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# Film Theory and Criticism Term Paper

## Music On My Mind



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## Music On My Mind – The Use of Music in Film

I've never seen a silent movie. It's not an uncommon thing for a teenager living in the twenty-first century to have never experienced spending a couple of hours in the cinema with complete silence. In this day and age, the sound and music elements in a movie are critical. It would be unimaginable for one to pay almost ten dollars to watch something that had no sound.

Although all the visual aspects of a film that appear on screen are given most of the credit, the music used in the background is the component of the entire movie that seals the deal. Music is the one thing that arouses the strongest emotions in human beings. It has the power to convey any message that is indescribable in words.

A “language without concepts” is what Theodor Adorno calls music in ‘Introduction to the Sociology of Music’ (Kassabian, 2001) and this is supported by Hanns Eisler who states that “music is supposed to bring out the spontaneous, essentially human element in its listeners and in virtually all human relations” in ‘Composing for the Films’ (Kassabian, 2001).

This may be due to the fact that movements and music influence the right side of our brains. We all have feelings, which put us in a vulnerable position to be easily manipulated to feel a certain way about something.

As put by Adorno in reference to the emotional listener, “At times such people may use music as a vessel into which they put their own anguished and, according to psychoanalytical theory, “free-flowing” emotions; at other times they will identify with the music, drawing from it the emotions they miss in themselves.” (Kassabian, (2001)

When it comes to music that is used in a movie and how effectively it contributes to the essence of the film, I can think of no better example than “Ray”. It is a musical

documentary that depicts the trials in blind musician Ray Charles' life when he was struggling to get his music heard by others.

The music selection in the movie is extremely pertinent as the themes and issues shown on the screen are appropriately reflected in the lyrics and tone of the music being played. Of course, it is understood that there is resemblance in the music and events, because Ray was merely putting his thoughts on paper at the same time he was going through his problems.

This is reinforced by the principles of music in classical film as brought up by Claudia Gorbman, "signifier of emotion", "inaudibility", "narrative cueing", "continuity" and "unity" (Kassabian, 2001). The music used in "Ray" is the utmost expression of Ray's point of view and it serves as a good signifier of emotion with a unique twist by having rhythm carry the words along, as compared to the normal monotonous drone of the human voice speaking on its own.

The lyrics in the music also add to the establishment of the setting and characters, acting as referential and narrative cues for the viewer. The scenes in the movie are smoothly transitioned with the help of the music, which provides the audience with a smooth bridge to crossover to the next scene and to ensure continuity.

"The task at hand is to serve the film." Jerry Fielding, composer (Karlin, 1994)

The year is 1948, a time when racial prejudice and discrimination is so blatantly practiced, its stench can be sniffed a hundred miles away. A young black man stands in a deserted part of town in Northern Florida waiting for a bus to Seattle. This is Ray Charles Robinson. Blind yet coloured, he is made to sit in the rear section of the bus alone.

After initially getting discriminated against by the bus driver, the uplifted tune of “Anytime you’re feeling lonely...anytime you feel downhearted... and prove your love for me is true” is played when he gets accepted onto the bus and is somewhat ‘accepted into society’ briefly. The music is a reflection of his mood and state of mind as he embarks on the long journey ahead.

This music then transitions from being a non-diegetic piece, to a diegetic one as its timbre changes from a richer feel to a more hollow sound (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001). It takes form of the music being played on the radio in the bus, when the change takes place; a shot of the radio comes up on screen.

In contrast to the analyses of Gorbman and Kathryn Kalinak, who suggest that film music can be categorised within a dichomous schema- having only diegetic or non-diegetic present in any particular film (Kassabian, 2001). The music used and presented in Ray straddles the line between diegetic and non-diegetic many times throughout the course of the film.

David Shumway further discusses this, in relation to the music in ‘American Graffiti’ (1973), as a technique employed to make the viewer “assume a movie’s quasi-diegetic origin” and concluding “the line between diegetic and non-diegetic (music) is impossible to establish” (Kassabian, 2001).

The first ever performance from Ray that we witness is light-hearted and fun. It shows his innocence and ignorance as his managers Gossie and Marlene are discussing how ‘green’ he is. Then another song comes up, in a montage of his sold out

performances in the McSon Trio, that goes “Monkey thought everything was all square...” “straighten up and fly right”. Ray is being used by Marlene and is not getting his fair share of the money, he is the ‘monkey’ that has to straighten up and fly right.

Afterward, just as he’s starting to realise the manipulation and is getting angry, a fan walks by and hums “cool down papa, don’t you blow your top...” from that very same song and he calms down. He then recalls back to when his mother, Aretha Robinson, was getting cheated and paid less for washing laundry too, an instance of parallelism in the film.

The background music is fast and buoyant as Ray listens to Art Tatum playing live in a bar in Los Angeles. He reminisces to when he first started to learn how to play the piano, the beat and rhythm of the piece he learned is similar to what Art Tatum is playing now.

The change in tempo build of the music in the LA scene shows the geographical influences (Karin, 1994) music can have, it characterised the location of the scene just by the type of sound heard.

When Ray is performing with in a band, the music they play is catchy with merry lyrics like “come on down, your daddy’s in the heart of town”. However, when he’s left out of the celebrations afterwards, he plays a bluesy tune as an expression of his feelings.

A new song is introduced and played over in the foreground “everyday I have the blues...”, “bad luck and trouble people, you know I had my share”, “ain’t nobody worried about me, nobody crying, crying for me”. The words speak volumes about how he has to fend for himself against racism and being blind. It hints that through these trials, he gets stronger and it builds his character.

Not long after, "Baby let me hold your hand" is played and Ray is shown picking women with small wrists to have fun with. This is also poignant as he recalls back to when his mother taught him how to handle going blind.

"I Got A Woman" marks Ray Charles' first foray into a new genre of music. By mixing gospel music with R&B, Ray invented Soul. He wrote this for Della Bea Antwine, the woman he had fallen in love with and eventually married. This marks a turning point in his life, as he excels in music and love.

The song is played while they are shown getting married, and the words "knows a woman's place, is right there in her home..." are heard just as he is carrying her into their house. This then transitions to another song "Hallelujah, I just love her so" with the happy couple in bed, right before the audience hears "let me tell ya bout a girl I know, she's a baby and she lives next door...".

Ironically, "I Got A Woman" takes on a negative significance when Bea finds Ray's drugs and is told by him to stay at home, revealing his opinions about how "a woman's place is (right there) in her home".

After we come recover from the earlier scene, we only hear Mary Ann Fisher's voice, over a black screen, singing "it brings a tear to my eyes, when I begin to realise" just after Ray's conflict with Bea. After hearing Mary Ann, Ray brings his own rendition of the song and sings it with more soul, making it more heartfelt, "I've cried so much, well since you've gone, drowning in my own tears..." another significant indication of his state of mind at that point. This is also marks the start of his downward spiral with adultery and drugs.

When Ray starts getting romantic with another woman, the music in the background immediately lowers and sounds more mysterious and sinister. It has a bass-like low pitch that is fitting with the situation.

The picture soon transitions into a montage of Ray being a new father while committing adultery at the same time, with a song he wrote for Mary Ann playing in the background the entire time. We hear “hello Mary Ann, you sure look fine, oh Mary Ann, I could love you all the time...”, “don’t you know I love you so...” all happening while we see Ray carrying his newborn baby.

It’s ironic to see all the fatherly things he takes so much pride in doing while singing about his mistress. His straddling between two women and his two roles shows that he has changed from being the ‘monkey’ that was used by others, to the puppeteer that pulls the strings and uses others.

The irony continues as he sings “if you don’t want to, you don’t have to get in trouble...”, “well, I know you are a playboy, got women all over town, if you sweet talk my women, I’ll lay your body down, better leave my woman alone”, one can’t help but put a smile on one’s face because the satire in his lyrics is so brilliantly edited into the movie.

1957, I sensed a drastic change in the pace of the music; the piano is played slower and more subdued, as Mary Ann gets jealous of the backup singers. Of course, being the genius that he is, Ray easily manages to please his band with a solo part and new arrangements on his song that is light beat and fast. Thus, the dispute is swiftly solved. After all, this genius loves his company!

Well things cannot always be smooth sailing for this master of his art, as he moves on from woman to woman and neglects them one by one, Mary Ann decides to leave as she’s had enough.

The timing of this music piece is impeccable, as the words go “what kind of man are you?”, “why do I love you so, when you love me no more, I just can’t satisfy, no matter how I try, I’m always left alone” and the performance ends with the announcer saying “Miss Mary Ann Fisher, ladies and gentlemen!” at the exact moment Mary Ann



smashes Ray's windscreen in with a brick, and we never see her again. The clever editing created a cheeky tone and brought out comedy in the midst of drama.

Once again his art imitates life as Margie, Ray's new girl, takes over Mary Ann's place in his life and in his performances. With that spontaneity present in his arrangements, this musician is able to churn out twenty minutes of fresh and unrehearsed award-worthy material at the flick of his wrist. The chemistry that the entire band shares is top notch, as everyone is able to chime in miraculously to create a beautiful sound without any prior notice. It shows that the members of the band are all at the same place musically.

Naturally, "What I'd Say" is released and makes impressions on all the charts in 1959. "Make me feel so good...", "make me feel alright..." indicate that he's on a roll and the movie picks up speed alongside his musical successes.

Ray fans celebrate for a few seconds before we are once again sucked back into the emotional whirlpool that stems from the root of past mistakes. Here, another melody is aptly played over Margie's phone conversation with her lover.

The perfect timing of "one of these days and it won't be long, you're gonna look for me and I'll be gone...", "cos I believe, I believe right now, you're trying to make a fool of me". As Margie starts to rebel and cause trouble, I can't help but notice that the tune of this track is strangely familiar to the Elvis Presley hit "If you're looking for Trouble". I'm not sure if this was purely a coincidence, or a subtle example of a musical reference to the music industry, with Elvis as The King and Ray Charles as the innovator of Soul.

Smarting up from his past monetary experiences, Ray moves from Atlantic Records to ABC for a better deal and records "Georgia On My Mind" revealing a totally different sound that is mellow in comparison with his previous works.

This move leads to accusations that he has lost his rhythm and gone middle-of-the-road. He is also warned by Quincy Jones to not return to Georgia because of the

racism and segregation. Frustrated and emotional, he composes "Hit The Road, Jack" in the middle of a heated argument with Margie. The big band takes over as the polished version is performed live at a classy joint.

"Unchain My Heart" is introduced to the audience after Ray returns from his incident in Augusta, Georgia. Singing "Unchain my heart, baby let me be. Cos you don't care about me, oh baby set me free.", "I'm under your spell, like a man in a trance.", "Unchain my heart, let me go my way.", we all feel his exasperation and know that he's pouring his heart out into his music.

Further insight could argue that he is having a heavy heart towards the way coloured people are being treated in his hometown, and that the drugs are holding him down and not setting him free because he's jailed in a 'drug cell'. His battle with heroin floats to the surface when he gets caught and cornered with reporters.

The most eventful scene in this movie for me was the one in 1962 at a theatre in St Louis. When the stage lights dim and the spotlight hits Ray, it portrayed a turning point in the attitudes of the people in his audience and signified the most powerful gesture music is capable of manipulating; the turning of emotions.

I was impressed when Ray Charles wanted to share his past, through his love for country music, with a rowdy audience, but I was blown away when he was able to turn negativity into appreciation with just his music. Maybe the words "I just can't stop loving you...to live in memory of the lonesome times" sealed the deal.

It is also comforting to see Ray recollecting his past as he sings "I can't stop wanting you, it's useless to say, so I'll just live my life, in dreams of yesterday, those happy hours, that we once knew...heals a broken heart, when time stood still, since we've been apart." This would have been a nice place to end the show on, but we all know that the history of Ray beating his drug addiction has not yet graced the screen.

As we witness Ray suffering in rehabilitation, we can also hear him 'narrating' with his music on how "my(his) mother told me(him) 'son when I'm gone, don't forget to pray, cos there'll be hard times, who knows better than I'".

Slow dramatic music with strings and an instrumental feel to it assist in setting the stage of pain, suffering and misery. This helps to bring the audience into his mind and along with him in the road to recovery as he recollects all the pain he went through in his life. A signature tune of Ray's music is played as he's hallucinating and battling his demons of childhood brings this chapter to a close.

An uplifting piece of music takes centre stage as Ray gets his salvation, is enlightened and unchained from his past demons. I'm fairly certain that everyone in the audience felt a tinge of pride for Ray Charles as a montage of his accomplishments over the next forty years is presented on the big screen, especially after witnessing the brutal journey he had to endure to get what he wanted.

The uphill climb of events to the climax ends when Ray's battle against segregation in Georgia ends in triumph. As "Georgia On My Mind" is announced as the official state song of Georgia on March 7 1979, Ray Charles' distinctive raspy voice is heard once again as he sings the film out,

"Every time I sing this song, I sing for, Georgia. The whole day through."

Ray Charles 1930-2004

The essence of the film is established early on in the opening credits as we see Ray at his happiest, doing what he does best. The tone is threaded through the entire film with great skill and closely depicts the emotions of this musical legend during his musical career.

Unlike most movies, the songs featured were seldom played as a backdrop to the visuals on screen; the music always found a way of imprinting its presence and took form dominantly in the storytelling aspect.

This film was a wonderful example of a “film carried by the sound track” (Proferes, 2001), and showed good conceptualisation of the movie. This was possible as the entire film was based on the music of Ray Charles and having sound and music in a conceptual category (Proferes, 2001), made it easier for the director to follow his angle to the story.

The music in this movie was almost like the shadow of Ray Charles taking the form of another (unseen or non-visible) character and helping to bring the viewer along this musical documentary.

It served as a good segue between scenes and the fact that the lyrics to the songs bear strong resemblances to the events happening on screen, instigates the viewer to appreciate this piece of motion picture history on a level previously unimaginable.

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COMM 1032 – Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema

Assessment Task 2

QN 11: “My comedy is sadistic.” – Blake Edwards

“whenever I do a joke, I always investigate to see if there is a topper, and if there is, a topper to the topper.” – Blake Edwards

Test these claims regarding comic cruelty and ‘topping the topper’ by examining **any two** of the following films: *SOB*; *Victor/Victoria*, and *Switch*. (Your discussion will include close textual analysis of **two scenes** from **each** of your selected films.)

This essay will analyse the notion of comic cruelty with regards to Blake Edwards’s take on his comedy being sadistic, as well as his tendency to push the envelope of his jokes to its greatest extent by exploring all perceivable avenues of extending his gags; exhausting all options in his attempts to top the topper. The two films chosen for contextual study are *Victor/Victoria* (1982) and *Switch* (1991).

Jerry Palmer addresses the definitions of writing, milking and topping gags before finally topping the toppers. He explains the principle behind it being that “each stage in the development of the gag builds on the previous one and each is calculated to produce an increment in laughter, creating a crescendo effect. Moreover, gags could be arranged in sequence, perhaps with different gag series intertwined in such a way as to give increments in laughter over a more extended period.” (p. 111)

The first example from *Victor/Victoria* (1982) is the scene where Victoria goes to a French restaurant to have a big meal she does not intend to pay for. The focus of this scene revolves around her conversation with Toddy and the waiter. Victoria's hunger gag is obvious from the beginning when she enters and ogles over the dessert on display, this is continued with the waiter thinking if she had a dog with her because she finished her food in no time. She then proceeds to take a swig of wine before the waiter has even finished pouring wine into glass. This gag runs throughout the scene and keeps building with each action, ending with Victoria picking food off the plate while the waiter is clearing it.

The subtlety of the running jokes in this sequence that focus on Victoria's hunger is well executed and befitting for a medium like film, where "the entire style is based upon the assumption of an audience carefully watching every moment, not distractedly looking away and merely listening to some parts." (Lehman & Luhr, p. 242)

The arrogance of the work staff in the restaurant drives another train of gags, as they do not hold back their displeasure towards customers. Victoria's waiter has a disgruntled demeanour when serving, and dumps plates heavily onto the table. The manager closes the menu in an agitated manner when Toddy fails to order a substantial food item.

An example of where Edwards tries to 'top the topper' in this scene, comes from the challenges and insults Toddy and the waiter exchange between them. Toddy's remark about the wine not being up to par, leads to the topic of comparing waiters to a horse's arse. Momentum starts building with the first insult from Toddy, telling the waiter to fetch him the wine list, and continues escalating as he insults the wine comparing it to a horse's specimen. Toddy's remark about the horse costume with two waiters in it was an example of milking the gag, and the line "It is a wise man who knows when to throw in the towel" is the topping of the gag. Finally the waiter's response "and it is a moron who gives advice to a horse's arse" seals the deal and tops the topper Edwards style. This was in his own words how "you carry it on; you *compound* the joke" (Kennedy, p. 26), providing evidence of how he is seemingly never satisfied with standalone jokes, and it always investigating ways of further prolonging the gag, using up all credit whenever possible.

The final scene in *Victor/Victoria* (1982) is a strong example of how Blake Edwards infuses comic cruelty into his scenes and manipulates the physical comedy onscreen to provide an endless stream of gags.

We start looking at the scene from the middle of Toddy's performance on stage, at this point after establishing the irony of his maleness and awkwardness in the female costume, the performance carries on with Toddy clumsily trotting around in his heels, not being nifty or nimble enough to keep up with the choreography and timing. With broken fan in hand, Toddy tries his best to move around the stage but crudely yanks and tosses



the remains of his shredded costume around. The scene gets to a point where the cruelty toward the characters on stage are so evident in the physical comedy, and people are falling all over each other, making a farce of the whole performance.

The remnants of Edwards's 'topping-the-topper' traits are peppered all throughout this scene. He builds up the gag by having the matador try to compensate for Toddy's burlesque physique, which leads to him tripping over the water fountain and falling to the floor. To draw out the gag, Toddy struggles to limp across the stage and proceeds to take out the entire line of male backup dancers with one shove at the hip. Toddy remarks 'Is that it?' when only a third of the dancers recover, further topping the gag. The topper is topped when Toddy leans on one side of the line and is too heavy for the backup dancers to support him. He falls to the floor with no assistance, and remarks 'You Bitches!' to the rest of the line, exhibiting Edwards's habitual portraying of comic cruelty in his films and the constant satisfying of the urge for an abundance of jokes that extend the existence of the one before it.

He constantly hammers home his take on the stark differences between men and women, through the exhibition of multiple jokes that serve as constant reiteration of his desire and habit of wanting to exhaust all comedic potential of that moment.

The first scene I chose from *Switch* (1991) is the one where Amanda and Walter are playing pool at a bar, run into trouble with some guys and start an all-out bar brawl. The

fight begins with tongue-in-cheek irony as Amanda attacks the guy's crotch first, knowing full well the vulnerability of that weak point; she takes advantage of her position as a woman to inflict pain on her target. This happens again when she makes use of her heels, a representation of femininity in society, to stomp down on her attacker's shoe.

Much of the comedy in this scene relies on the characters' physicality and the irony of unrealistic cruelty applied to everyone in the scene. The action onscreen flows from the main characters involved in the conflict to unsuspecting bystanders. This is a strong example of how Blake Edwards displays his signature 'topping-the-topper' style and aesthetic in film. Multiple punches are thrown in sequential rhythm and the kinetic energy from one person will get passed on to a chain of at least two more people. For example, Amanda gets grabbed from behind, she uses her heels to ward off her attacker and receives help from another party, but it doesn't matter, she proceeds to turn around and assault him too; it's a free-for-all in Edwards's world.

The simplicity of throwing a straightforward, lone, single punch doesn't seem enough for Edwards, who emphasises, more than once, his desire to showcase an unintended blow; that is a blow ultimately landing on someone else other than who it was originally intended for. An example of this would be the action of one person ducking to avoid a swing, only to have it land on someone else.

Andrew Sarris addresses the level of comic cruelty in Edwards's material, which goes against the normal notion that audiences are willing to laugh if they know no one is

actually getting hurt, by writing “Blake Edwards is one writer-director who has got some of his biggest laughs out of jokes that are too gruesome for most horror films” (p.92).

Edwards’s defence to this exists in his own belief that an author or director can smuggle what he wants to express under the guise of laughter because “comedy can attack your prejudices and undermine your defences” (Kennedy, p. 28). He uses this reasoning to push the limits of physical abuse onscreen to the extent that is sometimes construed as sadistic. Edwards promotes the notion that there is more tolerance for cruelty in comedy because this genre is further removed from reality than others, and thus does not carry the same weight and should not bear the same consequences.

Edwards also brings to attention the juxtaposition of male-female roles during the bar brawl. Amanda portrays the physicality of a man in a woman’s body when she is able to fend off the two men attacking the bartender, throwing aside the expectations and meanings attached to gender roles by society. In true Edwards fashion, Blake continues to build on the comedy of the scene by playing up the irony of Amanda as a woman defeating two men, before eventually getting taken out with a single punch courtesy of another woman. This was only made possible after Amanda lowered her guard (probably forgot and reverted back to Steve’s mindset) to check if the other woman was okay.

This whole sequence that ended with Amanda being punched behind the bar and Walter landing in the foreground exhibited, through the use of physical comedy, Edwards’s ‘Topping-the-Topper’ practices to a great extent. It also demonstrates “the acritical

understanding and employment of the terms “man”, “woman” and “body” and how “comic relief results when these terms are inverted”. (Namaste, p. 48)

The second scene chosen from *Switch* (1991) revolves around Amanda and Walter waking up in bed beside each other, the confusion around Walter’s missing shorts and the revelation that they had sex with each other the night before. This is an example of how Edwards sets out to ‘top-the-topper’; he lays the tracks and starts the train of thought rolling by having Amanda do a double-take to see who she shared her bed with before shrugging it off with an ‘Oh yeah’ remark.

Edwards then proceeds to escalate the situation by introducing more elements of conflict, and draws out the bit by showing the delayed reaction from Amanda who realises that Walter’s butt cheeks are exposed. The action of showing Walter actually having to look down when questioned about not wearing any shorts and Amanda’s growing anxiety, added on to the momentum of the scene and milked the gag. The line where Walter says he doesn’t remember the exact moment he lost his shorts builds to the ‘topper’ of Walter eventually revealing they made love. Of course, Edwards has to end the scene and ‘top-the-topper’ by having Amanda punch Walter in the face, employing the use of physical comedy again to extract laughs from his audience.

From all these examples, we can also observe that Blake Edwards approaches comedy from both verbal and physical aspects. The amount of puns and play on words in the dialogue is not sparse and the physical comedy onscreen is unavoidable.

The restaurant scene in *Victor/Victoria* (1982) contained jokes that mostly exist in the verbal form with the characters exchanging snide remarks and speaking in accusatory manner towards each other. The lyrical delivery of verbal comedy shares the stage with some physical comedy in the final scene of the film where Toddy performs in Victoria's place.

In comparison, the bar fight scene in *Switch* (1991) displayed physical comedy in the most brazen manner; with hardly any dialogue present, the characters onscreen just go at it with no holds barred. Not surprisingly, Edwards still manages to come through with a series of jokes that boast an extended lifespan; reminding the audience that he is still an experienced practitioner and a master at 'topping-the-topper'.

Taking these two films into consideration, along with the rest of the Edwards filmic collection, it isn't difficult to spot the common thread that exists throughout the comedy in his work. The numerous occasions where jokes in his films are multiplied, prolonged and finally end up in a completely different place than where they started, attest to the fact that Edwards does fulfil his claims of always investigating ways to 'top-the-topper'.

He is also not afraid to test the waters and push the boundaries with regard to his display of and affectionate relationship with showcasing onscreen comic cruelty. The nature of his dark humour, and his tendency to want to explore more ways of extending a joke, can often lead him into the violently extreme territory that physical comedy allows, answering the claims of his comedy being sadistic to a great extent.

(Word Count: 2138)

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This article by Harlan Kennedy explores the comedy tactics employed by Blake Edwards drawing relations to *S.O.B.*, *10* and *Victor/Victoria*. Providing insight into Edwards' history and his relationship to the film studios, the article reveals the background and shows why bitterness was a driving factor in the comedy of his films. It also exposes the reader to Edwards's stance that an author can get away with displays of cruelty because comedy undermines one's defences, and works towards justifying the sadistic nature of his comedy.

Lehman, Peter & Luhr, William. 'Victor/Victoria' Thinking About Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying. (Second Edition) Blackwell Publishing: Malden (USA) / Oxford (UK) / Melbourne / Berlin, 2003

This article dissects the visual style that Blake Edwards employs with particular reference to the film *Victor/Victoria*. The filmic aesthetics studied include camera movement, stage direction, cutting patterns and the use of onscreen and offscreen space. It explains how this style of comedy is suited to the attention-grabbing medium of film, where the viewer watching and taking note of every detail onscreen.

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The chapter 'Humour and Narrative Structure' breaks down the process of topping a gag and topping the topper to the gag. It sheds light on audience reactions and attitudes towards comedy in different mediums and explains the different degrees of laughter that audiences experience when watching comedy onscreen. It writes about the function, existence and place of jokes within a narrative structure.

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COMM1035 – ASIAN CINEMAS

ASSESSMENT TASK 1 – INFERNAL AFFAIRS

QN 1 – PRESS/CRITICAL RECEPTION & MARKETING

*Infernal Affairs* was a Hong Kong film about two characters on opposing sides of the law being made to go undercover and feed information back to their original bosses. Directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, this 2002 thriller gained international acclaim and was credited with the honour of reviving the Hong Kong cinema industry.

According to BBC News, “Hong Kong's film industry suffered a sharp slump of 17%, and an even bigger decrease in profits from home-produced movies in 2002” and added that the industry saw a revival towards to end of the year when “home-grown thriller [*Infernal Affairs*] emerged victorious, taking the most money during 2002.”

It also garnered tons of awards at various events such as the 2003 Hong Kong Film Awards, 2003 Hong Kong Film Critics Society Awards, 2003 Golden Horse Film Festival and the 2003 Golden Bauhinia Awards amongst others.

According to an article from The Wall Street Journal published in the Australian Financial Review in 2003, “*Infernal Affairs* was the top-grossing Hong Kong film of 2002, with box-office takings hitting \$US 7.7 million” (Mazurkewich, 2003) in it’s local market alone. *Infernal Affairs* proved itself to be a significant piece of work that would break records and make its mark in cinematic history.

The strategy employed by the directors and producers of the film to cast a long list of A-list talents renowned not only in the Asian region but in some western markets

as well, proved to be a major contribution that greatly propelled the film's promotion and marketing campaigns. The casting of prominent figures such as Andy Lau, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Anthony Wong, Eric Tsang and Sammi Cheng alongside younger talent such as Edison Chen, Shawn Yue, Kelly Chen and Elva Hsiao, reassured the film's mass appeal to audiences, capturing both of the younger and older demographics.

The posters released by the distribution companies featured impressive taglines "Betrayal Is Business As Usual" and appraisals from esteemed publications and reviewers like The New York Times boasting that the movie was "A beautifully shot and intricate story of loyalty and betrayal. Signals a new era of Hong Kong filmmaking." (Internet movie poster awards gallery, 2004)

The posters also feature a significant scene in the film where the two lead characters are on the rooftop of a modern building in the midst of a standoff, while the film's narrative reaches a climax. This example relates to Wyatt's note of advertising becoming a "medium of expression [that] is fundamental to the very construction of high-concept films". (Wyatt, 1994, p. 23)

*Infernal Affairs* was also on the receiving end of a whole slew of great reviews, one of which, written by Mark Pilkington, states, "Probably the best thriller to emerge from Hong Kong since the glory days of John Woo, *Infernal Affairs* is right up there with classics of the genre such as *Heat*, *The French Connection* and *Serpico*." (Pilkington, 2004, p. 42) Prominent film reviewer Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times also gave his stamp of approval by writing "The movie pays off in a kind of emotional complexity rarely seen in crime movies." (Ebert, 2004)

The abovementioned reviews only represented a fraction of all the critical acclaim

this Hong Kong action cop thriller received worldwide. These impressive accomplishments caught the attention of movie international movie distributors such as Miramax, which has acquired the rights to *Infernal Affairs* for distribution in the United States. (Reynaud, 2005) Brad Pitt and Warner Bros Pictures also reportedly paid \$US1.75 million for the rights to remake the film. (Mazurkewich, 2003)

The reasons for the positive critical acclaim and healthy reception from global audiences towards *Infernal Affairs* are plentiful. The culturally universal themes explored in the movie are able to appeal to global markets relatively well. For example, the “cop/criminal relations; codes of honour among thieves, patterns of undercover investigation; importance of urban settings; ineffectuality of the justice system; foreign or exotic settings” (Kleinhans, 2003, p. 170), “are embodied most acutely in key moments that depict gunfights and their aftermath.” (Kleinhans, 2003, p. 170) The exploration and use of these themes not only present stylistic elements that mainstream audiences have become accustomed to and tend to be well-received, they also reinforce the film’s rightful occupancy in a certain action/thriller genre.

The portrayal of stylistic elements such as the Mexican standoff, where several characters are caught in a tense situation with guns drawn on each other in close proximity, which is similarly staged in the rooftop scene between Lau and Leung’s characters, works to reinforce and draw relation to a variety of action genre films from other countries. The “depiction of policeman and criminal as being virtually indistinguishable human beings, a staple theme in John Woo’s oeuvre” (Rist, 2007, p. 161) was another culturally universal theme employed in the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy in 2003.

Even though these themes were widespread, they still remained within the boundaries of Hong Kong and Chinese culture, reinforcing its appeal to the local audience. The film opens with a visual narrative from the 'Nirvana Sutra' about the "worst of the Eight Hells (being) called the Continuous Hell" (Lau & Mak, 2002) referring to continuous suffering. In the film's opening scene, Eric Tsang's character prays to Buddha and preaches to his young compatriots about loyalty to the gang and sacrifices that have to be made for the greater good.

One reason why *Infernal Affairs* was a hit in vastly different markets was because this film steered clear of the over-the-top action and drama previously embodied in typical Hong Kong cinema. As written in David Bordwell's 'Planet Hong Kong', "Hollywood is unusually fastidious about realism of detail, restraint of emotion, and plausibility of plot." (Bordwell, 2000, p.19)

Therefore, in opting to use slick, stylised cinematography, with the enlistment of internationally acclaimed talent like renowned cinematographer Christopher Doyle, and fast-paced, plot-heavy narration, this film was allowed a greater opportunity to entice and draw appreciation from global audiences.

These strategies proved successful, as response from the press and critics was generally positive; Leigh Paatsch writes in the Herald Sun about the "sizeable influence of Australian-born cinematographer Christopher Doyle" working with the directors "on *Infernal Affairs*' gritty look and audacious camera moves." (Vic Metro) (2004) Mark Pilkington also writes that the city of Hong Kong, with its "chrome, glass and mirrored surfaces are brilliantly reflected in the restrained but expressive cinematography." (Pilkington, 2004, p.42)

Proudly touted by critics, the intense narrative of *Infernal Affairs* “captures the grinding tension and tedious detail of the lives of both cop and criminal” (Loving, 2004), “building tension and suspense, so that when the bullets do finally do fly, the sudden rush of adrenalin comes as a blessed relief.” (Pilkington, 2004, p.42)

As Hong Kong filmmakers strive for global distribution and international success, they tend to make films that can charm audiences in the United States market. Due to the fact that this is the most lucrative and largest market in the world, a “hit film in the United States accrues value in other international and ancillary markets.” (Walsh, 2007, p.167) The fees paid by Hollywood studios for the remaking rights of a movie, are also an added incentive to cater to the appetite of that particular market of consumption.

Despite drawing obvious criticism for straying away from national identity and lacking a certain level of ‘Asian-ness’, an increasing number of “East Asian films aimed at commercial success now have a built-in “remaking mentality”, which self consciously measures the films against Hollywood standard and actively exercises self-censorship.” (Xu, 2004)

Andrew Lau himself acknowledges that “*Infernal Affairs* is deeply affected by Hollywood, and reminiscent of a Michael Mann thriller” and is “keen to see what Hollywood proper will do with the remake.” (Hawker, 2003)

It certainly helps that global audiences are now also more attuned to Asian cinematic offerings, “from the prominence of auteurist art cinema from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea in the early 1990s to the mainstreaming of cult tastes in Asian genre films (primarily from Hong Kong and Japan) by the end of the decade, Asian cinema has been an increasingly familiar regional presence on the horizon for moviegoers

in the United States.” (Lim, 2007, p. 121)

This is further supported by the argument that “U.S. independent upstart directors such as Quentin Tarantino recirculate Hong Kong action elements”, “borrowing Hong Kong style and imagination to invigorate U.S. commercial cinema.” (Kleinhans, 2003, p. 168)

The successes of movies made by Hong Kong directors, and the increasing reception of Hong Kong films by the global audience, serve as “further evidence of this once-vibrant local industry’s absorption into the realm of ‘world cinema’.” (Leary, 2003)

The transnational culture present in Asian cinemas today has been crucial in the provision of international opportunities for films regarded in this category. As “action films are envisioned as having a potential international audience” (Ciecko, 1997, p.231), the overall impact and presence of infernal affairs of the film industry on a global level, has proven it to be a highly exportable product.

(Word Count: 1501)

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## Hot Box (Article on Local TV Programming)

“It seems today, that all you see is violence in movies and sex on TV...” -  
Lois Griffin

No truer words were ever sung by a suburban housewife in the middle of fictional town Quahog. This sentiment rings true right on our tiny island of Singapore, half a world away. More often than not, when you turn on your living room window to the world, you’ re immediately standing over a dead body at the scene, or processing the evidence in a slick, fast-paced, goggle-wearing montage set to set to a cool, new-age soundtrack. That, or you’ re following Kui Jien and Jade on some exciting conquest around our tiny island.

With titles of local productions like ‘*Whacked Out Sports*’ , ‘*Sports@SG*’ , ‘*Unexpected Access*’ and ‘*Behind Closed Doors*’ you can expect to watch exactly that; lots of local sports emphasis in anticipation of the YOG (Youth Olympics) later this year, and the ever increasing yearn to do what is not allowed, and boldly go where no man (or woman in Andrea de Cruz’ s case) has gone before. Of course, it shouldn’ t surprise anyone that there has been a strong presence of the crime theme in the early episodes. I suppose what happens to people in their everyday lives doesn’ t seem that interesting or appealing anymore.

Gone are the days where character-driven dramas (like *Brothers & Sisters*, *Gilmore Girls*, *One Tree Hill*, *Grey’ s Anatomy* etc.) that revolve around the themes of Family, Friendship and Romance, ruled the telly and brought weepies back every week. We’ re living in the times of the one-hour procedural that systematically and robotically formulates the solving of a crime within forty-odd minutes of introducing several characters one will never see back again on the same programme.

The ratings seem to point to the fact that audiences love these self-contained episodes that rarely bleed into each other, leaving no room for the usual twists that are topics of conversation that next day. So cliff-hangers beware! The path to glorious victory seems tempting, but long and painful is the fall into obscurity; the perfect nightmare of any TV show at the mercy of network executives.

This short viewer attention span and unwillingness to commit to twenty-two consecutive weeks at a time, might also give reason to the rise of mini-series' like *'The Lost Room'* and *'Harper's Island'* .

Much like the umpteen variety programmes and buffet of crime procedurals on the tube, Sci-fi programmes have also seemed to have struck a chord and tooted its horn with audiences here. Flash back or *FlashForward* with the *LOSTies* and hope for rescue from the legendary *Seeker*. The escapism offered in these programmes is doing a good job of tickling audiences' fancy with fantasy.

So housewives, desperate or not, can expect to wake up a show that teaches them how to cook, have afternoon tea with talk show hosts, fill up on the latest Hollywood gossip whilst preparing dinner, and their husbands and sons geek out in a science-fiction world, before settling in for a good old *Crime Scene Investigation*.

Written By:  
Michelle Teh

## Film Review - Up In The Air

This isn't a depressing movie, though it centres on a depressing event of life. This isn't a movie about the recession, though it's presence is felt throughout. This isn't a movie about firing people from their jobs, though this unfortunate event is shown multiple times in the film.

No, this 108-minute affair uses one man as an example of our sometimes artificial pursuit of a seemingly worthless goal; to attain an elite status in society, and the harsh awakening about the things he values in life, upon actualisation of his dream. The audience is given insight into the life of a high-flying frequent-flyer member on the cusp of joining the 10 million mile-high-club.

Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) makes his living by firing people. The irony of earning a living by taking away someone else's is not lost on the creators behind this film. Writer-director Jason Reitman cleverly orchestrates a nifty push-pull tone, balancing drama and comedy in the unravelling of an unpleasant topic onscreen, all set to a delightfully classy soundtrack reflecting folksy indie roots. He introduces moments of humour, helped very much by Ryan's feisty assistant, played skilfully by Anna Kendrick, and sheds some much needed light on the darker moments in the film.

George Clooney's performance exuded the perfect amounts of confident charm and vulnerability. He hasn't embodied a character so precise since his career took off.

Written By:  
Michelle Teh

I've added on this review that I wrote a while ago on a television show that I loved watching and felt passionately about, if you've seen 'Pushing Daisies', you might enjoy reading this as well:

### TV Review: Pushing Daisies Season 2 Episode 1

The facts were these: 8 years, 10 months, 1 day, 9 hours after the millennium, the first episode of this vibrant, vivacious feast for the eyes and mind premiered on television for its second season. How we as an audience have been able to live without the likes one pie-maker (Ned) and his circle of friends (Chuck, Olive, Emerson and Digby) for the last 10 months has been unbelievable.

At this very moment, the injustice of having lived through the past 10 months without this gem of hourly entertainment has begun to correct itself. The amount of material this show manages to unfold within the first 15 minutes of its opening surpasses what most of its compatriots strive to in hours. I sit in awe and marvel at how the producers churn out episode after episode of pure lyrical treasure engulfed in sheer colourful brilliance.

Every tiny detail of this 40-minute visual and aural spectacle boasts quality ranks that supersede its counterparts. The orchestral backing elegantly dovetailed into the aesthetics of the story, along with the intricate set pieces come together with a poetically written script to provide the best example of how one can and should spend 40 minutes of life.

Though most of the show was sheer comedic brilliance and provided good entertainment, I have to give special mention to Olive Snook and her ventures into 'The Hills that are alive' with nuns who revere silence.

For now, the next 6 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes and 60 seconds will be less visually vivid, aurally appetising and everlastingly entertaining than the last 41 minutes and 37 seconds.

Written By:  
Michelle Teh

## Film Theory and Criticism

### Film Review: TROY

Greek gods, fearless warriors and beautiful women. What's not to like about Troy? A film of epic proportions, that is evident in the scenery of the film as well the reputation of the cast, is shot in the beautiful lands of Greece.

This movie has Achilles (Brad Pitt), Hector (Eric Bana) and Paris (Orlando Bloom) as young leads to carry out its action sequences and enough love scenes to make the audience go weak in the knees. In every big budget movie, there's always a villain if not two, here we are entertained by the sadistic Agamemnon who is played cheekily and brilliantly by the veteran, Brian Cox.

In order to give the film an excuse to shoot two great armies to duke it out and create a sea of blood, we have naïve and inexperienced Paris lure Helen (Diane Kruger) away from her betrothed and into the lands of Troy. This obviously sparks hatred between the generals and eventually leads to war and the sailing of a thousand ships.

To make up for the overpowering sense of chauvinism portrayed in the film, attractive actors from three continents in the form of Pitt from America, Bloom from the UK and Bana from down under, were cleverly employed to keep the ladies in their seats. While the men can get their satisfaction out of the well choreographed fight sequences and major battle scenes.

Although the general feel of the movie was acceptable, personally I felt that the dramatic scenes were a bit too drawn out and corny. It takes patience to

remain engrossed in the storyline, as the pace of the movie slows down rapidly when there are no war scenes with intense drumming in the background.

Overall, the main cast held their end of the bargain well. Brad Pitt was convincing in his first warrior role and Eric Bana's performance managed to somehow overshadow the appeal of Orlando Bloom's charm. What Wolfgang Petersen lacks in the romance department, he more than makes up for in the war and adventure department.

The chilling soundtrack is haunting and majestic at the same time, and it effectively evokes a sense of brotherhood and sacrifice throughout the movie. So don't shoot yourself in the heel, go watch Troy to escape into 160 minutes of glorious battle and romances captivating enough to last a thousand years.

(391 words)

## Film Theory & Criticism Journal 1 (Meaning-Making)

The Michael Bay directed film 'Pearl Harbor' takes its viewer on an emotional ride. With a plot revolving around the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec 7, 1941, and the love story involving Rafe McCawley, Evelyn Johnson and Danny Walker, themes such as love, sacrifice, courage and grief are boldly highlighted throughout the movie.

Of course being a film theory student, I've been able to observe and see how the different issues raised by the film touch on many levels of meaning making. For instance, the opening of the film which features two boys in a farm on Texas playing with a toy plane aspiring to be one day be great fighter pilots is an example of referential meaning in the film. It is also established that these two characters, Danny and Rafe are best friends and would stick up for each other when in trouble.

Rafe's character is seen as a diehard soldier that yearns to be in an airplane very badly and wants nothing more than to be able to fly. Hence, when he signs up to fight alongside the British in the war, it can be seen on an explicit level that he is displaying courage of a fighter pilot. When news of his death arrives, Evelyn and Danny are left to face grief and move on with their lives. The romantic side of the story is now evolving amidst the pain and suffering of war. This shows that us humans rely on companionship to survive and we grow stronger when we are together.

On the implicit level, Rafe and Danny's friendship strains when betrayal is introduced. However, when it comes down to the crunch, Rafe realises that Danny wasn't completely wrong and decides to step aside and let Danny have the girl. Although this may seem melodramatic to some who feel a sense of Hollywood creeping in, the sacrifice Rafe makes to his best friend does play a significant part in the plot. This is reversed towards the end of the movie when Danny in turn makes the ultimate sacrifice to save his best friend's life in the plains of China.

The father-son storyline also comes full circle when Rafe returns home to take care of Danny's son, taking him up on the airplane as well. It shows three generations sharing the passion for flying.

On the ideological or symptomatic level, the many instances of courage displayed in a time of chaos and having the willpower to overcome those odds were very appropriate considering the fact that this film was released in 2001. Banding together and unity as a country took on a whole other level because of the social links to the September 11 attacks.

Showing Rafe and Danny doing their part for their country by taking on the dangerous mission to Japan helped arouse the patriotism of the viewers. The scene involving the presentation of medals only helped to tug at the strings of the heart of the people watching.

The use of taglines such as "Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941: A date which will live in infamy", "The day America stood still" and "A surprise attack that changed their lives



forever” were very effective in playing up the sense of patriotism and urgency to defend one’s country in times of trial.

Some contrasting elements of the movie were the sentimental music that was played in the background while the bombs were being dropped and bullets were being fired. The soft music ironically intensifies those scenes because the sheer amount of devastation can be felt on an intimate level, whereas if loud banging music were used, the effect would be lost in the midst of the action. The warm backdrop of Hawaii played host to the coldness of war. The director did a good job in paying attention to these techniques to play on human emotions and achieve a dramatic climax to the plot.

The two personalities of Rafe and Danny were also contrasting elements. Rafe was more assertive and upfront when chatting up Evelyn and Danny was a more reserved and shy individual, but she fell in love with both of them. Being the more conservative individual, Danny also tries to persuade Rafe into avoiding the war, but ends up dying in the war himself. These are some instances of parallelism observed in the film.

#### Film Theory & Criticism Journal 4 (Mise-en-scene)

In 1999, everyone living in the world was affected by a theory. Whether the extent of influence was minute or catastrophic, every single person felt it. Even if one didn’t want to be drawn into another world, this conspiracy theory had a way of invading your life. The people at work talked about it, kids at school yearned

for explanations to questions only one set of brothers had the answers to. It had never been discussed before, it was a phenomenon; it was the world of “The Matrix”.

Wachowski brothers Andy and Larry conjured up a brilliant story, about a computer hacker being the possible future saviour of the world, and did it justice by directing a movie that would be a prominent event in movie history.

A major plot of having its main characters toggle between two worlds was cleverly interwoven throughout the movie. This embodied a complete transformation from one opposite to another, toying with ‘mise-en-scene’ in the film.

The stark contrast in scenes from the real world and the Matrix show two ends of the spectrum and displays the maximum power of mise-en-scene achievable in a movie.

In the real world, the main characters like Neo, Trinity and Morpheus along with the rest of their crew are dressed in dirty, grungy and casual white ensembles. In the Matrix however, everything is flipped and all the opposites are evident. These same characters are dressed in smart, formal black outfits. The costumes in the real world show more vulnerability in the characters and portray them as a more compassionate and humane species. In the Matrix, the slick and cool costumes make the characters look like they lack feeling and are tough enough to fight off the enemies without feeling remorse.

The personalities of the characters also differ. In the real world, Neo seems lost and unsure of himself. Trinity is more vulnerable and Morpheus shows less

confidence. In the Matrix, Neo is more poised, Trinity displays more assertiveness and Morpheus has a lot of faith and assurance of what he's doing as their leader.

The setting of the real world has a lot of tight corners, leaving the people with very little room to move about. Yet there are spaces of vast emptiness in the Matrix. This could be used to make it more obvious to the audience that the themes of reality and fantasy are being explored and the differences are endless.

I feel, the fact that the directors portray the Matrix very closely to what the world is like today, is done for a greater impact on the viewers; who are living in the present day world. They want viewers to ponder and think about whether they are in the Matrix themselves, waiting to be extracted to the real world.

Its modern day concept has a great amount of realism in it, which allows them to play on what is real and what isn't, outside of the context of the movie. This leaves a huge psychological impact on anyone who watches the film and could be the reason why so many people went to watch it.

The mise-en-scene in a film is in most cases the core of the film. It is what the audience sees. The setting, costume, lighting and figure behaviour all add to the images shown on screen. These factors put together are what the audience takes with them at the end of the day.

It is therefore, one of the most crucial things to take note of when viewing a project like this, or when creating a project like this, to ensure full appreciation of effort and talent on the director's behalf.