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Genre as Bait: Using Pop Soundtrack as Narrative Counterpoint or Complement
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Abstract

There is much argument against using pre-existing music in film, Ian Garwood noting three potential problems with the pop song: obtrusiveness, cultural relevance, and distance from the narrative (103-106). It is believed that lyrics and cultural connotations can distract from the action, but it is my belief that these elements only *aid* narrative. By examining the cinematic functions of the soundtracks of *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), I will argue that using pre-existing music in film is actually more effective than a score composed specifically for a film.

Film theorist Claudia Gorbman notes that film scores have “temporal, spatial, dramatic, structural, denotative, [and] connotative” abilities” (22), and it is my belief that pop music is just as economical in forming character, conveying setting, and furthering plot. The historical significance of *O Brother Where Art Thou?*'s authentic bluegrass/gospel/old-timey soundtrack captures the ethos of the Depression Era deep South more effectively than music scored by a modern composer. *Marie Antoinette*'s punk/New Wave soundtrack would seemingly distract from the setting, as it employs music that originated two centuries after the French queen's reign. Yet these modern rock lyrics and instrumentations remove Marie from her 18th-century Versailles setting and paint her as a relatable teenage girl with whom a modern audience can empathize.

At first glance, the pop soundtracks of *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and *Marie Antoinette* are diametrically opposed, as the first is steadfast in its realistic dedication to the historical time period while the second is an irreverent interpretation of a historical figure. Yet both employ expertly curated soundtracks of pre-existing music to breathe believability and authenticity into the diegetic worlds of their respective films.

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Introduction

When a film's soundtrack is erroneously referred to merely as "background music," movie aficionados will recognize this as an absolute misnomer. Film theorist Claudia Gorbman points out the many functions film music can serve, including its "temporal, spatial, dramatic, structural, denotative, [and] connotative" abilities" (22). Director Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *Slum Dog Millionaire*) who is known for his stunning film visuals believes that his film soundtracks are actually more important than the images. Soundtracks rich in pop music, asserts Boyle, "have the power to expand the film" because pop/rock songs bring along "so much baggage. They are our lives. Our relationship with them is so important, like a family photograph you are carrying around. Not to be misused." ("A Conversation with Danny Boyle").

Two films that fully utilize the cinematic functions Gorbman identifies are *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006). *O Brother* reworks a classic Greek fable and replaces the legendary hero with three escaped convicts, chronicling their adventures as they stay one step ahead of the law in the deep South of 1930s America. The soundtrack's history-rich bluegrass/gospel/American folk music helps draw archetypal American characters into *The Odyssey* myth, functioning as a brilliant form of shorthand for the tale's setting. In contrast, the soundtrack of *Marie Antoinette* draws the French queen out of her historical setting by using the cultural signifiers of modern pop/punk/New Wave music. The audience is invited to consider the iconic historical character through a 21st century lens, the rock instrumentations speaking to our modern sensibilities and expectations of teen behaviour.

While one soundtrack functions to support setting, the other seems to undermine it. Furthermore, the old-timey folk music of *O Brother* is presented diegetically, slipping

seamlessly into the narrative, while the punk tunes of *Marie Antoinette* are only featured playing extra-diegetically, the characters never acknowledging its presence. Yet, as I will uncover, these seemingly disparate soundtracks are more similar than one would immediately assume. These films' respective bluegrass and rock soundtracks, while unrelated in genre and presentation, are both ultimately essential to the character development, narrative commentary, and spatial and temporal establishment of their films as a whole.

O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU?

Reimagining Homer's Epic

Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a screwball Great Depression-take on Homer's *The Odyssey*. Ulysses, Pete and Delmar are escaped chain gang convicts in search of buried treasure worth \$1.2 million. On their epic journey they encounter obstacles reminiscent of *The Odyssey's* Cyclops (a corrupt bible salesman with an eye patch) and Sirens (singing women washing clothes in the river). To further integrate *The Odyssey* into the Great Depression, the escaped trio also has run-ins with the KKK, gangster Babyface Nelson, and a blues guitarist down on his luck. But successfully reimagining Homer's epic in the setting of the 1930s American South relies on more than costuming and location. The Coens recreate the vintage dustbowl feel with warm sepia color filters and period-specific slapstick comedy, but setting is most effectively established with music. *O Brother's* Grammy Award-winning soundtrack of old-timey, gospel, and bluegrass music transports the audience to Depression-stricken Mississippi. The soundtrack is yet another reference to Homer's time period—folk music is an aural tradition, just as *The Odyssey* was passed down orally. “As with most Negro

ballads, every [epic poem] performance produces a fresh version, the stanzas occurring in the same order only by chance” (Kerns 2). The undefined structures of both American folk tunes and age-old oral myths leave them open to interpretation and individualization.

Another function of *O Brother*’s soundtrack is to convey the ethos of the time period and the robustness of those struggling through it. The instrumentation is sparse, the lyrics are hopeful, and the performances are gutsy—Great Depression sensibilities are encapsulated in the hardiness of this music. The origins of this music are as sturdy and homegrown as they sound: this music was made “from scratch, often with hand-made instruments,” proving the “independent, self-sustaining” qualities of its creators (Filene 56). In the Depression Era Dustbowl, folk music was an “alternate source of strength in a time of crisis” (55). With lyrics often referencing the toil that precedes triumph, paired with sturdy downbeats to stomp and clap along with, folk music was a form of respite from one’s harsh life.

These Depression Era sensibilities are highlighted by the vintage recordings included in *O Brother*’s soundtrack. “[T]he use of period songs re-key narrative events, evoking an associational structure of feeling of the period” (Drake 193). The soundtrack is composed heavily of more modern folk artists such as Gillian Welch and Chris Thomas King, but producer T Bone Burnett does include two vintage recordings that are crucial to *O Brother*’s philosophy. The clanking of heavy tools accompanies the film’s opening credits, and we open on a chain gang hard at work, singing to pass the time. Through their sorrowful voices and the rhythmic wielding of their axes, we feel their aches and pains in the intense Mississippi heat. In the 1930s and 40s, folk music historian Alan Lomax was commissioned by the Library of Congress to document the South’s rich music tradition, and the version of “Po’ Lazarus” we hear is that of an authentic prison chain gang (Cline 2). “Po’ Lazarus” is immediately followed by Harry

McClintock's "Big Rock Candy Mountain," as the freshly escaped Ulysses, Pete and Delmar run for their lives. The lyrics depict the idyllic world to which the convicts hope to escape:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,
The jails are made of tin.
And you can walk right out again,
As soon as you are in.
There ain't no short-handled shovels,
No axes, saws nor picks,
I'm bound to stay
Where you sleep all day,
Where they hung the jerk
That invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains. (Burnett, tr. 2)

The juxtaposition of these two pieces represents what the trio is running *from* and what they are running *towards*. The songs "operate as a meta-narrative, creating a parallel fabric of textuality to the image track" (E. Scott 242).

Defining Southern Sound

Is it possible to ascribe a single characteristic to folk music considering the myriad influences that have shaped and defined it? The liner notes of the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack note some of these influences, including "blues, gospel, string-band hoedowns, Appalachian balladry, work songs, and vaudeville hokum" (Oermann 1). American folk music pulls on a wide range of cultural and racial stimuli (Europeans who immigrated to the United States, slaves brought over from Africa, etc.), and is subsequently "elastic enough to encompass all of [the soundtrack's] genres and artists" (Filene 54). In a fiery speech at a KKK meeting, the hooded speaker shouts that it is desire to protect his "heritage and culture" from "darkies, from

Jews, from Papists, and from all those smart-assed folks that say we come descended from monkeys.” The fantastic irony of it all is that these groups *are* elements of his heritage and culture.

Despite its incredibly mixed origins, American folk music is an identifiable genre because of its subject matter—folk music is about hard work, struggle, temptation, salvation, Jesus, hope. The Depression Era themes previously discussed are applicable to the American folk genre as a whole. The objects that float across the screen during the flood that occurs in *O Brother's* final moments are a fitting representation of American folk music and the seemingly unrelated elements that have merged to form the genre (Chadwell 10). A banjo, a Civil War soldier's portrait, a lazy bloodhound, and a phonograph all float by.

This flood scene is one of many in which Southern imagery is prominently featured. But are these images a fair depiction of the South or are they exaggerated to exploit Southern stereotypes? The South is often negatively depicted in film and we have come to expect the following conventions from any story set below the Mason Dixon line:

[A] dirty, barefoot kid playing a mean banjo on a bridge in Deliverance; overalls and straw hats from Hee Haw; Granny Clampett sitting in her rocking chair in the back seat of a beat-up old pickup truck. (Chadwell 3)

Ulysses, Delmar, and Pete don hillbilly clothing (waist-length beards and oversized overalls) when performing as The Soggy Bottom Boys. Yet the success of their music depends on this home-cooked, “salt of the earth” image, and the film forces us to ask if their profiting from Southern stereotypes is all that bad if it resonates with Southern audiences. As Chadwell notes, “these stereotypes [hicks, rednecks, white trash] are themselves part of the mythology the South has created about itself” (6). In the case of American folk music, image and music are “welded

solidly” (4) together. Redneck imagery may have become synonymous with the genre due to its depiction in media, but perhaps that is not a negative thing—it is simply part of the mystery of the South.

The Integrated Bluegrass Musical

A majority of *O Brother*'s music is performed within the context of the narrative. Claudia Gorbman argues that “songs require narrative to cede to spectacle, for it seems that lyrics and action compete for attention,” (20) but *O Brother*'s music is presented with such inherent authenticity that this does not prove true. Action does not stop for musical numbers as in classic Hollywood musical fashion. *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) is a classic musical that expertly displays the integrated and non-integrated capabilities of music in film. Some numbers do organically occur within the narrative (the tap dance number “Moses Supposes” arises from the jazzy rhythm of a tongue twister Don Lockwood recites), and characters not only acknowledge but employ their current settings (Cosmo Brown catapults himself through a fake wall on a film set for comic relief in “Make ‘Em Laugh). Yet the dream sequence dance number “Broadway Melody” halts narrative progression completely, neither acknowledging previous events nor influencing the action to follow.

As opposed to blatantly rehearsed and staged numbers such as “Broadway Melody,” musical performances in *O Brother* appear impromptu. The characters' musical abilities do not magically materialize. Guitars and banjos are always on hand during the convicted trio's adventure, so their performances posing as The Soggy Bottom Boys integrate seamlessly into the action. This valid use of American folk/gospel music is carried throughout the film. Every

political campaign needs a catchy slogan, and frontrunner Homer Stokes finds his in the peppy “Keep on the Sunny Side”:

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side,
Keep on the sunny side of life
It will help us ev'ry day, it will brighten all the way
If we'll keep on the sunny side of life (Burnett, tr. 8)

Performed by a picture-perfect family band reminiscent of the Von Trapps or the Partridge Family, the lyrics do not distract from the action but instead bolster Stoke’s political platform and speak to the Depression Era sensibilities previously discussed.

Lyrics and action are married later again in Alison Krauss’ ethereal “Down to the River to Pray.” Without this song, the baptism scene would instead be an unexplained pilgrimage of people through a forest. Rather than fight the action, the lyrics explain it. Worshippers and sinners alike are called to prayer in the stunning a capella hymn, and the song’s beauty inspires Pete and Delmar to be baptized:

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way
O sinners, let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sinners, let's go down
Down in the river to pray (tr. 4)

Gravediggers sing “Lonesome Valley” while preparing the nooses and graves of the escaped convicts. Not only is it realistic for laborers to sing while working, but the lyrics foreshadow

the trio's impending doom: "Oh, you got to ask the Lord's forgiveness/ Nobody else can ask him for you" (tr. 18).

As previously noted, soundtracks have the ability to establish a film's historical and geographical context, as *O Brother's* does. But this particular soundtrack goes a step further in that it propels narrative. Blatant plot holes would mar the film without such a reliance on the soundtrack: "Music becomes a major character, if not the film's narrator, sustaining the rhythm of the often unconnected pieces of the film" (Kerns 2). Furthermore, the liner notes of the soundtrack indicate that the music was compiled before the Coens commenced filming, that the musicians "created a canvas upon which the colorful saga would be painted" (Oermann 1). Therefore the tale of Ulysses, Pete, and Delmar is not simply supported by the soundtrack, but completely shaped by it. It is music that enables the escaped convicts to undertake their flight from the law. Posing as The Soggy Bottom Boys, the trio performs "I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow" on the radio and earns money essential for meals and travel. The lyrics teach us a great deal about the convicts' predicament: "For six long years I've been in trouble...For in this world I'm bound to ramble" (Burnett, tr. 5). And as we know, Sirens use song to distract men from their missions, thus "Didn't Leave Nobody But The Baby" becomes another crucial narrative moment. How could the Sirens possibly entice the convicts had Pete not heard their alluring, tight-knit harmonies from a distance? *O Brother's* narrative reliance on its soundtrack comes full circle when The Soggy Bottom Boys reprise "Man of Constant Sorrow." Since its radio debut the tune has become a hit across Mississippi, but until this performance at a politician's dinner, the identity of The Soggy Bottom Boys has been a mystery. The crowd greets the song's opening line with an explosion of cheers. Much to their disbelief, Ulysses, Pete, and Delmar are launched from criminals to "rock" stars, and the governor pardons their crimes. Without the

blockbuster success of “Man of Constant Sorrow,” the trio’s fate would likely be much less triumphant.

Old-Timey “Authenticity”

O Brother Where Art Thou? is presented as good ol’ home grown, down South, chicken-fried fun, and we are quick to forget that the folk music that materializes so organically is actually incredibly constructed. First of all, the soundtrack features only two authentic period recordings (“Po’ Lazarus” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain”), the rest performed by contemporary folk players in modern recording studios. Old-timey music is so appealing to a modern audience because of its “isolation from contemporary reality” (Filene 57). Therefore we are almost in denial that the *O Brother* musicians have careers (very lucrative ones, I might add) outside of the confines of the film. Alison Krauss alone has released fourteen critically acclaimed albums, making it safe to assume that she does not adhere to the bluegrass stereotypes previously mentioned—she is more likely to reside in a Nashville mansion than a rural Mississippi shack. Due to the success of the soundtrack, a live concert version was released and titled “Down from the Mountain.” The title gives us the false, and paternalistic, impression that the musicians emerged from their hillbilly hideaways for one night of banjo plucking and foot stomping. We are eager to forget that these musicians are modern commercial artists, no matter how nostalgic their music may be, because the quaint spell might be broken if our minds wander and consider the jet setting lifestyles their commercial success might afford them. It should also be noted that old-time music was, in its heyday, “as twentieth-century as jazz and as popularly exciting as rock ‘n’ roll” (Chadwell 5). Therefore when examining the soundtrack from a strictly diegetic standpoint, the music is even *more* modern.

Note how The Soggy Bottom Boys' reprise of "Man of Constant Sorrow" is greeted with the screams of rabid fans evocative of teen girls at a Beatles concert.

The fact that actors are lip-syncing to the music of these bluegrass artists is another great irony of the film—George Clooney certainly isn't providing his own vocals! Furthermore, the musicians who *do* appear on screen are not acknowledged as artists in their own right. Gillian Welch, who lends her voice to two pieces off the soundtrack, can be spotted in a crowd cheering on The Soggy Bottom Boys. This "entangling" of characters and musicians "question[s] whether there is an original or authentic version of any song or work of art" (Toscano 59). This "entangling" is most effectively displayed, however, in the form of modern musicians playing Great Depression ones. The gravediggers singing "Lonesome Valley" are not actors, but members of The Fairfield Four. They did not write the traditional gospel hymn, nor are they singing it live on screen, making the performance we see actually very inauthentic. There is also the young guitarist, Tommy, played by blues musicians Chris Thomas King. His character is modeled after another musician: Robert Johnson. Robert Johnson was said to have sold his soul to the devil (like the character Tommy) and would only play with his back to his audiences (not dissimilar from Tommy, who is only heard on the radio or seen onstage disguised as a hillbilly). Chris Thomas King and his identity as a musician disappear altogether in his performance.

The film, in other words, does not necessarily draw distinctions between what is authentic music and what isn't but concerns itself with the representation of music (or culture) as "authentic." (Chadwell 3)

In a continuation of this idea of fabricated "authenticity," the musical performances that appear so spontaneous and natural are in reality incredibly constructed. Sound is key in

achieving cinematic realism, as it can enrich the aural credibility of a diegetic world. We are not conscious of sound due to the fact that it is invisible and ever-present; therefore, the signifier of good sound editing is that it is not noticed at all. As realistic as the dialogue and musical performances in *O Brother* may sound, the sound mixing required to achieve this is actually exceedingly *unrealistic*. Dialogue takes full precedence over ambient sound effects or music, for it is “the only sound which remains with the image throughout the production” (Doane 52). Oftentimes sound effects are added in or dialogue looped in postproduction—in *O Brother* we absolutely know this to be true because the actors are lip-synching to prerecorded music. As Alan Williams explains, “it is never the literal, original ‘sound’ that is reproduced in recording, but one perspective on it, a *sample*, a *reading* of it” (53). Film sound is a representation or reconstruction of reality, but not recorded reality itself. Classic films pay such close attention to dialogue (and singing) that the viewer is quick to forget how implausible this portrayal is—atmospheric noise would never, and could never, mute itself to bring a voice to the acoustic foreground. And yet it is “the calculatedly unobtrusive, doctored recording that seems to render everyday reality better” (63). This concept is best displayed in the convicts’ encounter with the Sirens washing clothes in the river. Visual close-ups are accompanied by acoustic-close-ups, creating an “aural point of view.” As the camera approaches each individual Siren, her melodic line grows accordingly in volume. Visual and sound perspectives are matched through artful post-production mixing—what we witness is not a reproduction, but a *representation* of real events.

Just as sound is expertly edited so that it does not call attention to itself, so too are the visual effects. The Coens originally planned to shoot in Texas in the summer to capture authentic Dustbowl scenery, but the shoot was moved to lush Mississippi, the landscape far too

green to pass as drought-stricken land. Therefore (for the first time in history, I might add) the entire film underwent digital color correction (Prince 28). This process involved converting the film into a digital format, correcting colors, and returning it back to its original medium. To achieve a vintage, dusty look, cinematographer Roger Deakins had to “desaturate the greens and give the images [the Coens] were going to shoot the feeling of old, hand-tinted postcards” (Fischer 37). The sepia and ochre tones do give the impression that *O Brother* originates from long before its 2000 release date. Typically when one hears of digital effects added in postproduction, we can expect computer generated monsters destroying cities or gravity-defying fight scenes filmed in front of green screens. Because *O Brother* is an interpretation of an epic poem with its fair share of monsters and creatures, it is a bit of a surprise that they were not created digitally. Instead the Coens utilize digital correction for the complete duration of the film without it ever being noticed, a continuation of their attempt to achieve old-timey authenticity with the most modern techniques.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Crafting a Punk Rock Princess

The effectiveness of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*'s soundtrack is largely dependent on its narrative significance and its attempt to recreate Depression era-authenticity. However, not every film soundtrack must follow this formula to be successful. The unexpectedly contemporary soundtrack of Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* proves this with great success, deploying pop/rock music that is just as economical in terms of characterization and narrative commentary. The film opens with the anti-consumerist lyrics of post-punk Gang of Four's

“Natural’s Not In It” blasting: “Dream of the perfect life/ Economic circumstances/ Ideal love a new purchase” (Reitzell, tr. 6). A royal 18th-century socialite lazily sucks cake icing off her finger, stares directly at the camera with a raised eyebrow and delivers a self-satisfied smirk, “evok[ing] nothing so much as a young movie star rolling her eyes at the latest scurrility in some trashy celebrity gossip blog” (A.O. Scott 1). Her name flashes in neon pink across the screen in the The Sex Pistols’ iconic font. Clearly this is no orthodox period piece, as Coppola paints one of history’s most notorious queens as a punk rock party girl.

Coppola and music supervisor Brian Reitzell’s New Wave and post-punk selections more closely resemble a teenage mixtape than a traditional film soundtrack. Roger Ebert notes how important this approach is to Marie’s characterization.

Many characters in historical films seem somehow aware that they are living in the past. Marie seems to think she is a teenager living in the present, which of course she is—and the contemporary pop references invite the audience to share her present with ours. (1)

Marie Antoinette is not a film concerned with strict historical accuracy and includes only minor references to the French Revolution and America’s struggle for independence. Instead, the focus rests on the young queen caught in the middle of it all. Coppola further clarifies this departure from the traditional historical film genre by eschewing authentic period music. Ian Garwood notes that “[t]he pop song provides rich source material, in terms of both its ‘musical’ and ‘cultural’ qualities” (98). Coppola and Reitzell shunned a strictly period-appropriate soundtrack, choosing rock/pop lyrics to convey emotion and comment on narrative. The drums and guitars of The Cure and New Order communicate Marie’s party girl persona in a manner arguably more effective than a French aria. Reitzell said it best: “...[I]t would have been a lot

harder to get across her teen angst with a ‘Masterpiece Theater’ type of soundtrack” (*Visual Hollywood* 11).

As the unorthodox mixtape soundtrack indicates, it was of the utmost importance to Coppola that the retelling of Marie’s reign feel modern, to give the antiquated world of Versailles a more visceral and present tone. Despite *Marie Antoinette* being a full-fledged costume drama filmed on location at Versailles, there is hardly anything “historical” about it. Coppola focused on more than the soundtrack to achieve this. Modern, incongruent visual elements are introduced as well. Said cinematographer Lance Acord:

Sofia and I talked a lot about how you can make a period movie without falling into the conventions of period films. From our earliest discussions, Sofia and I agreed that we wanted to avoid making paintings but instead create a very imaginative, personal, alive story inside a real historical past. (6)

Marie Antoinette lived in a cotton candy-filled bubble oblivious to the hardship that existed outside the Versailles gates, and a sweeping historical epic would not convey the queen’s sheltered existence. The intimacy of *Marie Antoinette* makes it innately more alive, more modern, and Coppola continues to augment this tone with contemporary touches to the makeup, hair, and costumes. Costume designer Milena Canonero crafted dresses with more graphic patterns, bolder florals and stripes. Pastel fabrics reminiscent of macaroons and sherbet were used instead of dowdy burgundies and mustards. Marie’s impressive shoe collection is not of the period, but in fact an interpretation designed by Manolo Blahnik. These elements, however slight, further characterize Marie as a young, fresh, current girl. Said Canonero, “We don’t

present a classical vision. It's more of a fashion statement. At times, it was very rock and roll," (8).

Marie Antoinette received simultaneous boos and standing ovations at its Cannes Film Festival premier. Critic Agnès Porier found it to be "empty, devoid of a point of view, because the person who has made it has no curiosity for the woman she is portraying and the time that her tragic life is set in" (Rogers 1). Conversely Pam Cook applauded the film as being "irreverent for all the right reasons" (36). Costume and setting are just about the only historical elements of the film, the political climate preceding the French Revolution being of no concern to either Antoinette or Coppola. Yes, Coppola received unprecedented access to Versailles and shot scenes in the actual locations they took place, but it is the modern elements we take notice of. Kirsten Dunst (playing Marie Antoinette) bows in shame to an angry mob of French protestors in the very spot the real Marie Antoinette did. Yet the location chosen is not critical, as what we really focus on is Marie—a scared, inexperienced child queen being confronted with a serious dose of reality for the very first time. Coppola explores the gossip-ridden social bubble of a world from which Marie ruled rather than the political repercussions of her naïveté and frivolity. The friction between the 18th-century French setting and heroine with an American accent and teen woes cleverly highlights Marie's position as an outsider. Versailles becomes modern Hollywood; Marie is a starlet with too much money and too little savvy. As A.O. Scott presents it:

The clothes, the parties, the flatterers, the entourage, the sham marriages and passionate adulteries: it's American celebrity culture but with better manners and (slightly) more ridiculous clothes (1).

Pop Music's Narrative Necessity

Marie Antoinette is portrayed as so shallow and spoiled that the film runs the risk of lacking any emotional depth, Nathan Lee going so far as to title his critique “Pretty Vacant” and dismissing a narrative that is “formless, lack[s] conviction, and [is] nearly incoherent” (25). It would be difficult to argue with this sentiment if the narrative relied entirely on dialogue. With virtually no dialogue or historical references, the script presents Marie as Barbie and Versailles as her Malibu Dream House. However, the emotional depth is purposely and brilliantly salvaged by the film’s soundtrack as music addresses what dialogue does not. Vivaldi’s “Concerto in G” (which I will later discuss at length) conveys the French public’s disgust with the royal court’s grotesque extravagance. This disgust is musicalized, not verbalized, as the frenzied concerto accompanies the wasteful daily rituals of French royalty. It is not only classical music that substitutes plot holes; post-punk and New Wave lyrics are used to convey Marie’s innermost thoughts. Perhaps she refrains from expressing her emotions in order to maintain the stately image her political position requires of her, or perhaps she really does not know how to verbalize her thoughts, as she is only a 14-year-old child. Whichever the case, pop lyrics express what we all know Marie to be thinking (specific examples to follow). The soundtrack bolsters the narrative in a structural sense as well. Music producer Brian Reitzell broke down the story into three sections and paired them accordingly with pop music: the innocent period, the decadent period, and the decline (*Visual Hollywood* 11). And most significant of all, the film starts with sound, not image (Brevik-Zender 11). Post-punk icons Gang of Four grant us entrance into Marie Antoinette’s party girl world before we even set eyes on the impudent child queen.

Interestingly, *Marie Antoinette* does not feature the lyrics of all its pop songs. Viewers unversed in the world of current pop music could assume certain songs by The Radio Department and Aphex Twin to be scoring composed specifically for the film. However, this is not to say that these instrumentals imitate a traditional film score; their electronic melodic qualities and modern drum beats continue to play on *Marie's* rebel queen theme. As newly-crowned Louis XVI and Marie descend the palace steps to the opening of The Cure's "Plainsong," the spacey 1980s synthesizer portrays them as unstoppable galactic action heroes. To a savvy New Wave/post-punk fan, the titles of these instrumental sections cleverly comment on the narrative. "Plainsong" originates from The Cure's album "Disintegration," a subtle foreshadowing of the political and social downfall of the new royals that is to come. Windsor For The Derby's "Melody of a Fallen Tree" is introduced after Marie's French makeover. She is stripped of her Austrian clothes, ladies in waiting, and beloved dog, symbolizing her departure from both homeland and childhood. The Austrian Marie is "chopped down" to make way for the future Queen of France. Coppola later employs two songs by The Radio Department in a much more literal sense. Marie's first encounter with fiancé Louis is incredibly forced and awkward, appropriately underscored by "I Don't Like It Like This." There is immense pressure on Marie to produce an heir to the throne, and Louis' rejections of her sexual advances are problematic. "Pulling Our Weight" highlights his shortcomings as a lover and a husband.

Classical Sound, Punk Sensibility

Period-appropriate music is used diegetically but sparsely in *Marie Antoinette*. An organ plays at the marriage of Marie and Louis; a string quartet accompanies their meals; Marie studies harpsichord and regularly attends the opera. Vivaldi's "Concerto in G" is a standout on

the *Marie Antoinette* soundtrack because it is classical yet nondiegetic. The film is predominantly scored with New Age and post-punk tunes, so the symphonic concerto catches us unawares. Classical music brilliantly highlights the rigid and controlled manners and movements expected of royalty. As the fourteen-year-old princess is catapulted into the Versailles way of life, the frenzied violins parallel her startled mindset. Marie's bedcurtains are flung open to reveal a room full of noblewomen and maids waiting to dress her. She stands naked, humiliated, and shivering as the issue of which lady-in-waiting will put her nightgown on is resolved. The music pauses. "This is ridiculous," Marie notes in her insolent SoCal accent. "*This...is Versailles,*" a noblewoman snaps. The concerto re-enters at a comically lavish breakfast table. The glass of water Marie requests passes through several different hands before arriving at the table, and she is scolded after reaching for it without the assistance of a servant. Next she is reprimanded for whispering during a monotonous church ceremony. Vivaldi's overpowering concerto augments both Marie's greenness and the grandiose customs of Versailles.

Vivaldi's concerto and the "overtly ridiculous and otiose" (Rogers 2) rituals that accompany it are repeated twice more before pop/rock music is heard again. Each time "Concerto in G" swells, the Versailles traditions appear even *more* pointless and antiquated, the haughty concerto transforming into a musical mockery of Versailles conventions. Along with Marie, the viewer develops a "punk" attitude towards these maintained traditions—what encapsulates the punk rock movement more than bold irreverence toward the cherished customs of previous generations? Marie is a "poor little rich girl, a kind of Paris Hilton of the House of Bourbon" (Dargis 1) who is desperate to break from the pointless ceremonies of her elders. To

be punk is to be anti-establishment, misunderstood, angry, cheeky, and rebellious, making the young Marie Antoinette a punk poster child.

Sofia Coppola demonstrates these punk sensibilities as well. During a champagne-fueled shopping binge featuring Marie and her “posse,” Coppola includes a shot of lilac Converse sneakers. Not only do the sneakers form a stark contrast to the late-1700s apparel, but Converse Chuck Taylors are synonymous with punk rock style. Despite being a basketball sneaker dating back to 1917, “there was something about its brashness and brightness that would make it irresistible to a generation of rockers, skaters and rebellious souls” (“About Converse” 1). The Ramones, arguably the first punk rock band, wore Converse almost exclusively and turned the sneaker into a subcultural status symbol. When asked about her decision to include modern sneakers in the shot, Coppola “blurt[ed] out ‘Because I could,’ the room erupting into laughter at the punkish irreverence of her admission” (Brevik-Zender 20). Coppola’s defiant response could not *be* any more punk rock—by replying “Because I could” she flips a metaphorical middle finger at meticulously accurate period films and the more orthodox directors who have come before her. What Coppola chose to depict was an “opulent proto-Euro Disney cum rave where royals are really just 24-hour party people” (Dargis 2). She tests genre boundaries so much so that Nathan Lee jokes that “you half expect the Count Mercy D’Argenteau (Steve Coogan) to skip by with an iPod” (26). How punkishly blasphemous, and quintessentially Coppola, that would be.

Characterization Through Pop

The punk rock music that Marie (as well as Coppola) so impeccably personifies eventually does re-enter after Vivaldi’s “Concerto in G,” signaling that it must take time for the

young royal to acclimate to Versailles life and establish her sense of self. As Marie grows more comfortable, guitars and drums invade. But although the young queen may be growing older, she does not mature. In response to court gossip, her inability to produce an heir, and intensifying political unrest, she submerges herself in an idealistic, self-indulgent world. Marie realizes she has failed to please the public and cavalierly decides that she may as well please herself. Thus, the party girl princess is born. This shift in personality is accompanied by a shift in musical genre as 1980s New Romantic pop is introduced. The genre is

...heavily influenced by 18th century ideals of extravagance. New Romantic artists such as Bow Wow Wow and Adam Ant celebrated glamour, luxurious fashion and hedonistic fun during that period as a kind of counterpoint to both the boredom of classic rock and the primal anger of punk music. (*Visual Hollywood 2*)

New Romantic music exudes decadence and liberation, as does the newly confident and carefree Marie, musicalized in an opulent shopping spree scored with Bow Wow Wow's "I Want Candy":

Go to see him when the sun goes down
Ain't no finer boy in town
You're my guy, just what the doctor ordered
So sweet, you make my mouth water (Reitzell, tr. 7)

Champagne, shoes and sweets are bountiful. The teen-fantasy lyrics expertly highlight Marie's unfocused mindset. Rather than distressing over the concerns of a responsible monarch (civil war in Poland, rumors of rebellion in France), Marie's thoughts are candy-coated.

Contemporary pop/rock continues characterize Marie, this time as Siouxsie and the Banshee's "Hong Kong Garden" scores a Parisian masquerade ball. Siouxsie sings of jasmine,

rice fields, and yens over oriental instruments such as gongs and xylophones. The title, lyrics, and instrumentation imply that the ball is a playful and enticing event completely new to Marie, making it all the more exciting. Bow Wow Wow's "Aphrodisiac" crescendos with determined drumming as Marie catches the eye of Count Axel von Fersen at the masquerade. The rapid drums mimic a beating heart and insinuate an instant attraction between the pair, only to be confirmed by the title and lyrics such as "Gives you a-a-a heart attack, just take your clothes off, this is overjack" (tr. 2) sung in a breathy, girlish voice. Their meeting is followed by Bow Wow Wow's squeaky, pitchy "Fools Rush In," and the lyrics indicate that Marie is enamored:

When we met
I felt my life begin
So open up your heart and let
This fool rush in (tr. 8/disc 2)

The mischievous, tropical ukulele and peppy bass underscoring speak more to a 1960s sitcom theme song than an 18th century period piece. Coppola reminds us that Marie is still a teenage girl with teenage desires by featuring a song with such impish and youthful qualities. But as the narrative progresses and princess becomes queen, it is the soundtrack that best communicates Marie's passage into womanhood.

Wearing nothing but knee socks and a feather in her hair, Marie is stretched across a chaise lounge waving a strategically-placed fan. The tribal, bass-heavy drums of Adam & the Ants' "Kings of the Wild Frontier" pound, accompanied by a wobbly, psychedelic guitar. Marie and Fersen give in to sexual desire, which they have painfully suppressed until this moment like "red skin[s] suffering/ From centuries of taming" (tr. 8/disc 1). Once the Count returns to Sweden, Marie's life is bleak. The Versailles gossip she once found such pleasure in grows tedious and her daydreams of Fersen are constant. As the opening of The Strokes' "What

Ever Happened?” blasts, she excuses herself from stifling afternoon tea and sprints down a palace corridor in frustration. Her footsteps are in perfect sync with the staccato guitar plucking. In this moment, the lyrics signify her desperate wish to move beyond her love affair and the burdens of the monarchy:

I want to be forgotten,
and I don't want to be reminded.
You say ‘please don't make this harder.’
No, I won't yet. (tr. 3)

But the song also functions on a much larger scale. As Ellen Scott writes, lyrics can “transcend the workings of any particular scene and reveal the message, or subtext, of the film itself, as well as its narrative trajectory” (242). Marie is now a despised monarch—nobles and the public alike detest her hard-partying, lavish, ignorant lifestyle. “What Ever Happened?” is the final rock song heard in the film, and its title encourages us to ask “What *did* ever happen to Marie’s power?” Her fall was quite abrupt. Once heralded as France’s saving grace, her fortune quickly waned as her countrymen were orchestrating and celebrating her violent beheading.

Conclusion

Much criticism has been directed at film soundtracks employing pop songs. The argument advanced is that lyrics distract from the narrative. Director Danny Boyle, however, believes that the film’s action need not directly match the lyrics because “we tend to self edit and ignore the parts that are not appropriate” (“A Conversation with Danny Boyle”). Ian Garwood disagrees and points out three potential problems with the pop song: obtrusiveness, cultural relevance, and distance from the narrative (103-106).

For *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* T-Bone Burnett and the Coen brothers collaborated on the script from its earliest stages, and the soundtrack was recorded before filming commenced. Joel Coen himself described the film as a “Valentine to the music” (Filene 58). The music and narrative could not be more intertwined, as a majority of the soundtrack is performed diegetically. The cultural relevance of the American folk/gospel music and lyrics adds to, rather than distracts from, the film and establishes it as a well-executed period piece. The lyrics express Depression-era ideologies and act as clever characterizational and narrative tools. Even meticulous digital color correction was employed to create a seemingly authentic, vintage visual experience that works seamlessly with the soundtrack to transport the viewer back to the 1930s.

The soundtrack approach of *Marie Antoinette* is diametrically opposed to that of the Coens; its soundtrack is neither period-appropriate nor diegetic, but it, too, disproves Garwood’s concerns. Composed scores are “designed to weave in and out of the soundtrack with the maximum dexterity and minimum of fuss” (Garwood 104), and Coppola skillfully achieves this effect with pre-existing pop music. Danny Boyle notes that traditional score compositions are great for “creating waves and shallows, but I like dissonance as well” (“A Conversation with Danny Boyle”). Coppola uses the inherent musical dissonance of punk to spotlight the cultural dissonance and discord Marie is experiencing after being dropped into the fussy world of Versailles. By occasionally showcasing instrumental introductions rather than lyrics and employing drum/guitar/synthesizer instrumentations, Coppola bridges 18th century Marie with the modern day teen. She creates exciting conflict, both musical and thematic, with her dexterous placement of punk rock or Vivaldi where appropriate. Furthermore, there are generally no distracting lyrics to confuse or muddle the plot. When Coppola does include lyrics,

they are selected with dedication to characterization, oftentimes expressing what Marie would never openly discuss.

The incredible effectiveness of these soundtracks can also be gauged by their critical reception. *Marie Antoinette* may have received boos at the Cannes Film Festival, yet music critics hail its soundtrack. The *Village Voice* review of *O Brother Where Art Thou?* read that “an excellent, mainly traditional bluegrass score is placed at the service of the three stooges” (Chadwell 1). Regardless of their thoughts on the films themselves, no critic could ignore these soundtracks expertly curated by Brian Reitzell and T-Bone Burnett. These soundtracks have taken on lives of their own, re-launching the careers of their artists or revitalizing their genres completely. Consider the American folk resurgence that *O Brother* created: the soundtrack not only received a Grammy Award, but was in such popular demand that a live concert version was released. Filmmakers have even formed long-time working relationships with pop artists, a testament to the cinematic effectiveness of pre-existing pop music. Danny Boyle launched the career of electronic band Underworld by including “Born Slippy N.U.X.X.” in 1996’s *Trainspotting*, but Boyle and Underworld front-man Rick Smith continue to have an exclusive working relationship, Smith having created music for Boyle’s newest film, *Trance* (“A Conversation with Danny Boyle”). May I also add that “Born Slippy N.U.X.X.” is Underworld’s most commercially successful song to date, a testament to the relationship between a film and its soundtrack.

The relationship between the *O Brother* and *Marie Antoinette* soundtracks and their narrative/character developments is a symbiotic one. Without the use of traditional American bluegrass and gospel music, *O Brother*’s 1930s Mississippi setting would not be portrayed with such credibility, and the narrative would be nonsensical as so much of the action stems from the

diegetic soundtrack. *Marie Antoinette*'s New Wave/post-punk soundtrack alternatively pulls the queen out of her historical setting, more easily connecting us with her spoiled actions and emotions by expressing what 18th century music cannot. By "strengthening the emotional content of the image...and by suggesting and expressing emotions that cannot be conveyed by pictorial means alone," (Boggs and Petrie 292) the role a soundtrack plays in its film is an utterly vital one. Danny Boyle claims his soundtracks "use genre as bait to get people in and then try to mess with it" ("A Conversation with Danny Boyle"). Both films have appealing soundtracks that cleverly toy with the expectations of their genres: *O Brother* through its fabricated musical authenticity and *Marie Antoinette* through its 18th and 21st century playful music mix achieve brisk and inventive soundtrack breakthroughs.

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