promoted a station-exclusive pre-release premiere screening at the local cinema. The focus on the soundtrack of

this film is made more significant when one considers that *The Spy Who Shagged Me* is a parody of sixties 'special agent' films (more specifically, the James Bond series); as Smith has noted, it was during the sixties that pop music and the popular music aesthetic came to dominate film scoring techniques (1995, p.6).

Russell Baillie (1999) also notes that film soundtracks provide good exposure for relatively unknown artists. A recent illustration of this trend is the soundtrack to the high-school comedy *American Pie* (1999, Paul Weitz). New Zealand singer Bic Runga has two tracks on the soundtrack to this top rating American film. As Baillie points out, the inclusion of her early New Zealand hit 'Sway' (45 seconds of which can be heard during a memorable scene in the film) and 'Good Morning Baby', a duet with Dan Wilson of American band Semisonic, has been a 'boon' for the singer-songwriter: "It's resulted in markedly increased American sales for Runga's debut album and increased traffic on her Website...by newly won American fans". Runga's manager, Campbell Smith, sees soundtracks as "...a really important way to promote her" (quoted in Baillie, 1999). Neil Finn is another New Zealand artist who has drawn on 'soundtrack status' to increase his exposure in the United States (his song 'She Will Have Her Way' is the lead track on the soundtrack to the New York television drama *Felicity*).

These examples of heavy marketing of soundtracks highlight the fact that the popular music in many films is almost impossible to ignore; the popular music soundtrack now seems to have replaced, or at least displaced, the 'classical'<sup>4</sup> film score. This raises the question, essential to



this thesis, of whether the popular music soundtrack is still used in similar ways to the 'traditional', 'classical' score. With analyses of the textual relations between the popular music on the soundtrack and the narrative, characterisation and themes of three contemporary, relatively mainstream films, the uses of and functions carried out by the popular music are compared to those considered to be conventional in 'classical' Hollywood film music.

The analyses of the film soundtracks will draw broadly on a neoformalist approach. Kristin Thompson has provided a comprehensive overview of this approach in *Breaking the Glass Armour: Neoformalist film analysis* (1988)<sup>5</sup>. As she explains, neoformalism is an approach based fairly closely on the work of the Russian Formalist literary theoretician-critics (1988, p.6). It is an approach that does not prescribe one specific method: Thompson states that for the neoformalist critic "Each analysis uses a method adapted to the film and the issues at hand, and interpretation will not always be used in the same way...[it] may emphasise meanings within the work or the work's relation to society" (1988, p.13).

Neoformalism examines 'devices' within the filmic text (such as camera movement, theme, or music); one of the analyst's main jobs is to find a device's functions (in various contexts) and the motivations for the device's presence. As Thompson points out, formal devices serve a variety of functions: they can serve the narrative, appeal to similar devices familiar from other artworks, imply verisimilitude, and defamiliarise<sup>6</sup> the structures of the artwork itself (1988, p.20). This emphasis on the functions and motivations of filmic devices (rather than, say, a

psychoanalytical focus on gender specific maturation processes) makes neoformalism a relevant approach for research into the role and function of popular music in film.

A further relevant feature of the neoformalist approach is its attention to historical context: Thompson states that "Every viewing occurs in a specific situation, and the spectator cannot engage with the film except by using viewing skills learned in encounters with other artworks and in everyday experience" (1988, p.21). Thus, in analysing a film, the neoformalist critic does not treat the film's devices as "...fixed and self-contained structures that exist independently of our perception of them" (Thompson, 1988, p.26). The qualities that are of interest to the analyst (such as the film's representations, its unity, and its meaning) are considered to result from interactions between the text's formal structures and the mental operations viewers perform in response to them (ibid.).

This attention to historical context and viewer response means that the neoformalist approach fits well with the conception of active viewers implicitly adopted in this study (outlined in the second chapter). Thompson maintains that the neoformalist view finds a medium between the totally text-constructed 'spectator' and the actual subjective 'viewer'. While the background of each individual viewer is unique, and has an undeniable effect on the interpretation of the text, the text itself is constructed to encourage viewers to apply certain schemata; that is, the work 'cues' viewers in their responses. The analyst's task then becomes to "...point out the cues and on the basis of them to discuss what responses would reasonably result, given a knowledge of backgrounds on

the part of the viewer” (Thompson, 1988, p.29). However, because a work exists in constantly changing circumstances, perceptions of it will differ over time. Therefore, it is also crucial not to assume that the meanings and patterns noticed by the analyst are ‘completely there in the work, immutable for all time’ (Thompson, 1988, p.25).

This attitude underlies the analyses in this study: the meanings I have read from the films and their soundtracks are not taken as ‘carved in stone’. They are considered to be ‘likely’ interpretations of the film/music relationship, but by no means are they believed to be the only possible reading of the texts. Because the analyses in this thesis are text-focused, however, the notion of potentially differing audience receptions is not discussed in any depth. It is recognised that the area of viewer responses to film music is essential to a full understanding of the way film music creates meaning, but it is a topic that could not be covered due to the limited time frame available for the study. Moreover, it should be noted that the readings I have outlined in this thesis are based on repeated, intense viewing of the films chosen; this viewing ‘style’ is different to what ‘normal’ audience members would engage in, so their responses might be quite different to mine.

My readings are also somewhat different to a notable trend in several published critiques of ‘nostalgic’ films such as *Forrest Gump* or *American Graffiti*. Analyses of these films tend to focus on the way the popular music ‘summarises’ or reflects the themes that were dominant within society in a certain era. Because I have focused on contemporary films, it is difficult to discuss such themes with any specificity, as they are

still evolving, and have yet to be identified and accepted as indicative of this time. Moreover, an understanding of a 'zeitgeist' would seem to rely strongly on audiences' perceptions of their societies; because I have not engaged in any audience research, a meaningful account of dominant themes of contemporary society is near impossible (though I have attempted to indicate where I think a particular song might be trying to signify 'now-ness' to an audience).

In order to carry out the analyses of the textual relations between film narratives and popular music, then, it is important to understand the conventions of 'classical' film music, as well as the ways in which the meanings of popular music are received and constructed. Critics such as Claudia Gorbman, Kathryn Kalinak, Caryl Flinn, George Burt, Royal S. Brown, Jeff Smith and Noël Carroll have debated the functions of 'classical' Hollywood film music; their key ideas have been brought together in the first section of Chapter Two, which contains a discussion about the conventions of the 'traditional' score. The second section of this chapter brings together ideas from several critics and theorists about how meaning is gained from popular music. Here, I have drawn on the work of, among others, Simon Frith, Anahid Kassabian, Richard Middleton, Per-Erik Brolinson and Holger Larsen, Theodore Gracyk, and Brian Longhurst. The three case studies which follow combine these two strands of debate to consider the way popular music works in the selected soundtracks.

The first case study is an analysis of *Sliding Doors* (1997, Peter Howitt). This film was chosen because it is a contemporary film with a

significant amount of popular music on its soundtrack. The story line does not contain an explicit 'youth' theme, and so the film provides a good example of how popular music has become ubiquitous in 'general' film soundtracks. In contrast, the second analysis is of *Empire Records* (1995, Allan Moyle) which is a youth film set in a record store. It thus contains a clear link to the youth focus of popular music, but still begs the question of whether the popular music that dominates the soundtrack functions in a similar way to the 'classical' music that used to dominate Hollywood films. The third case study is an analysis of the recent New Zealand film *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* (1997, Harry Sinclair). This film is included because of its status as a 'New Zealand film'; I was interested to see whether the local music in the film's soundtrack was still used in a similar manner to Hollywood film music.

As will be argued later in this thesis, the songs in the soundtracks of these three films generally fulfil one or more of the conventions of classical Hollywood film music. There are some important differences, however, as the songs frequently draw on features which are specific to popular music, such as strong extratextual meanings and associations. Taken together, the three case studies provide valuable insight into the ways popular music works in contemporary mainstream films.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Song slides were first invented in the mid-1890s, and grew in popularity as sheet music publishers recognised their publicity value. A highlight of increasingly popular nickelodeon programmes, the illustrated song was 'a

live entertainment featuring a popular song illustrated by colourful lantern slides' (frequently involving audience participation during the last chorus). As Altman notes, song slides offered a "...convenient and inexpensive manner to occupy audiences while the film was changed" (1999, n.p.). They maintained their popularity until around 1913 when most projection booths had a second film projector installed, thus removing the need for 'fillers'. Altman suggests that early silent film accompaniment was influenced by the popular music conventions of song slides, and he maintains that the influence of the nickelodeon's song-oriented accompaniment practices is visible throughout the history of film music (ibid.).

<sup>2</sup> See Smith (1995) for a detailed discussion of the rise of the pop score during this period.

<sup>3</sup> The high-profile release of Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) was complemented by the release of two soundtrack albums: Danny Elfman's orchestral score, and Prince's songs (many of which do not actually appear in the film) (Donnelly, 1998, p.144).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis, the term 'classical' is placed in quotation marks following Royal S. Brown (1994, pp.38-39) to indicate that the term is used to "...designate not two centuries of musical tradition, but only the styles commonly employed in late silent film accompaniment and in through-composed sound cinema" (Altman, 1999, n.p.).

<sup>5</sup> This approach is also utilised by Bordwell and Thompson in *Film Art: an Introduction* (1997) and by Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985).

<sup>6</sup> Thompson argues that 'defamiliarisation' is an aesthetic play through which artworks achieve their 'renewing effects on our mental processes' (1988, p.10). She draws on Victor Shklovsky's definition of defamiliarisation which states that "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known" (Shklovsky, 1965, pp.11-12, cited in Thompson, 1988, p.10). Thus, art, including film, defamiliarises our habitual perceptions of the everyday world; it transforms material from this world by placing it in a new context and formal patterns. Defamiliarisation can occur with regards to representations of 'reality' itself, or to the conventions established by previous artworks. Thompson states that "Defamiliarisation is the general neoformalist term for the basic purpose of art in our lives" (1988, p.11).