

The place of the pop song in academic audiovisual film and television criticism

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‘The Place of the Pop Song in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism’ contributes to a discussion about the use of the pop song in the scholarly audiovisual essay, an area of videographic practice that has inspired scant self-reflection to date. The video operates in an explanatory mode, so I will allow it to sing for itself – with one caveat. Its unwieldy title refers self-consciously to my previous meta-critical video on [voiceover in the audiovisual essay](#), which took an expansive, survey-like approach. The current video is narrower in its use of examples, making central reference to the work of Cristina Álvarez López & Adrian Martin, whose collaborations have consistently demonstrated a sensitivity to the pop song’s expressive and critical power. The focus on these two critics is intended to provide consistency within my video, rather than to suggest they are the only practitioners with an eye on and ear to exploring what the pop song can do within this critical format. To expand the range of references, and in the spirit of Catherine Grant’s 2015 curation of video essays focusing on film sound, here are five other examples that exemplify the aesthetic and analytical effects the pop song can contribute to videographic criticism.

Atmospheres (Liz Greene, 2016)

This is a good example of a video that catalogues the use of a song (Joy Division’s ‘Atmosphere’) in different media texts, but also provides a further remediation of it: the original link between the song and the scenes it accompanies is severed, creating a montage of sound and moving image that is unique to Greene’s piece and that performs thinking on the continuing cultural resonance of the song, the band, and its singer Ian Curtis.

Mad Men’s ‘Babylon’ (Ariane Hudelet, 2021)

One of the fascinating aspects of the inclusion of pop music in screen fiction is the way a song's use in a particular narrative scenario can be informed by connotations forged outside of that specific context. Ariane Hudelet traces multiple intermedial reference points for the appearance of a version of 'Babylon' in an episode of *Mad Men*. As well as commenting on these connections, the video performs them, staging a musical haunting of the original scene through audio and video superimpositions.

Occupying Time: The Battle of Algiers (Alan O'Leary, 2019)

In my book *The Pop Song in Film* (2006), I provide examples of full-length fiction films that take advantage of their duration to create their own pop music ecosystem, whereby different musical genres are attributed different kinds of narrative functions (my video essay features Álvarez López & Martín's *The Semantics of Adventureland's Mix-Tape*, which charts the construction of just such a filmic ecosystem). This video by Alan O'Leary demonstrates that it is possible to create a similar kind of musical economy even in the compressed form of the short audiovisual essay, with different types of pop music being deployed for varying critical, rather than narrative, purposes.

Double Nostalgia in the Queen's Gambit (Jaap Kooijman, 2021)

In my video essay, I recycle a soundbite from Christian Keathley that I highlight whenever introducing audiovisual screen criticism to students. The best video essays, according to Keathley, 'borrow the aesthetic force of the moving images and sounds that constitute their object and they borrow it for their own critical work'. Kooijman's compact commentary on a scene from *The Queen's Gambit* does this in a manner that shows how

powerful the pop song can be as an aesthetic and critical force, even in a voiceover-led, explanatory piece. Through rhythmic cutting and layering of images, Kooijman takes the musical and visual energy of the original scene and remixes it into a scholarly music video, thereby demonstrating the critical potential of utilising visual formats associated with music television, as well as a song's purely musical qualities.

The Infectious Fantasy of The Queen's Gambit (Grace Lee, 2020)

Whilst my video essay focuses on pop songs with words, the most common use of pop music in video essays is purely instrumental. Creators avoid copyright takedowns by drawing from the huge array of tracks freely available under a Creative Commons (or similar) license, using them as underscore to their voiceovers or, as Catherine Grant exemplifies, foregrounding them much more overtly within a sensuous audiovisual combination (see, for example, her video *Carnal Locomotive* and its accompanying writing). In the multi-layered videos of Grace Lee, several electronic tracks come and go subliminally, providing a flittering yet consistent sonic architecture to support Lee's narrational train of thought which is, similarly, both eclectic and coherent. In this particular example, Lee goes further in their use of pop music by performing a cover version of Semisonic's 'For the Love of the Game' in the end credits. This points to a more parasocial use of the pop song in video essays made by creators for whom maintaining a fanbase is a factor: here, Lee demonstrates that they can turn their hand adeptly to music production and performance, on top of their virtuosic command of video editing and voiceover performance. This offers another point of fascination and admiration for their followers, while, due to the music's home-made nature, avoiding YouTube's Content ID detection.

Author

Ian Garwood is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at University of Glasgow. He has published video essays and writing about audiovisual criticism in [In]Transition, NECSUS, and The Cine-Files. *Indy Vinyl*, his audiovisual and written research project on record playing in American Independent Cinema, won the 2021 Videographic Criticism award from the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies. He is particularly interested in the role of sound in videographic criticism and the use and production of video essays in a teaching context.

Videos featured in ‘The Place of the Pop Song in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism’:

Against the Real (Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, 2015)

The Semantics of Adventureland’s Mix-Tape (Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, 2016)

This Is The Day (Chained Melody) (Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, 2021)

Scooby Road (Luminosity, 2005)

Poor Jesse (Jason Mittell, 2019)

Hannibal: A Fanvid (Lori Morimoto, 2016)

How Little We Know: An Essay Film About Hoagy Carmichael (Ian Garwood, 2013)

Indy Vinyl: Close Ups, Needle Drops, Aerial Shots (Ian Garwood, 2016)

The L/Song Take in Before Sunrise (Ian Garwood, 2018)

Records in American Independent Cinema: 1987-2018 (Ian Garwood, 2019)

Long Take, Pop Song (Ian Garwood, 2021)

‘The Art of the Needle Drop’ (Jacob T. Swinney, 2016) This is not currently available online. It was originally published by Fandor, a film streaming service that deleted a host of their video essays (including this one) when they changed their copyright policy, a change that was specifically related to music copyright concerns. In my video, I discuss the limitations copyright issues place on creators using pop songs within video essays that have any kind of commercial intention.

A Complete Guide to Pop Music Needle Drops in Movies (Patrick Willems, 2021)

How Tarantino Masters the Needle Drop (iamthatroby, 2020)

Top 20 Most Overused Songs in Movies and TV (WatchMojo, 2020)