

Rock 'n' roll 'n' film

Provisional text for module Music and the Moving Image 1 [MUSI 223]
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Rock 'n' rebellion

Rock was even slower than jazz to become film underscore. To this day, rock in feature film has largely retained the functions of providing local, historical or social colour, often as set numbers and source music, as in the famous potted rock guitar style history scene from *Back to the Future* (1985). These 'non-underscore' functions can be heard and seen all through the history of rock in film. Although Elia Kazan used Rosenmann's Hollywood symphonics in the James Dean movies *East of Eden* (1954) and *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) — probably because *film noir* bebop beatniks had not yet been ousted by rocking college-goers and because both films had a psychological, rather than sociological, angle (individual rather than flock story) — , rock started to become the standard musical signal for youth, youth problems and youth groups (often semi-criminal as 'juvenile delinquents') in the mid fifties. The initial breakthrough was probably using Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock' in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), this **rock = youth rebellion** equation being more substantially exploited for entertainment box office purposes in *Jailhouse Rock* (Presley 1957). The same sort of subcultural opposition connection takes a more critical turn in the hippie era with bike movies like *Easy Rider* (1969) in which music by Steppenwolf, Hendrix and The Band accompanies dope-smoking drop-outs played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper on their endless chopper rides through hostile and bigotedly 'normal' (what German rockers call *stinknormal*) southern states of the U.S.A. Prerecorded rock numbers play a similar role in Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1971) but this time it is, suitably enough, Pink Floyd's symphonic rock that emotionally locates the California students' more verbal and explicitly political type of youth opposition.

Rock 'n' energy

Of course, the equation **rock = glandular teenage energy** was most firmly established by a seemingly interminable run of 'fun', 'gang' and/or 'dance' and/or 'oppositional' and/or 'subcultural' and/or 'about the business' rock musicals, semi-musicals and/or (quasi-) documentaries, e.g. *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *Kid Creole* (1958), *Blue Hawaii* (1961), *Fun in Acapulco* (1963), *Kissin' Cousins* (1964) and other Presleyana, the Cliff Richard classic *Summer Holiday* (1963), *Hair* (1969), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Tommy* (The Who, 1975), *Nashville* (Keith Carradine et al. 1975), *Car Wash* (1976), *Rock Follies* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (Bee Gees, 1977), *Grease* (1978), *Quadrophenia* (The Who, 1979), *Breaking Glass* (Hazel O'Connor, Tony Visconti et al., 1980), *Fame* (1981), *Flashdance* (aerobics with Irene Cara et al., 1983), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Madonna, 1984), *Sid and Nancy* (The Pogues, 1986), *Crossroads* (J.B. Lenoir and Ry Cooder, 1986), *The Commitments* (1991), etc. In none of these films is the rock idiom used to any large

1. Note that *Pinball Wizard* (hit song from the film) is from 1969.

extent as underscore: instead it features as title music, as set numbers or as (quasi-) source music, frequently because the film's narrative is centred around music, this implying that music cannot logically take the 'normal' cinematographic back seat as mere sonorisation.

Rock 'n' normal

This **no rock underscore** rule applies also of course to more traditional MoR rock musicals like *Jesus Christ Super Star* (Lloyd-Webber, 1972) and *Godspell* (Steven Schwarz, 1974). Similar observations can be made about standard feature films (many of the middle-class adult sentimentality type) whose title themes and set numbers (but little else) were musically conceived in rock-related idioms, for instance *The Graduate* (including *Mrs. Robinson* and *The Boxer*, Paul Simon 1967), *My Girlfriend's Wedding* (Al Kooper, 1969), *Friends* (Elton John 1970), *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (Leonard Cohen 1971), *Harold and Maude* (Cat Stevens 1971), *The Pied Piper* (Donovan 1972), *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Neil Diamond 1973), *Just Between Friends* (Earl Klugh 1986) etc. Particularly prominent use of commercial-sounding rock numbers — especially in the bombastically symphonic and hyper-melodic metal style — has been made in machissimo films of Thatcherite arrogance and unchallenged hybris like *Flash Gordon* (Queen 1980), *Top Gun* (1986), *Biggles* (1986) and *American Anthem* (1986).

With the commercial success of Monty Norman's and John Barry's *James Bond Theme* (*Dr. No*, 1962), prefigured by Duane Eddy's cover of Mancini's *Peter Gunn* theme (1960) and by The Shadows' renderings of *F.B.I.* and *Man Of Mystery* (both 1960), pop and rock artists were asked to write and/or perform title tunes for several of the subsequent 007 films, e.g. *From Russia With Love* (Matt Munro, Barry, Bart, 1963), *Goldfinger* (Shirley Bassey, Barry, 1964), *You Only Live Twice* (Nancy Sinatra, Barry, 1967), *Live and Let Die* (McCartney, 1973), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (*Nobody Does It Better*, sung by Carly Simon, written by Marvin Hamlisch, 1977). This practice set up a veritable trend for commissioning or exploiting selling songs as title music for detective or spy adventure films, e.g. *Shaft* (Isaac Hayes, 1971), *Superfly* (Curtis Mayfield, 1972), *Batman* (containing Prince's *Party Man* and *Bat Dance*, 1989).² Like jazz up until the late fifties, rock has been mainly used as set numbers and to lend local colour of urban and subcultural (and therefore potentially criminal) up-to-dateness, connotative qualities well-suited to many P.I. and spy stories. All this is in addition to the provision of catchy (and hopefully popular) title themes that will in their turn (it is hoped) help sell the film which in its turn (it is hoped) will help sell the record.

Rock 'n' road

There are, however, other ways in which rock has entered more integrally into the world of moving pictures. In road movies like *Easy Rider* (1969), *Convoy* (Chip Davies, C.W. McCall et al., 1978), *Mad Max 2* (a.k.a. *The Road Warrior* — Brian May, 1981), as well as in pastiches of that film genre (e.g. *2000 Motels* — Zappa, 1971), rock music may act as social/subcultural colour and occur clearly as source music (on stage, from juke box, etc.) but it also serves to underscore driving and travelling sequences. Of course, such underscore may be interpreted as source music to the extent that filmgoers are liable to hear the sort of music that probably gets played on in-car (or

2. Check also Madonna's *Dick Tracy* album.

in-truck) stereo systems, i.e. in travelling/driving situations. However, little or no visual effort is made to make such source music functions explicit (i.e. no-one is shown sticking a cassette into the dashboard and pressing the play button) and the use of rock or country music in such contexts should rather be seen as a convention taking the source music level as read and as connoting the up-to-date 'hard travelling' underscore aspects instead. This connection was often exploited by Jan Hammer and Michael Mann in the TV series *Miami Vice* (1984, ff.) where hits by famous artists like Dire Straits, Peter Gabriel, Phil Collins, Chaka Khan, Tina Turner and Grand Master Mellie Mel were mixed up full-tilt for suspense and/or driving sequences.

Rock 'n' synth

Rock also entered the movies in the wake of **psychedelic** and **symphonic rock**. Early examples of film-musical hippiedom can be found in French-language cinema of the late sixties, e.g. in *Les granges br les* (Jean-Michel Jarre, 1967) or in Zoo's strange soundtrack for an even stranger Marc Simeon film about hallucinatory mushrooms (*Les champignons*, 1969). Of course, this trend was much influenced by the more suggestive psychedelic lighting and stage acts of the late sixties as recorded on celluloid in *Woodstock* (1969) and *Monterey Pop* (1969). However, these film music sequels to psychedelia and symphonic rock did not really catch on until the **synthesizer** became a widespread and popular instrument. Even then (by about 1980), it was mostly in **television** and **low-budget** feature film production that such music was used to any large extent. Since that time synthesizers have played an increasingly important part in composing for films.

Electronic instruments have quite a long history in the cinema (e.g. R zsa's theramin in *The Lost Weekend* [1945, ex. 27]) but until mass-produced synthesizers arrived on the scene, they were mostly used for futuristic, creepy-crazy, weird and eerie space, science or laboratory moods (e.g. *Dr. Who* 1963 ff.). However, by the mid seventies the minimoog (monophonic synth) is used more in contexts of popular up-to-dateness, acting alongside the harmonica as lead instrument in Mike Post's theme tune for *The Rockford Files* (1974) and as hip-but-obsolescent modernity in the *Starsky and Hutch* theme (J. Scott 1975). Post also uses monophonic synth in the theme and underscore for *Magnum* (1980, ff.) and it can be heard as lead instrument in Vangelis' theme for *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Keith Emerson also makes considerable use of synthesizer, along with other other rock instruments, in his music for *Inferno* (1980) and *Nighthawks* (1981). Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether the **synthesizer** really catches on before it becomes available as a **mass-produced polyphonic** instrument. This trend was confirmed for me in 1980 by Mme B ladel of the Parisian mood music company  ditions Montparnasse, who, when asked in an interview what type of music was most common in their current production, replied 'the synthesizer'.³

Perhaps the most notable early example of polyphonic synthesizer underscore is John Carpenter's and Alan Howarth's music for the low-budget dystopia *Flight From New York* (1981), including a suggestive synthesized version of Debussy's *La cath drale engloutie*: all quite suitable for the gloom and violence of an electronically controlled future, full of urban decay and social indifference. Los Angeles in the year 2019 suffers from a similar but more up-market dystopian treatment in *Blade Runner* (1982), under-

3. Tagg 1980:32.

scored by Vangelis' partially synthesized score. As **digital synthesis and sampling** become more common and as sequencing software becomes sophisticated enough to include sync facilities via **SMPTE time code**, synthesizers become an increasingly useful tool for the film composer, to the extent that by the end of the eighties advanced instruments like the Synclavier are used just as much in film for postsync-ing sound effects as they are for generating music. That the synthesizer's timbric sophistication develops dramatically during the early eighties can be heard by comparing the sounds used in *Chariots of Fire* or *Flight from New York* with those of Ryuchi Sakamoto's music for *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (1983). However, in Hollywood productions, although the digitally sampling synthesizer is often used, it usually comes to the fore, together with other rock instruments, as underscore for either funny or horrific or futuristic or up-to-date or rave-dance or crazy moods, e.g. Giorgio Moroder's music for *Cat People* (1982) and *Electric Dreams* (1984), *Birdy* (Peter Gabriel 1984), Harold Faltermeyer's music for *Fletch* (1985) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1987),

Rock 'n' underscore

If Hollywood composers of an earlier generation, like Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, Earle Hagen or Henry Mancini, were bi-lingual in classical composition and orchestration as well as in jazz writing and scoring, composers of the younger generation, like Mike Post, were **bilingual in classical and rock** music. The early TV rock scores may have used the idiom mainly for titles, set numbers and driving — e.g. Post's music for *The Rockford Files* (1974) or *School's Out* — Richie Brockelman P.I. (1977) — but gradually rock is used more and more to underscore suspense scenes (polytonal chords on Fender piano or synth and exotic percussion) and love scenes (plenty of swooping solo sax) as well as chases and title sequences. At the same time bridges, curtains and tails start to sound more 'rock' than 'jazz' or 'avant-garde'. These trends can be heard in *Hill Street Blues* (Post, 1980) or in Barry De Vorzon's and Joseph Conlan's music for *Simon & Simon* (1982-5) and *V* (1983-4). By the late eighties such scoring in the rock idiom was stock-in-trade of Hollywood prime-time and adult soaps, e.g. *L.A. Law* (Post, 1989 ff.).

We have already considered the strain from psychedelic/symphonic rock via synthesizer into TV and feature film. However, **underscore** in more (electro-) acoustic, **less synthesized rock**-related idioms was slower to move into Anglo-US-American feature film than into TV, partly because it was (or at least seemed) more socially specific than symphonic rock, partly because 'symphonic rockers' were more likely to be keyboard players and therefore more 'classically literate' than their guitar-playing colleagues. Moreover, SMPTE-sync-supporting sequencers were not widespread until the mid-eighties and only well-known guitarists from the traditional rock sphere would be 'worth' employing as film musicians before that time. In films like *The Border* (1982) and *Paris Texas* (1985) Ry Cooder uses traditional 'folk' music, either in its own right or as stylistic basis for his own compositions, not only to provide local colour but also to set the mood of the narrative. The well-known 'lonely' slide guitar of *Paris Texas* serves as an example of this trend, just as Marc Knopfler's 'celticisms' grafted on to a basically rock stem underscore moods of 'lonely beauty' in *Local Hero* (1983) and *Cal* (1986).

Rock 'n' video

Despite these various uses of rock in film and TV as theme music, local colour, set numbers and, finally, as underscore, the most important contribution of rock to moving picture has probably been that of its apparent unwillingness to become subordinate to visual narrative. This comes across clearest in Richard Lester's Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), as well as in the style plagiarism of NBC TV series *The Monkees* (1966-7). In these productions, often characterised as 'zany', it is the music that determines what the pictures should be doing rather than (the usual) vice versa (hence, perhaps, the 'zany' impression of the visual narrative). In this way we are dealing with **visualisation of music rather than sonorisation of image**. Thus the Beatles films, including *The Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) and *Yellow Submarine* (1968), can be seen as prefiguring not only important music visualisation films like Alan Parker's *The Wall* (Pink Floyd 1979) and Jimmy Murakami's *When the Wind Blows* (Bowie, Roger Waters, Genesis et al. 1987) but also many of the narrative and editing techniques used time and time again in rock videos of the eighties and nineties.

Here it is important to remember, as Wallis and Malm (1988: 268) remind us, that music videos, as well as the films just mentioned as prefiguring them, cannot be regarded as some radically new form of expression emerging magically out of the blue. Although video media technology and dissemination (videotape, VCRs, video editing, video cameras, music television) is a relatively recent phenomenon, visualising music is probably as old as humanity. Not only are music videos prefigured by *The Wall* and Lester's Beatles films; these have in their turn precursors in advertising, animated film, comedy sketches and short rock films, whose forerunners can be found in jazz and big band short films (e.g. Billy Holliday, Duke Ellington, Walt Disney for Benny Goodman), etc. Nor did these musical shorts visualising music spring from nowhere:

Examples of pictures being set to pre-recorded music with the aim of producing a piece of audio-visual entertainment can be found as early as the first decade of this century. At the Paris World Fair in 1900, stars of the theatre appeared in short film sketches with synchronised gramophone sound. From 1905 through to about 1914 in Sweden, a number of commercially available music recordings were used as the basis of short films which were shown in cinemas.

Wallis & Malm, 1988: 267

Rock 'n' pomo⁴

It is indeed strange that much writing on music videos expresses the assumption that it is first in the (nineteen-) eighties that 'logical' novel-type narrative along the unidimensional time axis (with the odd flashback or dream included to make things a bit more interesting) is challenged and that we are all of a sudden witnesses to something quite revolutionary in that pictures and action follow the music rather than vice versa. Typically enough, the word 'postmodern' gets banded about a lot in such writings. Not only is this absurd in the light of the precursors to video already mentioned; it is even sillier if you bear in mind all those stage musicals, ballets, operettas and operas in which musical discourse so obviously overrides any visual or verbal narrative logic. An example might make this clearer.

4. 'Pomo': UK cultural studies slang for 'postmodernist'.

Picture the Verdi heroine Aida performed by Birgit Nilsson⁵ of international fame, in a lavishly Pharaonic costume making Ziggy Stardust and the lead singer in Cameo⁶ look like bank managers. Then imagine La Nilsson bellowing three minutes' worth of bel canto while dying in Ramases' arms. No-one in their right mind would call this realistic narrative. And why not? (1) Because her lungs are working far too well for someone breathing their last breath; (2) because the words she speaks are addressed to the guy in whose arms she is resting but the sounds she produces might well split his eardrums at such close range; (3) because half the gear she is wearing would have had to come off in that situation had it but been for real; (4) because it is most unusual for humans to sing full throttle for several minutes while dying. Or is it so unrealistic? The scene comes off quite effectively from a musical viewpoint and the niceties of theatrical or cinematographic continuity or realism just follow that musical logic in the same way that the visual narrative of music videos have to take their cue from whatever music has influenced their visualisation. This means that if we take standard postmodernist writings about video seriously, we shall have to call Verdi's *Aida* (1871) postmodern too. In fact we would have delve far deeper into history than that, tracing all the dreams (like Mendelssohn's version of 'A Midsummer Night's'), fantasies, witches, satyrs, Arcadias, Olympias way back to Baroque opera and its stage machinery — comparable in technical sophistication for special effects at that time with any modern video mixer or editor — allowing unicorns to romp across the scene, devils to rise out of Hades (below stage), gods to descend, snow to fall, armies to parade, etc., etc., all as part of a production in which musical events (like in rock videos) determine the pace and order of visual events far more than vice versa. You could even go back to medieval miracle plays or to ancient religious ceremony and discover umpteen even older examples of 'postmodernist expression' where 'standard' narrative action is quite often secondary (or tertiary) to affective, often musically stated, types of 'logic'. In this way the whole of cultural history can — if you want and if you find it useful — be seen as 'postmodern' from time immemorial, i.e. what most folks would call 'pre' rather than 'post'. If you don't find that too useful, it is probably wiser to redefine 'postmodernism' very tightly or, preferably, to steer clear of the term altogether.

Here, with the relativity of 'logics', lies the point, for it is with the age of reason that two, logocentrically speaking, 'illogical' forms of music emerge as important vehicles of bourgeois emancipation. I am referring here (in the European tradition) to opera — especially *opera buffa*⁷ — and to the instrumental music (quartets, symphonies, sonatas, etc.) of the European classical tradition. There is no room here to discuss why or how, during that phase of European history, musical cognition became so clearly separated from the

5. Dark-haired Swedish opera diva (born ca. 1939), not Brigitte Nielsen, blonde Danish film actress referred to as 'the big bitch' in *Beverly Hill Cops* and once married to Sylvester 'Rocky/Rambo' Stallone.
6. The New York disco-rap group that recorded *Word Up* (1988) and whose singer wore a hilarious bright red plastic codpiece over black tights.
7. Opera buffa was originally conceived as far more 'logical' and 'realistic' than the old, more feudal 'opera seria' because stories were initially far less whimsical and fantastic, because women rather than castrati sang women's parts, because basses and baritones (not just tenors) could sing men's parts, etc. Nevertheless, the basic logic of opera — musical expression determining the pace and order of visual events far more than vice versa — prevailed.

verbal and visual in our tradition of knowledge; but it is worth noting in this context that the 'postmodernist' illusion of recent breakdown in rational narrative is probably based on a highly traditional and false view of European cultural history, i.e. on a view presupposing that the unidimensional or causal presentation of events was somehow the dominant if not the only valid form of narration in our culture, right up until the advent of MTV. More particularly, the @video pomo's historical short-sightedness about the 'break-down' and 'supersession' of narrative by 'less rational' types of discourse probably stems from ignorance about European music traditions (e.g. opera), an ignorance partly caused by the all-to-often regurgitated falsification of old-style music education pretending that (at least good) music is all suprasocial subjectivity, feeling and form and that it has no content relatable to anything outside itself. Other partial causes of video pomo ahistoricity might well be (a) that many of its advocates are in the first place journalists and/or sociologists and/or literary critics and thereby less likely than musicians or music critics to have attended an opera and enjoyed it at the same time; (b) that most of them are British, French or North American, do not read German and therefore know little or nothing about eighteenth and nineteenth century European music aesthetics that might be relevant to the issue; (c) very few have any substantial experience of everyday culture in Italy where opera singers can be as popular as football or rock stars and where, perhaps consequently, film narrative often resembles that of opera; (d) most of them have a career interest in the serious study of music videos and find it understandably easier to argue their case in front of their scholarly peers using academia's basically conservative view of our tradition of knowledge and of music's role in society rather than by challenging the rules of that strange ballgame and by attempting to demystify and defalsify that view and its implicit 'truths'.

Anyhow, instead of ranting on at pomos, it might be more constructive to suggest alternative ways of understanding **music's role in music music videos**, for, as Roe and Löfgren (1988: 303) point out, most writing on music videos discusses visuals and ignores music.⁸ All I can do at this stage is to present a provisional typology of music videos, i.e. of the various ways in which rock numbers tend to be visualised. The idea of this exercise is partly methodological — to find out more about musical discourse by examining what types of image are considered appropriate (including appropriate by being inappropriate) as visual counterpart or accompaniment to particular musical structures — and partly practical or educational — to increase awareness about the possibilities and pitfalls of the music video as a contemporary form of expression.

8. This avoidance of music is a bit too intellectually convenient. It enables the scholar to skip the issue of music as a culturally specific and socially-historically variable symbolic system. No wonder the visual narrative seems to have 'broken down', to have become 'deconstructed' if the scholar is unable or unwilling to understand how and according to which rules musical meaning is constructed.

Table 1: Pop and rock visualisation types

verbal visualisation	1	'live' footage	a.k.a. 'rockumentaries', i.e. artists shot in performance, 'live' in studio
	2	Mini-soaps	Visualised mini-dramas enacting the lyrics
	3	Visual word-painting	a) transmodal, synaesthetic, metaphorical, e.g. 'You make me feel good' → flowers open in sunshine b) typographic: words appear on screen, often in fitting typeface, e.g. love, COMPUTER c) graphic, e.g. 'crazy' → crazy graphic speeds, shapes
musical visualisation	4	Kinetic anaphony	a) metric/heterometric onbeat/offbeat cuts, dissolves, zooms, fades, etc. b) tempo, movement, gesture, action related to music
	5	Textural anaphony	colour, texture, grain, touch of objects and views related to musical timbre and instrumental/vocal texture
	6	Genre context	suitable social/natural setting for sociocultural image of artist or genre. Related to 1