

Session 6

Musical Multimedia

1. MIKE NICHOLS, *THE GRADUATE* (1968)

song lyrics and ,contextual/ersatz visuality' (see session 5)

Most people in the late 60s would have associated the song “Scarborough Fair” with the film, rather than with an audio recording, live situation etc.

The Graduate (Oscar for best film) is today no. 18 in the US all-time box office list (if rankings are adjusted for inflation)

The Graduate often seen as the first film to use pre-recorded song instead of post-production scoring

Three effects:

- Classically inflected film scores typically worked “toward the goal of transparent or invisible discourse” (Gorbman 1987, 72), while (rock) songs in film were suddenly meant to be consciously ‘heard’.
- “Ties between film and sound track recordings have become so important that producers now routinely hire musical consultants to assemble a collection of songs that not only will make the movie more appealing but will also lead to sales in music stores” (Shumway 1999, 37).
- **non-diegetic, pre-recorded lyrics add an entirely new dimension of semantic complexity to filmic composition.**

Plot summary of *The Graduate*, film excerpt

Nichols and Simon and Garfunkel

“The truth of the matter is that Art Garfunkel and I didn’t really score the movie; in a funny way, the movie was scored around us” (Paul Simon qtd. in Swenson 1984, 112).

In reality, Simon was commissioned to write new songs, but did not manage to do so; Nichols eventually decided to use old songs:

- “The Sound of Silence” (playing in the beginning, the end, and once in the middle)
- “April Come She Will” (playing only once)
- “Mrs. Robinson” (unfinished, plays when Benjamin drives up to Berkeley to prevent Elaine’s marriage)
- “Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine” (on diegetic sound only, like additional traditional scoring by Dave Grusin)
- “Scarborough Fair/Canticle” (longest running time, melancholic theme of Benjamin’s separation from Elaine and quest to get her back)

2. ANALYSING MUSICAL MULTIMEDIA

Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (1999)

Cook admonishes a

terminological impoverishment epitomized by film criticism’s traditional categorization of all music–picture relationships as either parallel or contrapuntal, and a largely unconscious (and certainly uncritical) assumption that such relationships are to be understood in terms of hegemony and hierarchy rather than interaction. (Cook 1999, 107)

we should not automatically give prominence to the images, but look at a free and unrestricted interaction between all medial elements, as

“approaches derived from film criticism, which proceed from the exegesis of narrative content to the analysis of music’s role in reinforcing or subverting that content, are clearly of limited value [...] where music is not intended to be inaudible [...] but just the opposite” (ibid., 167).

Lawrence Kramer (2002)

Questions Cook's "notion of free, variably hierarchical negotiation among the media," as this alternative "does not quite do justice to the historical and cultural force of the imagetext, which does enjoy a semantic authority that music is denied" (Kramer 2002, 151).

- Stability of signs
- Cultural dominance of visual media in the 20th century

"[w]hat's needed is a way to recognize semantic priority in the imagetext without conceding primacy to it" (Kramer 2002, 151).

Text, image and music are linked in a semantic loop where music is initially dependent on the transferral of meaning from the visual and verbal context to become meaningful:

In sum: musical meaning in mixed media is experienced in inverted form; it runs on a loop. The music seems to emit a meaning that it actually returns, and what it returns, it enriches and transforms. [...] Music, indeed, is one of the defining modes of an immediacy that the imagetext has to exclude in order to stabilize itself, to enable its generalizing, abstracting, speculative capacities [...]. But as soon as meaning effectively runs from the imagetext to music along the semantic loop, the music seems to convey the meaning to and through the imagetext in preconceptual, prerepresentational form. (Kramer 2002, 153).

My criticism:

When music is pre-recorded (as in our case or in music videos), it already comes with a meaning (acquired in the trialactics between cognition, social distinction and bodily hexis) and consequently enters the semantic feedback loop with a certain semantic weight of its own.

Suggestion: A compromise between Cook's idea of free interaction of meaningful components, and Kramer's notions of the dominance of the 'imagetext':



- two mixed media systems running on two interrelated loops, with music as the connecting element and a semantic weight of its own
- loop one: see session 5
- loop two: **music affects film** (e.g. to create atmospheres, to illustrate movement, to integrate images, to represent emotions, to mediate social contexts, to forge collective identities, to parody, among many others, see e.g. Schneider 1990, 88-105), **and images/narrative in turn affect the music**
- **film via the music affects the lyrics – and via the lyrics the music – and via music the images/narrative etc. etc**
- **every level remains independent and is never fully ‘swallowed’ by the dominant meaning of another**
- **irony** is produced if the independent meanings of different levels (especially lyrics and imagetexts) is contradictory
- **irony** may be contained by through a songful’ dynamics (see session 4)

3. “SCARBOROUGH FAIR” IN *THE GRADUATE*

Song and filmic focalisation technique:

gaze shots, point of view shots, over-the-shoulder shots, etc → Ben Braddock as focaliser

Paul Simon:

“See, it was Mike’s concept that we would be the voice of Benjamin, the graduate, in the film. Every time you would hear us, it would be as if Benjamin was speaking. A song like “The Sound of Silence” is really Benjamin talking about his life and his parents and where he lives and what he sees around him. (qtd. in Swenson 1984, 113)”

Flow of meaning in this process:

Elements of the **classical music interpretive option (see session 3)**: lyrics comment on ‘pure’, innocent, nonsexual and perfect love between Ben and Elaine

Elements of the **folk/pop music interpretive option (see session 2 and 3)**: ‘demonic, destructive, seductive, highly sexual love is embodied by/flows to Mrs. Robinson

Elements of the of the folk/protest song (‘canticle’-part) interpretive option:

“Simon and Garfunkel’s songs encourage the identification of Benjamin with a disaffected generation and discourage our seeing him for the isolated, idiosyncratic individual he might otherwise seem” (Shumway 1999, 38).

Music supports the overall ‘feel’ of the film: Simon and Garfunkel are chosen to provide the soundtrack of a beginning social revolution (1968)

Ironies:

Complexities and elaborate riddles etc in lyrics

vs.

“Dustin [Hoffman] has always said that Benjamin is a walking surfboard” (Nichols in Smith 1999).

Farber and Changas, review of the film in 1968:

Nichols does use a few fine Simon and Garfunkel songs (written long before the film was conceived) to pump poetic and intellectual content into *The Graduate*. Because all the songs, especially “The Sounds [sic] of Silence,” are so concise, lyrical, eloquent, we are tempted to believe that the film contains their insights and that Ben understands them. We are supposed to assume that Ben shares Paul Simon’s perceptions of “people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening” in a world whose “words of the prophet are written on the subway walls,” but in truth Ben couldn’t *begin* putting the world in that kind of order. He’s only a beer-drinking *Time* magazine type, as Hoffman recognized, rather harmlessly stupid and awkward, but tricked up with a suffering face and an *Angst*-ridden song intent on persuading us that he’s an alienated generational hero. And audiences eager to believe that all young people are sensitive and alienated and that all old people are sell-outs or monsters gratefully permit Hoffman’s mannerisms and Paul Simon’s poetry to convince them of a depth in Ben that the part, as written, simply does not contain. (Farber and Changas 1968, 38, emphasis in the original)

How is irony contained?

Sound and songfulness of the lyrics (see session 4)

!! I think, therefore, that Paul Simon is “talking without speaking” in *The Graduate* as the viewers are mostly “hearing without listening.” !!

Works Cited

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