Pop, Speed and the "MTV Aesthetic" in Recent Teen Films

Kay Dickinson, Middlesex University, UK

A brief perusal of academic library bookshelves will reveal to the browser only a meagre number of publications on two often interacting phenomena: the teen movie and the popular music soundtrack. While the neglect of the former, except its overlaps with historical survey or auteurist interest, offers us an intriguing insight into Film Studies' priorities, the lack of coverage of the popular music soundtrack *qua* music has triggered most of the arguments I wish to present in this article. The motives behind this lack of sustained engagement perhaps derive from the pop soundtrack's location in a disciplinary no man's land where academic occupation might spark border disputes. (See Appendix One for works on film music.)

It is worth noting that, in their titles, all these books refer broadly to "film music" when, in fact, they are concerned with little beyond the classical film score. Only Smith (1998) seems eager to dedicate himself exclusively to the history of the popular soundtrack. This is startling considering the consistently close relationship between popular music and movies, something which has been in place since at least *The Jazz Singer*'s commandeering of a successful popular musician, Al Jolson, to help launch the sound era. Historically, both industries have mutually profited from their union. To pick an obvious example, when musicals were in their heyday, fans of certain songs would flock to the cinema to see as well as hear them and sheet music and soundtrack recordings did roaring business with people who wanted to buy more than just the cinema ticket. Stars have always criss-crossed between both media following all manner of paths and range in diversity from Ivor Novello, to Bing Crosby, to Doris Day, to Lata Mangeshkar, to Elvis Presley, to Barbara Streisand, to Whitney Houston with many more in between. Yet, although this topic has received a certain amount of historically-focused attention (by Doty (1988), for example), there isn't a great amount of written material on more contemporary embodiments of the popular music and film relationship. So, with this intervention of my own, I have to stress that I don't wish by any means to imply that pop music within cinema is a new or radical phenomenon. I do, however, believe that there is something intriguing and unheeded about the present liaisons between film and popular music and this is why I intend to dive very quickly into the recent past rather than provide too much of an historical overview. With few books at our fingertips on this current configuration, we are left, perhaps, to think laterally through a body of work on the music video (Kaplan (1987), Goodwin (1993) and Frith and Goodwin (1993)) which, although it shares common analytical ground, primarily focuses upon another medium entirely.

Undaunted by the lack of comforting reference material, I wish to unite these two maligned qualities by contemplating an ever-growing, much commented on, yet rarely intellectually scrutinised presence: the teen film whose structure seems intentionally marked by the pop soundtrack it bears. While scholarly analyses of various specific movies occasionally touch upon this conjunction, there is still much work to be done on the broader cultural significance of the recurrent stylistic motifs which are encouraged by the assimilation of popular music into contemporary cinema. In these films, visual features such as editing seem infused with a certain pop musicality, namely the "MTV aesthetic": a characteristic which derives from the

peculiar stylistic conventions of the music video. What renders these attributes seemingly unorthodox is the submission of editing to the customary tempi of popular music, a presentation of shots which defies the standard broadcast rhythm of around three seconds minimum each. Obviously not all music videos manipulate their footage in line with this convention, obviously not all disruptively pacy editing recalls pop promotional clips (for example, this is obviously not an Eisensteinian's intent), but the term has increasingly become a short-hand for this craze in post-production.

While such a relation to time is common to, even sought out in our reception of music, it is uncomfortably fast for the eye. Chion points out the differences in certain perceptual skills that establish this disjunction:

> the ear analyzes, processes and synthesizes faster than the eye. Take a rapid visual movement - a hand gesture - and compare it to an abrupt sound trajectory of the same duration. That fast visual movement will not form a distinct figure, its trajectory will not enter the memory in a precise picture. In the same length of time the sound trajectory will succeed in out-lining a clear and definite form, individuated, recognizable, distinguishable from others... the eye is more spatially adept and the ear more temporally adept. (Chion, 1994: 10-11)

Yet music video editing need not be this fast in order to imitate the music's tempo, which, after all, is always divisible. This predilection instead compensates, perhaps, for a quality which, although alien to the moving image, is intrinsic to popular music: the repetition of decidedly short phrases (the riff) and a disregard of narrative progression (popular music instead alternates between any arrangement of verse, chorus and middle eight). Considering musical repetition's controlled stasis and its subsequent incompatibility with visual conventions, this recourse to flashing visual imagery is perhaps a strategic one. Within the structure of the music video, speed helps diminish the, at times, deadening visual connotations of repetition.

Although such visible tempi originally expressed a compliance with musical form that was necessary to the thematic restrictions of music video, these characteristics have since seeped into other mainstream audio-visual media, especially those eager to express "youth". The "MTV aesthetic" is now a pervasive stylistic element of television, of adverts, and, in particular, of feature films.

A traditional Film Studies reading of this type of editing in isolation would refer, no doubt, to its "decentring" qualities, judging them, perhaps, less revolutionary than blasé and postmodern in their motives. E. Ann Kaplan's foundational text on music video, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture,* offers one such application. However, a closer analysis of the film's structure, one not so blinkered by theories of the *gaze*'s influence on the relationship between the film and the spectator, one more eager to unblock its ears to the subject positionings offered by the soundtrack, may proffer a divergent reading. While understandings of a fragmented subject position from this formal visual quality are, of course, far from invalid, I wish here to dwell upon how the "MTV aesthetic" might paradoxically and in parallel offer a completely different, though no less coherent, sense of self which is primarily constituted through the popular music on the soundtrack and its side-effects. With these issues in mind, I would like to undertake a brief classificatory tour of a film that employs this technique, Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William*

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. I must apologise in advance for failing to fathom the more subtle and specific semantics that are exchanged between this film and the specific songs on its soundtrack - such a vast task is beyond the limitations of this type of analysis.

With each introduction of a new *Romeo and Juliet*, the emphasis must be on provoking a sense of novelty, even of capturing a teen sensibility (*West Side Story* acting as the obvious precedent). To a large extent, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*'s manipulation of the "MTV aesthetic" achieved the desired effect formally. The film was deemed a resounding hit by teenage audiences, despite the potential of its language to alienate or deter them. The success of the film can be attributed at least partially to its attainment of stylistic contemporaneity which few critics or audience members failed to ascribe to the influence of music video.

The greater proportion of *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (indeed almost all but the scenes of love declaration or tragedy) is composed of rapid edits, often constituted from restless moving shots, zooms and swish pans of, at times, less than a second's length. Tempo is sustained through an impatience with the shot/reverse shot typical of film dialogue. Cuts between characters mid-speech which serve little reactive purpose (as is evident in Mercutio and Romeo's pre-ball conversation) are not infrequent. Cinematically unconventional montages built up of shots covering objects from only slightly differing angles are brutally intercut with disjunctive single shots bearing other subject matter. At times, the pace is accelerated by a blatant, even comedic, use of speeded up footage (examples include the first confrontation and the Capulet household's preparation for the ball). From time to time, the editing flashes from shot to shot as a character stresses individual words; this is residual from music video's visual accentuation of rhythmic tempo and indeed is more prevalent when the music becomes diegetically symbolic.

References to music video style are most overtly and successfully enlisted in the film's interlude scenes, a space where it is not only less likely to clash with the thrust of the narrative, but may even help to ease it forward. The switch from the church to Mercutio and Benvolio's beach scene is engineered through a play on music video form. As the church choir embark upon a performance of "When Doves Cry", the editing presents the song in video-style disjunctive images (hearts and a dove in slow-motion) which enhance both the song's theme and the immediate narrative concerns. With the viewer now in "music video mode", the sliding of the images into beach motifs (complete with swish pans of bikinied women in the backs of cars) is less disorientating, smoothly sequing into this as the location for the next scene.

The music video link is more blatantly enforced by Mercutio's miming to Kym Mazelle's "Young Hearts Run Free" at the ball: a burlesque sequence which is half video, half drag cabaret act. The ball scene also allows for the incorporation of another song, Des'ree's "Kissing You" which she performs diegetically whilst playing a hired singer.

The conjunction of popular music, music video and the aesthetics of the film could not be made more clear, nor can its ulterior motives be evaded. As Sanjek points out:

> the entertainment conglomerates have mitigated the decline in box office receipts by selling the music featured in films as vigorously as (in some cases even more so than) the motion picture itself. Evidence of such cross-media marketing is supported by the fact that, with a single exception, the number

> one song on the yearly pop chart since 1991 also appeared in a motion picture soundtrack. (Sanjek "Popular Music and the Synergy of Corporate Culture" in Swiss, Sloop and Herman, 1998: 177-178)

Film soundtracks have been released as separate recordings since the 1940s with favourites such as *The Third Man* proving extremely lucrative. Such scores were mainly classical, until Mancini's mould-breaking jazz-tinged soundtrack for *Peter Gunn* proved popular. Although its scoring was appropriate to the film's protagonist, a frequenter of jazz clubs, the vogue for non-classical incidental music was leapt upon in Hollywood. Evans, somewhat on the side of the classical score, elaborates:

> Producers were quick to jump on the bandwagon... they made a concerted effort to find composers who would provide, not dramatic underscoring, but commercially viable pop pieces that could be exploited on records. The entrance of record company executives into the film music field changed it forever. For the first time, a key element in evaluating the worth of a score was totally divorced from the motion picture itself: Could the score sell records? (Evans, 1975: 192)

The incorporation of catchy and memorable songs rather than atmospheric scores culminated in a more conscious recollection of certain musical themes which consequently rendered them more commercially viable. Moreover, if a score is compiled of a selection of pre-recorded songs, perhaps even pre-recorded for the purpose of musical release rather than filmic scoring (as is mainly the case nowadays), then the method is distinctly cheaper.

The increasingly horizontally-integrated nature of the major film, television and music corporations has since spurred on the already highly established promotion of music via films and vice versa. Sony, for example, own record companies and Columbia Pictures whilst also manufacturing a vast amount of the hardware that these media are transmitted on. Time-Warner are the world's largest entertainment corporation with interests in film, television, cable and publishing. Universal Studios (and their related theme parks) were for a time in the possession of Matshushita who make VHS related goods and also own MCA and Odeon cinemas before ownership was passed on to Seagram and then Vivendi. MTV is part of the Viacom empire which also controls two film-related concerns, Paramount and Showtime/The Movie Channel. The commercial motivation for a flow of music and music television-derived imagery into and out of movies becomes immediately comprehensible in this instance. The EMI group, whilst not owning any actual studios, sell videos through their HMV outlets, have a controlling interest in Toshiba and manufacture electrical goods upon which both music and moving image media are transmitted, as do Philips. Similarly, BMG is part of the Bertelsmann group which owns publishing groups and cable companies. (Negus, 1996; Balio, 1998; Timbrell and Tweedie, 1998: 504) This tight interweave makes glaringly obvious why such readable pointers to other media types might appear in feature films. The "MTV aesthetic" in film seems a more practical means of covering several bases at once when the use of the individual rock star him/herself has always proved a particularly hazardous venture. Classical examples of how desperately unsuccessful this can be include the film flops *The Delinquents* (with Kylie Minogue), *Who's That Girl* and *Shanghai Surprise* starring Madonna and Prince's *Under the Cherry Moon*. It is no surprise, then, that the trend has gradually almost died out or mutated into pastiche (for example Billy Idol's role in *The Wedding Singer*). Very rarely is a pop star allocated a role which drastically digresses from his or her performance persona - which perhaps accounts for Madonna's success in

Desperately Seeking Susan or even Courtney Love's in *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Obviously there are exceptions to this rule, Will Smith proving a rare case in point.

Returning to my initial example, *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* is a Twentieth Century Fox film whose soundtrack was released on Capitol Records. While the two companies are parts of different media empires, the union proves advantageous for both. Twentieth Century Fox is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation which has vested interests in all (image-based) aspects of show business as fodder for his various publications (Harper Collins books, *The Sun*, *The Times* and so on). More importantly, the promotion of an MTV style potentially entices the viewer to subscribe to the station via satellite, something which is of obvious benefit to Murdoch. As controller not only of the Sky network, but also of the satellite encryption technology, Murdoch profits from all satellite viewing regardless of whether he owns the individual television station. In countries where MTV is not received via cable (such as Britain), its signal cannot be de-scrambled without the News Corporation making money. Of course Murdoch's control of satellite, terrestrial television (Fox TV, Star TV, which covers most of Asia, and Hindi network UTV) and a film studio entitles him to more rigid control of and profit from the fruits of the latter via the former.

Similarly, the EMI Group, who own Capitol Records, benefit on many levels from their role in this film. They can sell the soundtrack (Capitol has established a tradition of fine quality soundtracks which date back to their success with *Oklahoma!*) and the video in their retail outlets and, less directly, it is in their interests, as producers of stereos and videos, to promote the art forms which these types of equipment play. The corporation also owns VIVA, the major music video channel in Germany and most of Asia. (Timbrell and Tweedie, 1998: 504 and 1051) More important for Capitol, as a smaller company within a larger network, is the wider airplay that the film gives several of their artists. Although this film has striven hard to maintain the image that its pop soundtrack was a product of love and integrity with tracks specially chosen by Nellee Hooper for their concordance with the film's themes, the presence of the bands Everclear and Radiohead (both on EMI labels) is telling. Moreover, several of these tracks' videos, effortless and cheap through their deployment of footage from the film, also served as a free advertisement for the film each time they were aired.

Miklos Rozsa (with, as a renowned Hollywood scorer, more than a vested interest) has railed against the intrusive and disruptive influence of such songs deposition of the type of score which subtly complies with its film's narrative priorities: "all they want is to sell a song, play a cheap tune over and over, and sell records. The high ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has gone out the window." (uncited quotation from Evans, 1975: 207) Yet surely this "high ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* " has, in fact, returned to film in reverse, with the visual elements, as we have seen, increasingly mirroring popular musical form? Although, this may be "the wrong way round", its very diversion from the norm means it may purport to articulate generational difference while simultaneously highlighting a shift in how films may, at present, derive a great deal of their revenue.

Brophy deconstructs this immediate assumption that popular music is ill-fitted to film scoring:

> songs in films ... exist as imports, bearing carnets of displacement and badges of otherness. Polarized so directly against strains of orchestral beauty, rock tends to suffer a sameness which marks its identity too sharply, thereby rendering its usage limited by self-effacing and naturalistic standards of film

> making. The problem is that the grandiose narrative aspects of the orchestra are presumed to somehow come from cinema, to somehow match it, while the folk song form of rock music is situated outside of cinema's higher aspirations, fixing rock songs as vagrants and itinerants. (Brophy, 1998: 54)

Furthermore it often seems as if established critical stances pitch classical score/natural/meaningful dichotomously against pop soundtrack/unnatural/meaningless.

Of prime structural importance is the reconciliation of the previously recorded track with the film's diegesis. Unlike the conventionally established (though distinctly culturally relative) snug moulding of the soundtrack around narrative themes, the essentially closed unit of the pop song is far less malleable. Here, perhaps, is buried the root of the revulsion towards the pop soundtrack: that this insistent, even invasive musical presence may belie the fact that narrative or even traditional visual tropes may not feature as highly on film's agenda as they used to. When academic discourse on cinema intently focuses on these areas, there is an understandable distaste towards film genres which may digress from such priorities.

Yet sweeping the pop soundtrack under the carpet does little to silence its impact upon the constructed subjecthoods of its target audience. It is worth stressing that, to certain audiences, the pop song amidst a film narrative is far from (purely) a disruptive cash-in and may, in fact, be distinctly more pertinent to their identity construction than the unobtrusive seduction that a classical score often so relentlessly strives for in an idiom alien to their particular language. While pop songs may seem transitory, base or mindless to certain filmgoers, to a teenage audience they often play a vital role in both self-definition and micro-cultural stratification.

This is not to say that the texturally rich orchestral score that *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* also carries amounts to little, just that the pre-recorded song track should start off on a different but equal footing in our academic estimations. Here it is worth contemplating how semantic value is culturally imbued and what power structures these processes are likely to support. Along similar lines, it would be naive to project crass financial opportunism solely onto the pop soundtrack without reflecting upon the strategically embedded notion of the classical composer as Romantic anti-commercial artistic hero.

With such polarizations complicated, we are freer to consider what popular music might contribute to the film without immediately leaping upon its supposedly flawed attempts to match criteria which collude exclusively with the classical score. While writers such as Gorbman draw on French psychoanalytical theory to ground the classical score as a substitute for lost pre-Oedipal plenitude and wholeness, the jarring pop soundtrack is firmly rooted in (to answer Gorbman in her own Lacanian terms) the Symbolic - the construction of identity in line with social regulation, demography and one's place within capitalism. There are also more ways for music to interact with the film image than semi-consciously reiterating its visual and narrative themes, ideas that certain strains of Film Studies often seem reluctant to welcome on board.

While an admitted unfamiliarity with soundtrack discourse might exempt the average film theorist from tackling the derivations of the "MTV aesthetic", its leeching into that most cherished element of film - the presentation of the image - surely cannot be so easily side-stepped. Alongside the more commercial manipulations of the "MTV aesthetic", the potency of this *visual* (though musically derived) formal quality in the articulation or, more pessimistically, interpellation of youth identity must not go unsung - as it does, say, in

Smith's (1998) consideration of the "MTV aesthetic". While the author offers an engaging investigation into the commercial motives behind the "MTV aesthetic", he neglects to analyse its semantic debris. As my earlier recourse to Chion elaborates, the translation of musical tempi into visual forms unsettles many a viewer. While its sly opportunism (often anathema to the discerning leftist theorist) warrants our guarded attention, so too does the possible whole which might equal more than the sum of these exploitative parts. How might the audio-visual play upon jittery editing embody some form of "resistance" for a youth audience despite, even regardless of its entrenchment in big business? How might their aestheticisation of speed (especially in terms of visual disruption) pronounce difference in terms of advantage rather than subordination? Here space permits anything but a cursory treatment. However, as will become apparent, a teen understanding of speed shrugs off depth anyway and my treatment, if not conclusive, is at least conducive to its environment. To get bogged down in speed means becoming a traitor to its fundamental aims.

Beneath the narrative specificities of any "MTV aesthetic" film (examples of which would include *Flashdance* (1983), *Top Gun* (1986), *Batman Forever* (1995) and *The Faculty* (1998).) lies a more sturdy foundation - the enduring preference for rapid fire presentation. As each generation must demarcate its space, the lure of speed is a perennial favourite. Speed has been important to teen identity since at least the "invention of the teenager" and the "MTV aesthetic" is merely a more recent convulsion in this seductive mode of self-definition. If we trace these developments back to the 1950s, then it is worth noting the allure of speed to the beatniks (evident in Kerouac's writing in particular) and the frantic tempi of some of the jazz being played at that time. Since then, speed has played a sizeable role in youth differentiation from adult lumberings: quick-witted youth versus faltering age. A glorification of the moment - the moment of their "prime", a moment which disavows history and the primes of others now grown old.

Similarly, the accelerated pace of the "MTV aesthetic" becomes a new language for youth, something which distinguishes them from a parent culture now very knowledgeable about pop music from their own youth experience, who might even watch *Top of the Pops* with them thereby enormously decreasing the rebellious cachet of such music. And Kerouac simply will not do when he might be on the GCSE reading list. For contemporary youth it is speed in bpm, in increasingly commodified sports, speed the amphetamine which enables prolonged dancing, fast food, speed in computer games.

Chris Stanley makes the point that contemporary dance "music is 'impossible' to dance to, given its rapidity generated by synthesizers and computers. The music does not ask you to engage with it, but rather to chase it, to lose it or to establish a transcendental relationship with it." (Chris Stanley, "Urban Narratives of Dissent in the Wild Zone", in Redhead, 1997: 51) This, I would like to add, is a selection process in itself, one which allows entry into the guarded area of youth's collective loss. Speed in most of these forms works within a system of relativities in which it assumes superiority. There is also a certain amount of prestige and advantage attributed socially to attaining speed. Speed is elitist. Speed eliminates those who cannot keep up; weeds the weak from the strong in youth fashion terms.

This at times upturned hierarchy feeds back into the reception of music video and its stylistic genealogy, the viewers who are not frustrated by its editing speeds twisting them to their advantage in at least two ways. Firstly, they claim the authority of those able to adeptly interpret otherwise indecipherably fast images. Secondly, there is the potential to proclaim depth (the very quality fast editing denies the moving image) a redundant concept. Robert

Pittman, MTV's founding CEO, has laid down the stereotypical perspective on youth viewing and has incorporated it into his station's aesthetic: "You're dealing with a culture of tv babies...What kids can't do today is follow things too long. They get bored and distracted, their minds wander. If information is presented to them in tight fragments that don't necessarily follow each other, kids can comprehend that." (Robert Pittman in *The New York Times,* May 8th 1983, 43 as cited by Denisoff, 1991: 241) The clichéd notion that teenagers have limited attention spans is thus appropriated as a positive quality. In a decidedly teenage fashion, this move disregards the significance of penetration and its entrenched social value. The film theorist, of course, is faced here with a contradiction to the history of moving image development where depth, and especially a Bazinian notion of deep focus, has been equated with both realism and democracy, the freedom to choose what to focus one's eyes upon.

Speed also mocks certain concepts of labour. In the adult workplace there is an increasing trend towards rewarding accomplishment rather than hours put in - speed therefore is of the essence. The nature of menial teenage work, on the other hand, is largely based around clock-watching the sluggishly passing time, trying to expend as little effort as possible within it. In this case, then, the teenage cult of speed somewhat ridicules the adult work ethic, converting speed into a leisure concept with more to do with consumption than production. The speed of the "MTV aesthetic" and the computer game does not allow the eye to rest. A re-formulation of the work/leisure dichotomy is undergone whereby leisure warrants more attention than labour rather than acting as an anodyne after the gruelling working day.

This restlessness is one of speed's most captivating qualities. Stanley comments:

> The importance of speed and movement - of being nomadic - has been identified in the sense that to move is to be unstable and to deny order and fixity, from which reference in a strategy of control can be exercised. But speed and movement also deny order and fixity in the sense of constantly re-negotiating particular spaces. Ordered spaces can be disrupted and plunged into disorder... These are events which seek not to territorialize or colonize particular spaces, but rather temporarily to reconstitute and reconfigure particular spatial forms and then move on. (Chris Stanley "Urban Narratives of Dissent in the Wild Zone" in Redhead, 1997: 52)

Deleuze and Guattari emphasize an important point about the nature and necessity of speed:

> There is no structure, any more than there is genesis. There are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed... Nothing develops, but things arrive late or early, and form this or that assemblage depending on their compositions of speed. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996: 266)

This situation is particularly pertinent to the teenage condition; it realigns instability so that it may be beneficial, blurs the lines to the point of adult indecipherability and, as with the concomitant preference for structural repetition in the "MTV aesthetic", undermines the importance of "getting there" by glorifying the means rather than the end.

The rendition of space into place within moving image art forms is traditionally achieved through a steady narrative and a solidity of spatial rendition which counteracts any discontinuity the editing process may bestow upon it. None of these attributes are common to

the "MTV aesthetic", something which may be seen as advantageous by its fans: the denial of space and all its restrictive implications. This is not to say that this is a zone of freedom, but maybe that it is sold as such, as an exclusive realm, yet firmly ensconced in the commercial sphere. The following comment from Virilio is both questionable and compelling in its concordance with teen utopianism: "Territory has lost its significance in favor of the projectile. *In fact, the strategic value of the non-place of speed has definitely supplanted that of place*, and the question of possession of Time has revived that of territorial appropriation." (Virilio, 1986: 133) Although I am not in accordance with Virilio's movement away from the socio-political importance of space, his idea of the obliteration of space may prove fecund. Within the more specific context of the teenage restrictions of space, its denial, the creation of a "non-place of speed", or even an unsurveyed blurred movement between regulated zones, seems advantageous. However, this is all formulated in relation to the controls exerted upon their use of and access to concrete space and herein lies the paradox of these philosophies.

The teenage appropriation of speed dwells close to the tread mill and the supermarket: enhanced speed, after all, requires more fuel, greater consumption. These usages of speed are staged subversion within the domains of capitalism, small scale assertions of difference expressed through the lure of the commercial. Such strategies are appealing from a position of no real ownership or control, but a heightened knowledge of the marketplace: these subjects being neither dupes nor revolutionaries.

Thus we see youth not as oppositional in market terms, but as a marketable notion of opposition. As ever, the identities of youth cultures are largely centred around the consumption of various carefully chosen items (the construction of a taste culture) in which speed and pop music are currently still proving enduring. Here it is the use of a visual insinuation of speed, the glaring obviousness of a contemporary pop soundtrack and the subordination of the gaze to the whims of the music industry's promotional strategies which offer, through exploitative means evident to almost all involved, a strangely solid sense of self which differs from what is similarly fixed as "adult" as its defining point of opposition.

That this obstructive incentive to polarise (adult: teen, deep: shallow, slow: fast, classical: pop and so on) should stall in the middle of two-way traffic is telling in its revelation of the conservatism of certain aesthetic value systems - not least that of the teen. Yet surely it is best not to ignore the actual fluidity of the formal developments I have highlighted, especially as they may unbalance a formal hierarchy which privileges the gaze-driven narrative when contemporary cinema may be accenting other qualities? Evidently there is, whether we like it or not, a shift in the emphases of certain films and denigrating them does nothing to further our understanding of how the film industry implicates meaning and subjecthood at present.

Beyond industrial particularities, there has only recently been an echo of these aims in the academic treatment of the "high concept" film, a category in which one could place *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*'s look and musical sound, if not its language (Lewis (1998) and Neale and Smith (1998) in particular move outwards from economic specificity into examinations of viewer subjecthood) . These commercial packages which eschew narrative centrality for a deliberately catchy and depthless surface (where Shakespeare's play fits in here is a moot point) evidently "mean" more than corporate profit. Even on that level, though, the manufacture of a plethora of potentially purchasable fetish goods defies a logic bred of closer readings of filmic circumscription and suture. If these texts are fractured, it may be so we have a diverse range of (commercially exploitable) paths to follow: we can buy more information, a more sustained gaze at the stars and so on. Film Studies is still struggling to

devise an analytical strategy which can read such "decentring" as neither an ineffectual shortcoming, nor a liberating embrace of postmodern flux.

That this means of identity configuration, of (inter)textual reference is increasingly the norm in mainstream cinema (and indeed it has always been present) should surely not lead us to exhaustedly bemoan the passing of a more standard understanding of quality - be that in terms of a steady visual track, obliging non-diegetic music or a privileging of narrative over other filmic elements. Our neglect of these movies may allow us to retain various premises about cinema and its audiences, but such (perhaps unconscious) attempts at an immobilising grasp of cinema will forever be eluded by the slippery celerity of films themselves. It is this complex multiplicity of meaning and its breadth of reference and origin (I have only just begun to define a single formal preference) which challenges our current understanding of what a film text might be, in these instances by taking into account both teen signification and musical semantics.

If nothing else, the relentless invocation of rhythm in these movies (editorial and musical) brings to mind the ticking of a clock which may serve to remind us that our concepts of the gaze are growing old and maybe a little too weak to rule supreme. Our most pressing task must be the invention of methodologies for contemplating how these newer types of film help construct different classes of viewers and consumers - surely questions paramount to Film Studies' agenda anyway. Closing our eyes won't make these aesthetic conditions go away, especially if the soundtrack is so insistently and noisily present.

Yet, while the "MTV aesthetic" should not be read as either schizophrenic visual disjointedness or a volley of "meaningless" music, our definition of it in these terms may play straight into "their" hands. After all, perhaps the most potent rallying call and deliberate distancing device used by teens is the phrase "you just don't understand!"

Appendices

Appendix One: Many of the most persuasive, though unfortunately brief treatments come from journalists such as Brophy (1998) and popular music academics such as Frith (1988 and 1998). The former is evidently limited by the dictates of journalistic word count while the latter, despite the enticing comments he often makes, seems too dedicated to other projects to spend prolonged time in this area. More solidly declared Film Studies writers often flinch away from the soundtrack altogether, reluctant to claim mastery of that most esoteric of cultural objects - music. The seminal academic texts in the area of film sound make only passing reference to the non-classical soundtrack; the more reactionary of which are simply pointing and laughing or bemoaning the degeneration of the film industry's attitude towards scoring. Limbacher's collection (1974) does not really tackle the pre-recorded soundtrack; Gorbman (1987) includes only an addendum on popular music soundtracks; Kalinak (1992) makes reference to their challenge to classical form, but fails to critically or semantically evaluate them; and Evans (1975) sees them as inappropriate and largely commercial.

References

Balio, Tino (1998) A major presence in All of the World's Important Markets: the Globalization of Hollywood in the 1990s, in Neale, Steve and Smith, Murray (eds.) *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* London and New York: Routledge, pp. 58-73.

Brophy, Phillip (1998) Blood Music. *The Wire.* no.170, April 1998, p.54.

Chion, Michel (trans. Gorbman, Claudia) (1994) *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen.* New York: Columbia.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (trans. Massumi, Brian) (1996) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* London: Athlone Press.

Doty, Alexander (1988) (Re)New(ed) Conservatism in Film Marketing, *Wide Angle* 10 (2), pp. 70-79.

Evans, Mark (1975) *Soundtrack: The Music of the Movies.* New York: Hopkinson and Blake.

Frith, Simon (1984) Mood Music: An Inquiry Into Narrative Film Music, *Screen* vol. 25, Nov. 3, pp.78-87.

Frith, Simon (1988) Hearing Secret Harmonies, in *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop.* Oxford: Polity Press, pp. 129-140.

Frith, Simon (1998) *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frith, Simon, Goodwin, Andrew et al. (eds.) (1993) *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader.* London and New York: Routledge.

Gay, P. and Negus, Keith (1994) The Changing Site of Sound: Music Retailing and the Composition of Consumers, *Media, Culture and Society,* vol.16, pp. 395-413.

Gorbman, Claudia (1987) *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Goodwin, Andrew (1993) *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture.* London: Routledge.

Kalinak, Kathryn (1992) *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film.* London: University of Wisconsin Press.

Kaplan, E. Ann (1987) *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture.* New York and London: Routledge.

Lewis, J. (ed.) (1998) *The New American Cinema.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Limbacher, J. (ed.) (1974) *Film Music: From Violins to Video.* Metuchen: Scarecrow Press Inc.

Neale, Steve and Smith, Murray (eds) (1998) *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* London and New York: Routledge.

Negus, Keith (1996) *Popular Music and Theory: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Redhead, Steve (ed.) (1997) *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Smith, Jeff (1998) *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Swiss, T., Sloop, J. and Herman, A. (eds) (1998) *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory.* Malden and Oxford: Blackwell.

Timbrell, M. and Tweedie, D. (1998) *Directory of Multinationals Volumes 1 and 2.* London: Waterlow Specialist Information Publishing.

Virilio, Paul (trans. Pollizzotti, M.) (1986) *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology.* New York: Semiotext(e).

Wyatt, Justin (1994) *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Filmography

Batman Forever. Dir. Joel Schumacher. Warner Brothers. 1995.

The Delinquents. Dir. Chris Thomson. Silver Lining Entertainment. 1989.

Desperately Seeking Susan. Dir. Susan Seidelman. Orion Pictures Corporation. 1985.

The Faculty. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Dimension Films. 1998.

Flashdance. Dir. Adrian Lyne. Paramount Pictures Corporation. 1983

The Jazz Singer. Dir. Alan Crosland. Vitaphone Corporation. 1927.

Oklahoma! Dir. Fred Zinneman. Magna Theatre Corporation. 1955.

The People vs Larry Flynt. Dir. Milos Forman. Columbia Pictures Corporation. 1996.

Shanghai Surprise. Dir. Jim Goddard. 1986. Handmade Films. 1986.

The Third Man. Dir. Carol Reed. British Lion Film Corporation. 1949.

Top Gun. Dir. Tony Scott. Paramount Pictures Corporation. 1986.

Under the Cherry Moon. Dir. Prince. Warner Brothers. 1986.

The Wedding Singer. Dir. Frank Coraci. New Line Cinema. 1998.

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. 20th Century Fox. 1996.

Who's That Girl? Dir. James Foley. Warner Brothers. 1987.