

Songs as Elements in the Generic Structure of Film Musicals

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the description of film musicals as a subgenre of the genre family of musicals. Their dramatic structure is examined in terms of the generic elements that constitute the progression of a story expressed through the combination of spoken dialogue, songs and dance. The function of songs in the generic structure of film musicals is examined in the framework of the systemic-functional theory of register and genre. Special attention is given to the role of songs in the unfolding of the narrative. The theoretical observations about the role of songs in the register and genre of film musicals are then illustrated with an analysis of the use of songs in the TV musical *High School Musical 2*.

Keywords: musical; film musical; songs; genre; register; systemic-functional linguistics

Pesmi kot elementi žanrske strukture filmskega muzikala

POVZETEK

Prispevek se osredinja na opis filmskega muzikala kot enega podžanrov žanrske družine muzikalov. Njegova dramska struktura je osvetljena z vidika žanrskih elementov, ki poganjajo zgodbo skozi kombinacijo govornega dialoga, pesmi in plesa. Funkcija pesmi v žanrski strukturi filmskega muzikala je razložena v okviru sistemsko-funkcijske teorije registra in žanra. Posebna pozornost je posvečena vlogi pesmi v razvoju dramske zgodbe. Teoretska opažanja o vlogi pesmi v registru in žanru filmskih muzikalov so ponazorjena z analizo funkcije pesmi v žanrski strukturi TV muzikala *High School Musical 2*.

Ključne besede: muzikal; filmski muzikal; pesmi; žanr; register; sistemsko-funkcijsko jezikoslovje

Songs as Elements in the Generic Structure of Film Musicals

1 Introduction

This article examines the function of songs in the generic structure of the genre of musicals with regard to register and genre. The role of songs in the narrative structure of musicals is explained in terms of the register and genre theory which has been developed within the framework of systemic-functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday and Hasan 1989; Martin 1989, 1992). An analysis of the function of songs in the structure of a TV musical is presented and compared to the use of songs in non-musical films. The article illustrates some of the points about the function of songs and song lyrics in the register and the generic structure of film musicals through the analysis of the TV musical *High School Musical 2*. *High School Musical 2* is a popular TV musical for the teenage audience. It was first shown on the Disney Channel in 2007 as the second part of the trilogy *High School Musical*.

2 Film Musicals as Part of the Genre Family of Musicals

In the hierarchy of genres, TV film musicals are a subgenre of film musicals, which, in turn, belong to the broader genre family of musicals. The term musical covers a wide range of popular artistic forms that are distinguished from other popular dramatic genres by the integral role of songs in their generic structure.

The contemporary forms of musical have their roots in the musical theatre of the 19th century (Kenrick 2010). Musical theatre is based on the combination of popular music, songs, spoken dialogue and dance (Goodwin 2016). As opposed to the opera, it normally also contains spoken dialogue. However, there are musicals in which all the dialogues are sung. Such operatic musicals present an intersection between musicals and the opera (for example musicals by Andrew Lloyd Webber such as *Evita*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Phantom of the Opera* or the musical *Les Misérables*).

With the emergence of cinema and television, musical theatre gave rise to other dramatic genres characterized by the combination of popular music, songs, spoken dialogue and dance. The genre family of musicals today includes the following two major subgenres: stage musicals and film musicals. Film musicals can be further subdivided into screen musicals and TV musicals (cf. Kenrick n.d.).

3 The Historical Background

As part of the genre family of musicals, film musicals, i.e. screen and TV musicals, are related to stage musicals. Stage musicals stem from the long history of musical theatre which began in the theatre of ancient Greece and Rome, and developed through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the 18th and 19th centuries (Goodwin 2016). These historical forms were mainly used for entertainment and focused on humor and romantic plots. Modern western stage musicals have their roots in the forms of musical theatre popular in Britain and on the continent in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as operettas, music halls, burlesque, vaudeville, opera comique, musical comedy, etc. (Dirks n.d.). Most of these 19th-century forms of musical theatre focused on the entertainment and were thematically light and humorous.

Scaruffi (n.d.) notes that the Broadway musical survived despite the Great Depression and the

emergence of the talking movie, which were supposed to bury it. Instead, the 1930s became the golden age of musicals as the talking movie turned into a vehicle for the continuation of the musical itself. Scaruffi also mentions that the big losers of that period were the erotic revues such as the *Ziegfeld Follies*, which started to look out of touch with the zeitgeist of the Great Depression.

Screen musicals appeared with the coming of talking motion pictures. As Dirks (n.d.) notes, film musicals were the last of the major film genres, because they were dependent on sound captured on film. Film musicals present an intersection between stage musicals and films – they are a combination of spoken dialogue, sung dialogue, dance and music in cinematic form. The 20th century is considered the golden age of stage musicals, especially in the American culture of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (Dirks n.d.). In the 20th century, musicals also became a more serious dramatic form on film, but their popularity varied in different periods. The golden age of screen musicals after the 1950s and 1960s was followed by a rather dry spell in the 1970s, which was marked by many failures (with a few notable exceptions, such as the film musicals *Cabaret* (1972) and *All that Jazz* (1979)). This was also the period of the emergence of rock musicals (*Hair* (1979), *Tommy* (1977)). The late 1970s and early 1980s also brought successful screen musicals such as *Grease* (1978) and *Flashdance* (1983)). The 1990s saw a revival of an interest in screen musicals due to animated films (e.g. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Tarzan* (1999) (Dirks n.d.).

In fact, many screen musicals are adaptations of stage musicals, e.g. *Chicago*, *Hairspray*, *Grease*. Conversely, screen musicals are frequently adapted for the stage (e.g. *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*).

According to Kenrick (n.d.), the first original televised musical was *The Boys From Boise*, broadcast by the DuMont Network on September 28, 1944; but it produced no hits and started no trends. Original musicals and adaptations of stage shows flourished on American TV in the late 1950s to the 1960s, peaking in the late 1950s, but continuing through the 1960s. New televised musicals were rare from the 1970s onward (Dirks n.d.). The whole TV musical genre got revived by popular productions on CBS and ABC in the late 1990s and 2000s. This revival is partly based on the concept of special musical episodes of long-running non-musical TV series (e.g. *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scrubs*, *Oz*). One of the first of such TV episodes was the episode “Once More with Feeling” of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It was composed by the creator of the series (Joss Whedon) and is still considered one of the most influential and successful musical episodes in a TV series. Disney Channel was responsible for another revival of TV musicals with its trilogy *High School Musical*, which was in some ways reminiscent of the teenage subgenre of beach party movies of the 1960s. The most recent revival of musicals on TV has come in the form of stage musicals performed live on TV (e.g. *The Sound of Music Live!* on NBC, 2013).

4 Songs in Film Musical from the Perspective of Register and Genre Theory

This article applies the concepts of genre and register developed within the systemic-functional model to explain the function of songs in the generic structure of film musicals as opposed to the function of songs in the generic structure of non-musical films.

In systemic-functional linguistics, the concepts of register and genre theory have been developed by linguists such as Halliday (e.g. 1989), Martin and Rose (2003), Martin and Rose (2008), and

Martin and White (2005). The explanation in this article is based on the genre theory by Martin and Rose (2008), the register theory by Martin (1992) and Eggins (1994), and the theory of appraisal by Martin and Rose (2005).

According to systemic-functional theory, the register of a text consists of three different variables: field, mode and tenor. Field is what “the language is being used to talk about”, mode is “the role language is playing in the interaction”, while tenor is “the role relationships between the interactants” (Eggins 1994, 52). Genre, on the other hand, refers to “different types of texts that enact various types of social contexts” (Martin and Rose 2003, 7). Genre is realized through the purpose or goal of the text, which is superordinate to the three register variables of field, mode and tenor. In other words, genre is expressed through a concrete combination of the three variables in the text (Martin 1992, 502). Genre is additionally characterized by the schematic structure of the text – stages through which texts typically move to a point of closure (e.g. Martin, 1992, 503). Evaluation or appraisal is the discourse system which is based on the interpersonal linguistic function and is thus directly related to the register variable of tenor (Martin and White 2005). Evaluation or appraisal refers to meanings of emotional attitude, judgment and aesthetic appreciation. Expressions of evaluation are usually interspersed throughout the different stages of the generic structure of the text, but according to Martin and Rose (2003) they can also function as independent stages in the narrative structure of a story.

5 The Function of Songs in Musicals with Regard to the Register Variables

At the level of register, the function of songs in films is reflected in some way in all the three variables – field, mode, and tenor. Songs used in films can be of two basic kinds: diegetic (presented as originating from a source within the film’s world) and non-diegetic (originating from a source outside of the film’s world). The general distinction in films between diegetic and non-diegetic songs can be explained at the level of the variable of mode. The register variable of mode reflects the dimension of interpersonal distance (e.g. the possibility of feedback, the distinction between monologue and dialogue) and experiential distance (contrast between language and action, i.e. the extent to which a text constructs or accompanies a field) (Martin 1992, 509). From this perspective, the differences between non-musical films and film musicals in their use of non-diegetic songs can be explained as distinctions of mode. In non-musical films, the non-diegetic use of songs constitutes the extreme end of both interpersonal and experiential distance, i.e. it does not allow for feedback by the characters, while the song lyrics typically constitute their own field and are typically independent from the field of the film’s world. In musical films, on the other hand, the non-diegetic use of songs is part of the narrative flow of the film, similar to that of the spoken dialogue, and as such it can occupy a variety of different positions on the interpersonal and experiential distance continuum depending on the requirements of the story. Another distinction between the use of non-diegetic music in film musical and non-musical films at the level of mode involves the justification for the non-diegetic use of music and self-awareness of the characters in performing non-diegetic songs. In film musicals, characters can be aware of performing songs in a non-diegetic way, e.g. they are aware of the artificiality of singing dialogue but are pressured into doing it by some outside force (e.g. in the musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a demon causes everyone to burst into song and dance, with the characters being aware of the unnatural nature of their singing). In film musicals, justification for the non-diegetic use of music can be provided, and characters may or may not be aware of their

singing, while there is no such possibility with regard to the use of non-diegetic music in non-musical films. This potential for justification and self-awareness with regard to the performance of songs in film musicals thus involves the dimension of mode which Martin calls composition, i.e. the degree of self-consciousness involved in the creating of the text (1992, 513).

Diegetic songs originate naturally in the world of the film. From the perspective of register, the diegetic use of songs can occupy different positions on the experiential or interpersonal distance continuum in both non-musical films and film musicals. However, in contrast to non-musical films, film musicals typically use diegetic song lyrics as part of the field expressed through the world of the film, thus making song lyrics responsible for the furthering of the narrative.

From the perspective of tenor, songs in films, both diegetic and non-diegetic, have an evaluative function, i.e. the function of strengthening emotions, judgements or appreciation conveyed through the story regardless of the genre of the film.

From the perspective of field, it can be observed that in film musicals both diegetic and non-diegetic songs are an essential part of the field in the film world. Non-diegetic songs are typically a continuation of the spoken dialogue, while diegetic songs also tend to be tightly integrated into the film's field through their lyrics. In non-musical films, non-diegetic song lyrics usually constitute their own field parallel to that of the film's world, while diegetic songs normally function as part of the field by virtue of the performance itself and very rarely through the song lyrics.

6 The Function of Songs in Musicals With Regard to the Generic Structure

The register distinctions also have consequences for the function of songs in the generic structure of films. As opposed to songs in non-musical films, songs in film musicals have a much stronger potential for constituting different independent elements of the narrative structure of the film due to their inextricable link with the field of the film's world. Thus they also have a much greater potential to contribute to the furthering of the story. As opposed to film musicals, songs in non-musical films have a predominantly evaluative role in the development of the story, so they are mainly used for the reinforcement of the emotional impact of a scene. Evaluative effects of non-diegetic and diegetic songs in non-musical films are typically interspersed throughout the different stages of the generic structure of the film.

Diegetic songs in non-musical films can contribute to the furthering of the story in the obligatory stages of the narrative, but usually in the same way as non-musical actions or happenings and only rarely through the content of the songs.

In film musicals, on the other hand, both diegetic and non-diegetic songs have a much stronger potential for constituting different independent elements of the narrative structure.

Martin and Rose (2008) propose the following stages of the schematic structure of narratives: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda. The obligatory stages are complication and resolution, the other stages are optional. Evaluation is the interpersonal element which contains the expression of emotions, judgments (morality or importance) and appreciation (esthetics) (Martin and White 2003). Martin and Rose suggest that evaluation can be expressed at different stages, but it can also function as an independent stage in the narrative structure.

Like in non-musical films, songs in film musicals, both diegetic and non-diegetic, are essentially evaluative in nature: they reinforce the intensity of the emotional impact of the depicted events. In addition to functioning as evaluative reinforcement for other elements in the generic structure of the story, they can also constitute independent evaluation stages in the narrative structure. What's more, they have the potential of constituting the obligatory stages of the narrative structure such as complication and resolution and are thus used for furthering the story.

Songs in film musicals thus have a function similar to that of the spoken dialogue of the narrative structure and can function as essential elements of the obligatory narrative elements.

The next section illustrates the theoretical observations about the use of songs in the narrative structure of film musicals, using the example of the TV film musical *High School Musical 2*.

7 The Use of Songs in the Narrative Structure of *High School Musical 2*

The TV film musical *High School Musical 2* is a Disney channel TV musical from 2007. It is the second film in a highly popular trilogy which started with the TV musical *High School Musical* and ended with the screen musical *High School Musical 3*. The films are reminiscent of beach party films targeted at American teenagers in the 1960s. The musical was directed by Kenny Ortega and written by Peter Barsocchini. The plot revolves around a group of high school students taking summer jobs at the Lava Spring Resort, owned by the rich parents of their school friend Sharpay. The story focuses on the romantic couple of Gabriella and Troy, who become involved with the stage music production of the resort. After a series of conflicts in which Troy's loyalty to his girlfriend and his friends is tested, the two reaffirm their love for each other and their shared love of music.

High School Musical 2 contains 11 songs, only four of which can be considered diegetic; the rest are non-diegetic. All the songs are sung by the characters themselves. The titles of the diegetic songs are the following: *You Are the Music in Me*, *You Are the Music in Me* (reprise), *Every Day*, and *All for One*. The other songs are non-diegetic. The titles of the non-diegetic songs are the following: *What Time Is It*, *What Time Is It* (reprise), *Fabulous*, *Work This Out*, *I Don't Dance*, *Gotta Go My Own Way*, *Bet On It*. The characters do not show any self-awareness with regard to the unnaturalness of their singing and dancing in the case of non-diegetic performance of songs and the film plot provides no justification for it.

All songs in the musical, both non-diegetic and diegetic, are essentially evaluative in nature: they heighten reality and provide the emotional impact of the depicted events for the audience. In addition to functioning as a reinforcement of evaluative meaning, they constitute different independent elements in the narrative structure of the film. As Table 1 shows, songs in *High School Musical 2* function as essential elements of orientation (the characters preparing for summer vacation), evaluation (evaluation of the vacuous character of Sharpay, evaluation of the loyalty and solidarity of the school friends, love between Troy and Gabriella), a series of complications (the rift between friends, Troy forgetting his friends by turning attention to the wealthy spring owners, Troy's friends spending time without him, Troy being used by Sharpay for the musical, Gabriella finally leaving Troy due to his selfish behavior, Troy deciding something has to change), and then the resolution (Troy returning to Gabriella and singing with her on the stage of the Lava Spring Resort), followed by a coda (school friends singing and dancing

TABLE I. The function of songs in the generic structure of *High School Musical 2*.

Title of the song	Singing characters	Setting	Register function	Generic element
<i>What Time Is It</i>	Troy, Gabriella, Sharpay, Ryan, Chad, Taylor	East High's school grounds Classroom, Hallways, Cafeteria	Non-diegetic	Orientation
<i>What Time Is It (Reprise)</i>	Troy, Gabriella, Sharpay, Ryan, Chad, Taylor	East High's school grounds	Non-diegetic	Orientation
<i>Fabulous</i>	Sharpay, Ryan	Lava Springs pool	Non-diegetic	Evaluation
<i>Work This Out</i>	Troy, Gabriella, Chad, Taylor, Kelsi, Zeke, Martha, Jason	Lava Springs kitchen	Non-diegetic	Evaluation
<i>You Are the Music in Me</i>	Troy, Gabriella	Lava Springs Dining room	Diegetic	Evaluation
<i>I Don't Dance</i>	Chad, Ryan	Lava Springs baseball field	Non-diegetic	Complication
<i>You Are the Music in Me (Reprise)</i>	Troy, Sharpay	Lava springs stage	Diegetic	Complication
<i>Gotta Go My Own Way</i>	Gabriella	Lava springs pool, locker room, grounds	Non-diegetic	Complication
<i>Bet On It</i>	Troy	Lava Springs Golf Course	Non-diegetic	Complication- Climax
<i>Every Day</i>	Troy, Gabriella	Lava Springs Stage	Diegetic	Resolution
<i>All for One</i>	Troy, Gabriella, Sharpay, Ryan, Chad, Taylor	Lava Springs Pool	Diegetic	Coda

by the pool). All the songs are essential elements of the different stages in the generic structure of the film. Some elements in the staging of the film are constituted entirely by the songs (e.g. evaluation through the song *Fabulous*, complication through the song *Bet on It* – Troy searching for his moral compass, complication through the song *Gotta Go My Own Way* – Gabriella telling Troy about her decision to leave, resolution – Gabriella forgives Troy and they sing a duet on the stage, coda through the song *All for One* – friends celebrate summer through song and dance).

The analysis shows that both diegetic and non-diegetic songs in the film musical have the potential of constituting different stages of the generic structure. In *High School Musical 2*, orientation is realized through non-diegetic songs, while resolution and coda are realized through diegetic songs. Both diegetic and non-diegetic songs in the musical are crucial for the complication stage of the narrative and are thus used for furthering the narrative. Both types of songs also constitute the separate stages of evaluation in the film.

8 Conclusion

In non-musical films, non-diegetic and diegetic songs are mainly used as elements of evaluation (i.e. mainly for the reinforcement of the emotional impact of the scene), usually interspersed throughout the different stages of the narrative. In addition, diegetic songs in non-musical films potentially have a function similar to that of non-musical actions or happenings in the complication and resolution stages of the narrative, i.e. as acts of performance, only rarely through their lyrical content.

In film musicals, non-diegetic and diegetic songs are also essentially evaluative in nature. Unlike songs in non-musical films, they tend to constitute different independent elements in the generic structure of the film. In film musicals, both diegetic and non-diegetic songs tend to be used as the obligatory elements of the narrative structure. Songs in film musicals typically function as the essential elements of the stages of complication and resolution, thus furthering the narrative. This is due to the stronger association of their content with the field of the film's world. Non-diegetic songs in film musicals are closely related to the narrative flow (they are basically the continuation of spoken dialogue with different means or the overt expression of the character's inner dialogue), whereas the thematic closeness of diegetic songs to the narrative of the film musicals depends on their place in the narrative structure: they tend to be thematically more closely connected to the narrative when they have a central place in the complication or resolution stages of the structure.

References

- Dirks, Tim. n.d. *AMC Filmsite. Musicals – Dance Films*. <http://www.filmsite.org/musicalfilms.html>.
- Egins, Suzanne. 1994. *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. London: Pinter.
- Goodwin, Noël. 2016. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Theatre Music." <http://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-music>.
- Halliday, M.A.K., and Ruqaiya Hasan. 1989. *Language, Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kenrick, John. 2010. *Musical Theatre. A History*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- . n.d. *Musicals 101.com. The Cyber Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre, Film & Television*. <http://www.musicals101.com/tv1.htm>.
- Martin, J.R. 1989. *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging Social Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1992. *English Text. System and Structure*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Martin, J.R., and David Rose. 2003. *Working with Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- . 2008. *Genre Relations. Mapping Culture*. London: Equinox.
- Martin, J.R., and P.R.R. White. 2005. *The Language of Evaluation. Appraisal in English*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scaruffi, Piero. n.d. *A Brief History of the Musical*. <http://www.scaruffi.com/history/musical.html>.