

# Analysis of the Role of Music in Film Narrative

Rui Xu

Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade  
Fuzhou, China

**Abstract**—Given that music has been used as an accompaniment for films since the introduction of motion pictures, it can be said that the two mediums share a close relationship.

**Keywords**—music; film; role change

## I. INTRODUCTION

When people think of today's popular music, they call to mind the music spread by mass media, which is a kind of leisure and entertainment that is easily accepted by a large number of viewers (Kovač, 2006:83). Given that music has been used as an accompaniment for films since the introduction of motion pictures, it can be said that the two mediums share a close relationship.

In the 1920s, studios began to prepare theme music to promote their films — to begin with, one of the important reasons for the use of music in films was the huge potential business gains. Now, music has become an important element of mainstream film. These movie musics that convey a particular mood not need to give the audience a sense of substitution and correspond to the cultural and social environment of the film. For example, at the beginning of "The Great Gatsby", when 'No Church in the Wild' — a song by American pop star Jay-Z is played — it showed the picture of a world nearly one hundred years ago, forming a dislocation between screen and soundtrack in time and space and guiding the audience to enter the era quickly that the film wants to express in the process of viewing. The song is played while an extravagant scene of contemporary New York society is depicted. They also play a narrative role in the film, which is not an easy task. As well as literary works, film also needs to tell the audience the course of the story using audio-visual language, pictures, music, and other techniques. As for the music narrative in the film, music is a means through which to tell the story. Starting the plot with music in simple terms can establish a connection between the film and its audience. The music narrative not only brings the audience a new audio-visual enjoyment and cultivates their aesthetic art; it also allows the audience to understand the historical background of the film and to expand their field of their vision. For example, "Forrest Gump" is interspersed with famous historical events, such as Vietnam, China and the United States' ping pong diplomacy, the death of John Lennon, and contemporary pop or rock music is used to provide historical background clues.

This essay is divided into three parts and mainly discusses the importance of the narrative function of music

in film. The first part is an analysis of how music plays the role of narration in the film with theory in the atmosphere of music function changes. The second part studies two examples, "The Great Gatsby" (2013) and "Forrest Gump" (1994), and explores the ways in which pop songs play a narrative role in film, especially in the mainstream film, by implementing the theoretical principle of 'Unheard Narrative Film Music' developed by American scholar Claudia Gorbman. The final part will combine the previous two sections and present a summary. The analysis of the music narrative in specific films not only brings the audience a new perspective of appreciation, but also provides a new way of thinking and ideas for film production and related music production.

## II. THE CHANGE FROM CLASSICAL MUSIC TO MUSIC

Before the 1960s, the film industry began to use classical music more frequently as a soundtrack. The music of the film is a functional element which has the meaning of space, language, cradle, beat, inner depth and emotion, and the emphasis on the changes of visual motion (Bjornberg, 1994: 55). The main function of classical music-based theme music is to establish the framework of the film narrative and to connect the audience and the film using emotion and psychology. To a large extent, classical music depends on the response of the audience and the musical conventions that have referential significance. Gorbman (1987, p.162) believes that the use of contemporary music in mainstream films has been fundamentally different from the use of music in traditional Hollywood Musicals. The way in which music and images are combined is constantly evolving. Following the extensive use of classical music in the film, theme music shifted from classical to the use of popular culture. The addition of lyrics provides another new level of engagement and allows the meaning of the film to resonate more powerfully with audiences. Because classical music is not listened to by the masses, music is very prominent in the narrative which is considered to be closer in the melody. The addition of lyrics also makes it much easier to understand the popularity of music as a soundtrack (Brown 1994, p. 248). For example, in "Forrest Gump", when the heroine plays and sings a song, the leading man in the army is listening to the song "Blowin' in the Wind" under the stage with the lyrics: "Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows That too many people have died....The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind." In this context, the addition of lyrics, as well as the use of a pop song clearly demonstrates an idea of loving peace and being against war. From classical to popular, from

the pure melody to the addition of lyrics, the change can provide the audience with more opportunities to integrate into the film. In other words, the inclusion of music in the film affects the cooperation between music and image, narrative style, and the way the audience processes the visual/music text to a large extent. As Brown (1994) states, film music is no longer a secondary medium, only responsible for the support of an exciting moment, but exists as a kind of emotion parallel with vision to better describe the delicate connotations of a story.

### III. THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN FILM NARRATION

Some scholars (A.J. Cohen, 2002; Tarasti, 2004) believe that music can be conceptualized as the narrative itself. According to the experience and evidence, film music plays an important role in the narrative of the film (Boltz, 2004; Marshall & Cohen, 1988). Films are two-dimensional and, when you are afraid in real life, you do not need to use accompanying music to elicit the feeling of fear. However, film differs from normal reality as music is required to contribute to the film narrative and to lead the audience to resonate with the film (Fischhoff). Lipscomb and Kendall (1994) suggest that the music score of the film can provide additional information about the narrative and the implied meaning, not just from the visual scene itself. Research has also suggested that music can function in parallel with the visual narrative as well as providing the auditory clues. It can be said that music in mainstream films is a kind of independent voice in different media which assists in the expression of the film's visual and narrative terminology to pass more complete information to the audience (Brown, 1994). For example, in "The Great Gatsby", when the ball officially begins, it begins with will.i.am's interpretation of the song "Bang Bang" which features ample drums and percussion. The song is clearly inspired by the 1920s style and the lyric also shows the deep affection for the heroine, providing clues about the story. It plays an equally important role in visual narrative. However, not all music plays a positive role in a film, and sometimes, music, like advertising, cannot resolve the conflicts in the film (Scott Murphy, 2014:3). As such, directors must be particularly careful when adding music and lyrics to their film. In a manner of speaking, the dominant time of music is short and intermittent on the soundtrack of a movie. It is not common to provide the audience with music as a part of the narrative structure (Lapedis, 1999). The main reason for this is that the elaborated scene provided by popular music in the film combines visual and auditory cues and gives the audience new feelings. This pattern allows the viewer to quickly capture the information switching back and forth between the visual and auditory, but also allows means that the audience is less likely to focus on a single aspect. It is difficult to achieve the role of strengthening the connection and resonance with the audience mentioned above (Bjornberg, 1994). As Robert Gjerdingen states, it is a complex psychological category. However, some critics have pointed out that when a film absorbs the fragmentation of music, and uses it in an unconventional and non-linear narrative style, the film score in this new mix of media will be promoted along with the film's ability to shape the scene.

Therefore, whether the audience will be distracted because of the technical aspects of combining by the music and film visual media (New Media Technology Development), and whether the narrative of the music has an irreplaceable role in the film (Wolf, 1999), are controversial and need to be discussed.

### IV. CASE STUDY

There are three main reasons to focus on "Forrest Gump" and "The Great Gatsby" as a case studies of the role of music in film narration. Firstly, they are both successful, mainstream Hollywood movies that are closely aligned with mainstream culture and mainstream values. Forrest Gump won six awards, including best film award at the sixty-seventh Oscar awards; "The Great Gatsby" won the best costume design award among many others. Secondly, these two films used a powerful music team, so the music included is varied. The typical scores are pop- and rock-based and are therefore consistent with the themes of this study. In addition, according to the theoretical concept proposed "Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music" by American scholar Claudia Gorbman, film music can be regarded as a cinematic element that serves the film narrative in an auditory form. This theory, as well as articles and conclusions reached by relevant scholars (Ragland, 1997; Shepherd, 1991), argue that the narrative function of film music can be divided into the following areas:

- Deepening the expression of the theme and summing up the content;
- Describing the story and scenery;
- Playing an important role in characterization;
- Rendering the inner world and expressing emotions;
- Playing up the atmosphere to promote the role of the development of the story;
- Rendering the cultural and historical background atmosphere.

The importance of music in the film narrative in both "Forrest Gump" and "The Great Gatsby" will be now be analyzed taking into account the above aspects.

#### A. Case Study 1: "Forrest Gump" (1994)

In "Forrest Gump", the film production team selected 31 pop or rock songs as episode and background music besides the main soundtrack and according to the needs of the film and different times. This selection portrays the history of American music after the First and Second World Wars. Music works well as narrative music in the film; it not only promoted the development of the story, but also brought the film unexpected success. Music in "Forrest Gump" not only supports the visual images and the narrative situations, but also expresses itself naturally in its own image (Brown 1994: 248). At the beginning of the film, the Elvis Presley songs 'Hound Dog' and 'Hip Dance' are played. Forrest's mother is strongly against him watching the songs because this culture was seen to be vulgar and inferior in America at that time.

Her attitude reflects the fact that rock was not part of mainstream popular culture in the early stages of its development in the 1950s, which is a hidden narrative clue. When Forrest goes to high school, he is constantly bullied because of his low IQ. 'Rebel Rouser', performed by Duane Eddy, accompanies these scenes with a clear indication that the rhythm and melody reflect Forrest's odd disposition. As with the moral of the song, Forrest begins to revolt against this unjust world. This music helps the narrative brings the audience back to the United States in the 1950s, responds to the history of environmental growth during Forrest's youth, reflects the changes in American contemporary music circles and also distinguishes and isolates Forrest's childhood and adulthood. Later, before Forrest is sent to fight in Vietnam, the film also shows Jenny singing while naked in a club. The song that she sings is 'Blowin' In The Wind' by Bob Dylan, which the director uses to describe Forrest's experience in the Vietnam war. The examples above show that the ways in which the narrative rhythm and the visuals complement each other is very accurate. The pop and rock songs that are used as episode and background music largely help the audience to understand time clues in the film and play a significant role in telling the film's narrative.

#### B. Case Study 2: "The Great Gatsby" (2013)

At the beginning of the film, when the character Nick Carraway first mentions New York in 1922, the film adapts an original song to one that matches the film's narrative more effectively. When Carraway says "and I was one of them", three male voices shout "Yeah" in unison, as if to suggest that Carraway is inwardly looking indefinitely toward the future. Immediately when an upbeat jazz track is played, the equalizer is adjusted to recreate the effect of an old radio. The soundtrack thus brings the audience back to that era in time. At the beginning of the jazz piece, the piano part '#4-#6-5-#5' is following the rhythm of the popular song, linking the film up naturally and reducing the abruptness. Carraway describes his life in Long Island, with this section continuing until Gatsby appears in front of the camera. With the jazz music fading out, the four tone motivation 'b3-5-4-2' appears which the deformation of the piano melody is. With the harmony here, the tone of the music becomes sad, which is an indication of the sorrowful turn that the film is to take, as well as its dark end. When Tom and Carraway suddenly get off the train, cheerful Jazz belonging to the era is played once again in contrast to the soundtrack to describe Ash Valley; the live sound and the heavy atmosphere of some electronic tones contrast sharply. As the film continues, Carraway returns to his monologue moment, or inner world, and the reverb effect is increased to make people feel very distant and ethereal. Music brings the whole film to its climax, leading the audience to span four hundred years of history through the auditory feast of jazz, pop, rap, and modern electronic music in just a few minutes. This makes the film narrative more complete and successful.

#### V. CONCLUSION

From the theoretical discussion and case study analysis, it is clear that music plays a significant role in film narrative.

Moreover, the widespread use of popular songs as theme songs, published in advance to attract the potential audience, has become a vertically integrated concept of cultural goods in mainstream film. In addition, the role of music in the film narrative is multiple. Firstly, music provide an extended reading of events in the film, which can help the audience to integrate into the times, places, cultural backgrounds, and even the inner world of the characters better. Depending on the emotional responses of the audience, it can make the audience feel closer to the character's emotional state, activate the consciousness of the audience involved in the film, and provide a deeper reading experience and narrative possibility. Secondly, the lyrics of songs can be used to present a sort of dramatic irony. In the two case studies, music, used in the leading film soundtrack, is an important link between the audience and the film that cannot be ignored. Thus, it is effective to read the text both at the individual and group levels. Although there are many drawbacks to this study, the arguments made still show that the importance of music in film narrative cannot be underestimated, as audiences are eager to seek new narrative experiences. More studies could be conducted in this area to discuss how music affects the audience's judgment and decisions in the movie.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Aleksandra Kovač, Musical Postcards of Our Time A Personal Look at the Importance of Original Pop Songs Written for Mainstream Films, produced by Belgrade Faculty of Dramatic Arts and Public Film in Serbia, (2015) p83.
- [2] Björnberg, A. (1994). 'Structural relationships of music and images in music video', *Popular Music*, 13, 1, pp. 51-74.
- [3] Brown, Royal S. 1994. *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley).
- [4] Bullerjahn, C., & Guldenring, M. (1994). An empirical investigation of effects of film music using qualitative content analysis. *Psychomusicology*, 13, 99-118.
- [5] Cohen, A. J. (2002). Music cognition and the cognitive psychology of film structure. *Canadian Psychology*, 4, 215-232.
- [6] Durant, A. (1988). *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. By Claudia Gorbman. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; and London: BFI Publishing, 1987. 186 pp. *Popular Music*, 7(03), p.339.
- [7] Hilary Lapedis, Popping the question: the function and effect of popular music in cinema, *popular Music* (1999) Volume 18/3. Copyright © 1999 Cambridge University Press. Printed in the United Kingdom.
- [8] Kathryn Kalinak Film music (a Very Short introduction ) 2010 Published by Oxford University Press, Inc. 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016 P2.
- [9] Ragland, E 1997 Lacan and the Subject of Law :Sexuation and Discourse in the Mapping of Subject Position the give the Ur-form of Law "Washington and Lee Law review" P1094.
- [10] Scott Murphy, a Music Progression in recent Popular Movies and Movie trailers, *MSMI* 8:2 autumn 14 doi:10.3828/msmi. 2014.9.
- [11] Shepherd, J (1991) *Music as Social Text* Cambridge .UK: Picy Press P124.
- [12] Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D, *The Evolution of Music in Film and its Psychological Impact on Audiences*, (2005).
- [13] Wolf, W. (1999). *The musicalization of fiction: A study in the theory and history of intermediality*. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi.
- [14] Yair Oppenheim, *The Functions of Film Music* (2001).