



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Haworth, Catherine

Review of 'Film's Musical Moments' ed. by Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

Original Citation

Haworth, Catherine (2008) Review of 'Film's Musical Moments' ed. by Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell (Edinburgh University Press, 2006). *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, 2 (1). pp. 83-90. ISSN 1753-0768

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/11806/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, eds., *Film's Musical Moments* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 240pp.

review by Catherine Haworth

Film's Musical Moments is described by its editors, Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, as a book '...about musical performance on film, about the use of music within film and ... about film musicals: a triple focus that articulates the complex relationship that exists between music and the cinematic text' (1). This very broad remit is one of the collection's major strengths, but also its significant weakness. Although it allows the inclusion of work from a range of theoretical and critical standpoints and usefully moves away from the fairly rigid generic, historical and stylistic boundaries that already characterise much of the literature in soundtrack studies, its lack of real focus also limits the amount that the collection can achieve. Its chapters, in other words, are perhaps a little too eclectic to thoroughly open up the possibilities and implications of the cinematic 'musical moment'.

Conrich and Tincknell view the musical moment as occurring in several different guises – most conventionally in the traditional performance space of the film musical's song and dance number, but also, outside that genre, '...the novelty or romantic song within comedy, musical performance within animation, or the biopic and the lip-synching musical parody in many post-classical films' (1). Musical moments do not always feature diegetic performance (at least not in a conventional sense) but frequently occur as a result of musical 'excess', where the striking presence of music in a non-musical film acts to disrupt the text for particular effect. These musical disruptions act not only as effective (and affective) disturbances, but also frequently work to express the underlying themes or concerns of the narrative. Here, the collection builds upon Conrich's previous work on the film comedies of the Marx Brothers (2000), where moments of musical performance frequently punctuate the text in a manner that parallels the narrative's own concerns with chaos and anarchy: 'Music in this context is thus both a momentarily disruptive force *and* integral to the overall coherence of the text: it helps to articulate the underlying values or ideas in a new way' (5).

Moments of musical performance in films such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

(Blake Edwards, 1961) and both versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1934 & 1956) are also described as suspending the narrative whilst simultaneously underpinning its themes, drawing comparisons with the function, if not quite the style, of many song and dance numbers in the film musical. Contemporary films often heighten the disruptive effect of the musical moment by employing the montage editing and post-classical aesthetic of music video to produce sequences of a 'deliberately anti-integrational' nature (5). Conrich and Tincknell view these sequences as opportunities to 'broaden rather than restrict the possible audiences for the film' and to 'secure audience engagement, not only with the film itself but also with the particular recordings featured in these brief eruptions of aural and visual spectacle' (6). They give the example here of Céline Dion's chart-topping 'My Heart Will Go On' as used in *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), noting that the 'meaning' of the film also circulated through the song and its associations. Whilst 'My Heart Will Go On' certainly acted as a highly successful form of cross-promotion, its 'broadening' effect is perhaps more minimal than suggested here, as it is a musical moment very closely aimed at the film's original target market, rather than at those outside it.

The essays in *Film's Musical Moments* investigate these uses of musical excess in a range of texts and utilise a variety of different approaches. Several of the chapters are primarily historical in focus, outlining the significance of the musical moment in particular genres or cinematic traditions, whilst others take a more critical approach to assessing the ramifications of musical excess and its affective qualities upon such issues as star and fan texts, musical consumption and marketing, and personal and collective identities.

The collection is divided into four sections, of which the first, 'Music, Film, Culture', is the most historically focused. 'Jazz, Ideology and the Animated Cartoon', by Barry Keith Grant, traces the use of jazz in early American animation. He notes how Hollywood dealt with its problematic signification of black culture by either emphasising its black associations to evoke racist stereotypes, or 'softening' it to highlight white jazz personalities like Paul Whiteman and his 'sweeter', 'whiter' jazz sound. Whiteman and his band were significant in helping to establish the big band sound during the late 1920s as a popular type of dance music. These dance bands and their leaders began to appear in film revues and more developed roles on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1930s, as James Chapman notes in 'A Short History of the Big Band Musical'.

Many of the essays in *Film's Musical Moments* deal with the concepts raised by stardom in one form or another, but John Mundy's 'Television, the Pop Industry and the Hollywood Musical' is unique in its discussion

of how star personalities are often hard at work behind, as well as in front of, the camera. Mundy discusses the career of *American Bandstand* host Dick Clark, who was not only a major US television personality but also a highly successful businessman with interests in musical production and promotion. Clark was ideally placed to take full advantage of the cross-promotional opportunities offered by *Bandstand's* network distribution and widespread popularity to propel various artists into the public eye. Mundy notes the important role that *American Bandstand* played in bringing youth culture, black artists and rock 'n' roll to a more mainstream audience, and Clark's ability to negotiate between various cultural groups resulted in some huge commercial successes, including Chubby Checker's 'The Twist' (1960). Clark's continuing involvement in Checker's career was significant in allowing the twist to become a music, dance and film craze that crossed sociocultural divides, and clearly demonstrates the important role of the individual, as well as the institution and conglomerate, in models of cross-promotion.

Whilst Mundy's chapter is less explicitly concerned with the 'musical moment' than several other strong essays in the volume, his work combines the same impressive depth of research with an illuminating focus on the 'behind-the-scenes' side of the star persona that emphasises the commercial, political and pragmatic forces acting on the production of cultural texts. Unusually for a collection dealing primarily with popular music, Mundy's chapter is one of the few to emphasise the industrial and commercial sides of film (or television) as equally significant, in many ways, to its aesthetic ones. His essay provides ample support for his call to 'engage with the specific material practices that drive cultural production and influence its consumption' in any attempt to analyse its texts (54).

'The Operatic in New German Cinema' by Ulrike Sieglöhr examines the use of the operatic as a stylistic, structural and emotional device in the work of Werner Schroeter, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and Alexander Kluge. Sieglöhr demonstrates how the operatic is a key communicative device in these films, used 'to convey a critical understanding of identity, be it from a gay or from a national-historical perspective' (66). In this respect, the chapter might have been better placed in a later section of the volume, as the issues she raises about the relationships between musical 'excess' of one kind or another and identity are an important theme running through several of the essays positioned elsewhere in *Film's Musical Moments*.

'Stars, Performance and Reception', the second section of the book, has these issues at its heart, as well as its more obvious focus upon stars, their on-screen personae, and their fans. The three essays that make up

this section draw out the multiple processes acting to produce meaning and signification between star texts and their audiences, and emphasise how important authenticity (or at least the illusion of authenticity) is to this relationship. For example, Andrew Spicer's chapter on Jack Buchanan, a British musical star of the 1930s, highlights the consistency of his on- and off-screen adoption of the 'man-about-town' persona as a marker of socially mobile and unthreatening Britishness. Bruce Babington's contribution, 'Star Personae and Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic' also emphasises the uniformity of the ways in which film and television biopics strive to represent country music and its personalities as 'the last repository of "sincerity" and "authenticity" in popular music' (86). The musical moments of these films are shown to be crucial in allowing the narrative to negotiate the potentially problematic distance between authentic 'lived' experience, as articulated in country lyrics and musical content, and the move towards 'crossover' styles that frequently precedes the mainstream success of a local star.

This idea of authentic, lived experience being communicated through popular song is identified by Jonathan Rayner as an important facet of many of ABBA's hits and the identification of fans with the band. In 'Stardom, Reception and the ABBA "Musical"', he notes the important place of ABBA's music in Australian culture, tracing its appearance as a marker of personal and collective identity in films such as *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994) and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) back to the use of the band and their music in the 'mock-rock-doc' *ABBA The Movie* (Lasse Hallström, 1977). *ABBA The Movie* mixes documentary footage and filmed performances of the band and their fans with occasional use of the pop video format and a fictional narrative focusing around Ashley, a reporter and fan of the group. The film plays with the idea of 'access' to the star, simultaneously giving us 'backstage' privileges to ABBA's 1977 Australian tour while also withholding Ashley's (and our own) view of the band in several scenes and making use of 'artificial' pop video sequences as a distancing technique. *ABBA The Movie* demonstrates the way in which film can be used not only to circulate and revalidate pre-existing star texts, but also to critique their authenticity and value, and to articulate the significance of the star for fans.

The position of ABBA's music and image within popular culture, and in fan and Australian cultures in particular, is crucial to understanding their use in *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. ABBA's music is used across all three of the films Rayner discusses to articulate and problematise notions of identity. This happens individually in *Muriel's* 'attribution of private significance to popular media texts' (108),

and collectively in *Priscilla*, which features drag performance of ABBA songs as a representation of homecoming and authenticity in the gay community. Furthermore, it occurs at a level that addresses Australian national identity overall, the reconciliation of music with experience acting to 'exhibit a cautious and hard-won optimism about the question of national definition' (110).

Rayner's chapter is one of the strongest in the collection, addressing the many different levels on which cultural production and identity are tightly interwoven in a thought-provoking and invigorating way. 'Stars, Performance and Reception' is probably the most successful section of the book as its chapters are so closely linked, allowing the theoretical and critical content of these essays to become more than the sum of their parts. They build up a compelling subtext about the role of the star in the musical moment and how important notions of authenticity and sincerity continue to be in understanding the multiple processes of meaning at work in the star/fan relationship and also in our more general relationship with cinematic meaning and affect.

The final two sections of the book, 'The Post-Classical Hollywood Film' and 'Beyond Hollywood' are defined by the historical or geographical location of the texts they discuss, but are also, perhaps more interestingly, focused around a broadening and questioning of the traditional boundaries of the film 'musical'. Several of these essays also continue to address the underlying theme of musical performance and identity, whether in the original positioning of a film or its reception in relation to particular audiences. These include Ian Conrich's 'Musical Performance and the Cult Film Experience' and 'Music, Film and Post-Stonewall Gay Identity' by Gregory Woods and Tim Franks.

The two essays that complete 'The Post-Classical Hollywood Film' both deal primarily with musical moments offered by the contemporary pop soundtrack. Scott Henderson's 'Youth, Excess and the Musical Moment' argues that the post-classical film often makes a feature of the disruptive elements of diegetic musical performance, rather than emphasising its potential to form and cement communities as the classical Hollywood musical number often does. Films such as *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995) and *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999) use music and musical moments as one of their primary markers of youth identity, drawing on extra-textual reference points outside the diegesis to position their (female) lead characters as rebellious and independent. For example, Kat in *10 Things* is heavily associated with 'alternative' music, signalling her resistance to the mainstream teen culture of her peers. Her musical moments do not serve to integrate her into communities or romantic relationships – instead, romance only takes place, on Kat's terms, once

she feels she has clearly asserted (and is able to remain in control of) her identity. Musical 'meaning' is here shown to be very clearly about text *and* reception, a multi-way process that draws upon '... the music and the identities constructed through music ... based on relations that exist outside the filmic text (unlike the fully diegetic use of music and performance in so many classical Hollywood musicals)' (153).

Ideas about musical meaning and reception are also important in Estella Tincknell's 'The Soundtrack Movie, Nostalgia and Consumption.' Drawing on the work of Laurence Grossberg (1992), she argues that the inclusion of well known popular songs on a soundtrack often involves repositioning people in relation to an already known and consumed text. These texts can be crucial in a film's overall narrative structure and strategy – music is used to fill 'gaps' in the narrative and/or to speak to an audience in different, but still pleasurable, ways. Popular music is often at the heart of contemporary cinema's ability to communicate and to sell, and its increasing use as part of the soundtrack is significant not just in terms of economics and production models, but also in our ideas of what actually constitutes musical 'performance'.

Tincknell notes that through the quotation or pastiche of recently remembered musical history, these musical moments are used to evoke nostalgia and specific cultural associations in a knowing and self-conscious way. She uses examples from *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997) to argue that music is frequently used to repackage past events in a way that suits the needs of the filmmaker: '... the soundtrack film's nostalgia may be read as close to instant – and depoliticised – history' (135). Especially when read together with Henderson's chapter, Tincknell's essay offers interesting insights into the flexible, complex and collaborative processes through which the production of meaning in the compiled soundtrack is negotiated – processes that draw heavily upon references and associations from within and outside the narrative. What neither of them really address, though, is how these musical moments might engage with an audience, possibly outside their film's intended demographic, who might not recognise or 'read' their extra-textual associations as fluently (or in the same way) as others. Undoubtedly, moments like these still continue to provide pleasure and 'meaning' of one kind or another, whether their original source or basis is recognised or not; personal, as well as group, responses potentially offer a productive avenue for further discussion in these areas.

The concluding section of *Film's Musical Moments*, 'Beyond Hollywood', mirrors the opening in its largely historical focus. Essays by Niels Hartvigson, Andrea Rinke and Heather Tyrrell, and Rajinder Dudrah all

reinforce the importance of context when reading a film, demonstrating that the social, political and wider cultural climates of filmmakers working in 1930s Denmark, post-war East Germany and the commercial Hindi cinema industry have proved to have a profound effect upon their films. Like several of the other historically-based essays in *Film's Musical Moments*, these chapters are less incisive in their assessment of the musical moment than the more critically orientated sections of the collection, although they succeed perfectly well on their own terms, providing interesting and original insights into the specific conditions of production and reception operating in these areas of cinematic tradition.

Film's Musical Moments covers a wide variety of cinematic texts and traditions in its attempts to dissect the various guises and effects of the 'musical moment', and its genuinely interdisciplinary nature makes it a valuable resource for researchers working in many different areas of scholarship. However, the lack of overall focus identified earlier diminishes its theoretical scope somewhat, so that in places the collection raises more interesting questions than it manages to answer. The chapters that work best (for example, the essays by Rayner, Tincknell and Henderson) are the ones that move consistently and perceptively beyond questions about *how* musical moments work in various settings into discussion of *why* they do this so well, and what the repercussions of these strategies might be.

One of the most significant issues raised by *Film's Musical Moments* is that of categorisation, in relation to musical performance and the musical genre as a whole. The idea of the musical moment is significant in drawing attention to the multiplicity of ways in which music is used to draw attention in the cinema for specific and often self-conscious purposes. It moves usefully beyond the often-inadequate 'opposites' of diegetic and non-diegetic to occupy a space where music is foregrounded for the audience to the extent that its position in relation to the diegesis is of secondary relevance to its textual/extra-textual meanings and affect.

With this in mind, the collection also starts to challenge and reformulate ideas about what defines the genre of the film musical, questioning notions of its formal structure and definition, and highlighting the benefit of considering films at the boundaries of generic categories to be as significant as the canonic texts at their centre. All of the films discussed here demonstrate clearly that events of musical performance and/or excess are commonplace in films that sit outside the traditional (and usually Hollywood-centric) boundaries of the genre. These musical moments, like the numbers in a conventional musical, occur in a variety of styles and guises, but what they all share is the idea that they offer an audience a moment of authentic and intimate insight into a film's characters, themes

or stars. Music is shown throughout *Film's Musical Moments* to have a role reaching far beyond that of providing accompaniment or reinforcement to other elements of the narrative; instead it is an effective and affective tool that frequently provides a film with its most memorable and powerful sequences.



References

- Conrich, Ian (2000) 'Merry Melodies: The Marx Brothers' Musical Moments', in Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (eds.) *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, Bristol: Intellect Books
- Grossberg, Lawrence (1992) *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, New York: Routledge