Popular music and cinema: how the rock artist is represented on the big screen

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The question of how rock is narrated in cinema raises very interesting issues in the context of the current scientific debate concerning audiovisual communication and the methodologies of its analysis. Gaining an understanding of the configurations taken on by the relationship between form and substance, content and container, can open up useful perspectives in the analysis of a range of materials which have not yet been the subject of a specific enquiry into the structural organization of sound and image. In spite of the heterogeneity of genres and directing techniques, these films do seem to represent a category possessing unitary features; the values they express, as indeed the similar narrative and formal procedures, lay the foundations for a shared language based on recurrent situations and strategies.

1. Reflections on direct cinema as the basis for analysing rock films

As Keith Beattie points out in his historical and critical account of documentary film, *direct cinema* most popular and commercially successfull subgenre is the so-called 'rockumentary' (Beattie 2004: 97-102). This kind of films gave the go-ahead for a major development within this cinematic trend, espe-

cially bringing in "further revisions to a basic observationalism" (*ibid.*: 102) and helping in the elaboration of a distinct style for movies connected to the rock world. According to Dave Saunders, the affinity between this approach and the world of popular music is not just an aesthetic question but indicates a fundamental passage in the historical evolution of the technique: this is the very moment when *direct cinema* acquired an artistic autonomy, distancing itself from the conception of mere reporting (Saunders 2007: 52-3). In the 1960's, a crucial period for the definition of new meanings in art forms on account of the spread of electronic media, the conjunction of rock music and an innovatory approach to film directing can be interpreted as an attempt to tackle a subject which, for its specific characteristics, could no longer be narrated through the standard means. David Baker (2005) argues that the favoured communication channel is expressed by the sharing of some fundamental ideas (mobility, authenticity, freedom) which can be summed up with reference to the concept of transitivity, as showed in Table 1.

TRANSITIVITY	DIRECT CINEMA	ROCK
Mobility	hand-held camera, access backstage (spontaneity, pursuit of the "true" performer)	idea of speed and transformation (personal and social)
Freedom	free access for the camera	hedonism, search for wide open spaces, alternative life styles
Authenticity	unmediated presentation of the "truth" captured on camera	unmediated relationship with fans, coherence of projected personality

Table 1. Transivity and its values in the context of *direct cinema* and rock.

Referring to these coordinates, we can propose a set of parameters as a more wide-ranging analytical tool to bring, within a single conceptual field, films featuring popular music and its protagonists. In relating these ideas with the typical formal and material techniques of the films analysed (Table 2), we have suggested a relationship between opposite features which shapes a *continuum* of possibilities with each of the three ideal dimensions proposed by Baker. This gives us a unitary space – defined by transitivity – encompassing the most diverse modalities of the narration of rock on the big screen.

From the point of view of audiovisual analysis, this theoretical scheme operates at the level of what Nicholas Cook calls "cultural synaesthesias" (1998: 49), where sound and image are "related to one another not directly, but through their common association with transcendent spiritual or emo-

tional value" (*ibid.*: 55). In other words, the music is treated merely as a repository of values and ideas, leaving untouched the analytical level concerning the strategies for sound organization in relation to the image, and vice versa. The latter feature represents the logical counterpart of the conceptual construct presented in the above table: in this context the stated values denote what Richard Middleton refers to as 'secondary signification'. On the other hand the structural level of the text is linked to processes of primary signification, in which such ideal constructs interact dialectically with the modalities of presentation of both audio and video (1990: 176-239). In a domain in which the relationships between media dimensions vary according to the object analysed (Borio 2007), rather than conforming to a fixed hierarchy, interpreting them in the light of such a conception and investigating the relationship between formal values and devices may be the key to viewing the plurality of outcomes we encounter in rock films in a common theoretical framework.

Table 2. Transitivity space, defined both from the point of view of Baker's values (2005) and directing choices.

2. A paradigmatic case: Bob Dylan's performances in *Don't Look Back*, *Eat the Document*, *Masked and Anonymous* and *I'm not There*

We shall approach the problem through some practical examples, examining four films featuring Bob Dylan. Each is taken of from a specific cultural context, and it occupies a different position in the scheme shown in Table 2. Such diversity makes them particularly useful in verifying the hypotheses set out above. The first two are films of an essentially documentary nature, one in the style of *direct cinema*, the second using a similar filming technique but mounted by Dylan himself on the basis of pre-existing material. The other two are narrative fictional works in which the singer is involved either in person, as actor, performer and sound track author (*Masked and Anonymous*), or through a plot based on several episodes of his life, and where his songs are omnipresent (*I'm not There*). The moment of live performance is crucial in all four films, representing a significant case study for grasping essential aspects of the relationship between audio and visual dimensions. In the first place because this is when Dylan, for all his multiple roles, is seen on stage in his most characteristic guise as a singer, his 'true' nature being revealed by means of the film's construction. In the second place it allows us to examine some particular cases in which the contrast between the video and the sound track gives rise to important effects of meaning.

The film that differs most clearly from the others in this respect is *Don't Look Back*, primarily for its documentary nature, which rules out a narrative use of the performances, whereas this predominates in the others. Most of the songs performed in British venues are filmed backstage or from the hall, focusing on Dylan with frequent close-ups and in general maintaining a strict affinity between audio and visual dimensions. For this reason it is all the more striking that the film begins with the 'proto-videoclip' *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, seen before the credits. In contrast with the realistic aura of the rest of the film, the first 2' 14" feature a marked contradiction between image and sound: while the song plays as sound off, the screen shows Dylan with a series of hand-written placards showing the key words in the song. He displays these cards one by one in front of the camera, in a rather clumsy attempt to make them coincide with the sound track. As the song comes to an end a final card reads "What??" (a word that does not figure in the song and is probably directed at the audience, left perplexed by his recent experimentation with electroacoustic music) and the stage is left bare. The film's title and name of the director appear in caption over the first backstage images, with Dylan warming up on guitar and mouth organ in the dressing room and then tracked by the camera as he goes on stage. After 3' 26" the

opening titles scroll down a black screen, while off we hear the performance of *All I Really Wanna Do*, the sound accompanied by the images of the concert whose preparations we have just witnessed. All these details, concentrated in the first minutes of the film, reveal the attempt to 'camouflage' the performance component in audio terms, creating a contrast between sight and sound which is in apparent contradiction with the film's documentary nature. Nonetheless this procedure is coherent with the conflict, central to *Don't Look Back*, between Dylan's 'old' and 'new' style production in the mid-sixties, since it sets a piece from his early output against the first single from *Bringin' It All Back Home*.

In the other three examples the performance is used in a different manner, pointing up the contrast between the artefact's two media components as a means to create narrative ellipsis, or synthesise parts of the narration in the space of the song. In the sequence which immediately precedes the finale of *Masked and Anonymous*, in conjunction with the performance of *Cold Iron Bounds* (from 1h 24' 50"), the image on the screen shifts continually from the concert venue to the room in which the death of the president (who is also the father of Bob Dylan's alter ego, Jack Fate) is being announced, and on to the outside world. In this case the constant 'switching' of sound between in, out and off not only highlights different narrative levels but also serves to present several occurrences at once. Through a unitary setting, represented by the concert, the director pursues various narrative threads which coexist in a single temporal *continuum*. By superimposing fragments of the events going on all around on the performance; this choice, while giving rise to a lack of synchronism between visual and sound dimensions, has a strong dramatic aim, i.e. to illustrate in a single clip all the events which are going to lead to the dénouement in the next few minutes.

In *Eat the Document* and *I'm not There* we find a particularly interesting example of performance on screen: *Ballad of a Thin Man*, which shares some of the underlying features of the example we have just looked at. In an accounting of the 1966 European tour of Dylan & The Band, the song is used to dramatise the on-going conflict between the singer, on one hand, and the audiences and journalists on the other. This piece, with its refrain "Because something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you Mr. Jones?", comes across as an authentic war cry aimed at all the critics of his most recent music, accused of not being 'hip', of not being at the heart of 'what is happening', of being unable to grasp the heady creativity of this period. Table 3 gives a schematic analysis of this performance in *Eat the Document*.

In breaking into the song to present first the press conference and then the opinions of listeners about Dylan's new direction, two types of image are forcefully contrasted, those from the stage and those from the outside world. The contrast between the two levels is highlighted by juxtaposing them in terms not only of image but also, and especially, of sound (music / absence of music). It seems that here the film director is using the audiovisual medium to make a crucial statement regarding the centrality of the music in his new mode of writing and recording his songs. Yet he also points out that the response to the criticisms he has been subjected to in those years has to be seen in the irresistible impact of the group's performances and the cathartic moment of the concert rather than in the speculations of fans and critics.

TIME	FRAME	DESCRIPTION	SOUND ON SCREEN (in & out)	SOUND OFF
30' 04"	1	Dylan on stage with The Band. Camera focuses on Dylan	*Ballad of a Thin Man* (introduction, 1st verse)	
31' 09"	2-4	Press conference, Dylan asked whether he ever feels harassed on stage	Journalists'voices, background noise	
31' 40"	5	Dylan on stage with The Band	*Ballad of a Thin Man* (2nd verse)	
32' 32"	6-12	Interviews with audience after the concert, Dylan criticised for his switch to electroacoustic music	Audience's voices, background noise (foyer, street)	
33' 17"	13	Dylan on stage with The Ban	*Ballad of a Thin Man* (bridge)	
33' 51"	14-15	Images of Dylan and The Band at the airport		*Ballad of a Thin Man* (3rd verse)
33' 56"	16	Interviews with audience at the end of the concert	Interviewer's voice	*Ballad of a Thin Man* (to 34' 00", then breaks off to let voice be heard)
34' 02"	17-22	Dylan on stage with The Band. Song ends, he gets up from piano and walks off. Fade to black	*Ballad of a Thin Man* (3rd verse continues) finale	

Table 3. Audiovisual analysis of *Ballad of a Thin Man* sequence, from *Eat the Document*.

We find a similar audiovisual strategy in *I'm not There*, quite possibly as a conscious hommage on the part of Todd Haynes to this sequence in *Eat the Document*. Filmed in a black and white which is very reminiscent of the grain of *Don't Look Back* (another unmistakable reference to one of the films which brought this phase of the singer's career to the big screen), the song begins over the end of the interview between Jude Quinn (Cate Blanchett) and the journalist played by Bruce Greenwood. At first the singer, outraged by the interviewer's preposterous questioning, gets out of the car in which they had been conversing and walks off alone through the streets of London (1h 04' 13"). This sequence is followed by a series of surreal, dream sequences based on the sense of bewilderment felt by Mr. Jones, the piece's protagonist, here identified with the interviewer. The first verse accompanies a sequence in which, alone in a public toilet, other men looking just like him suddenly come up to him and stare at him, until a lift materialises in the toilet and carries him away from a scenario full of menace and disquieting clones (1h 05' 10"). As the refrain starts up the viewer realises that what has been heard so far of the *Ballad of a Thin Man* comes from a performance on stage, with Jude Quinn at the piano accompanied by his group (1h 05' 58"). In the second verse the journalist finds himself in the sort of theatre used for the freak shows popular in the United States in the XIX and XX century; on the stage there is a cage with a deformed man inside, being taunted by the spectators (1h 06' 20"). After showing his disgust at this cruel behaviour he suddenly finds himself inside the cage in the place of the deformed man, with Jude Quinn outside ironically holding out a microphone to him. During the bridging passage the camera returns to the stage (1h 07' 03") and then, as the third verse begins, follows the journalist as he does everything in his power to destroy the singer's character, procuring in an underhand manner information about his origins. At 1h 08' 44" the camera suddenly cuts to a tape recorder which stops, breaking off the *Ballad of a Thin Man*, and the scene changes to a Black Panthers meeting as Bruce Greenwood, from the comfortable safety of a taxi, passes through the streets of a black ghetto, looking around him with patent alarm. The tape is rewound and starts up again at 1h 09' 15", on the song's closing refrain, with the camera going back once more to Jude Quinn's performance that comes to an end amid the protests of the public, while the journalist looks on from the audience. The strategy employed by Haynes shows up the decisive role of the song in the formal construction of the image, whereas the syntax of audio and video proceed in parallel, the contrast between the unitary sound track and the changing quality of the images serves to convey a complex scenario.

3. Conclusions

In view of what has emerged from our analysis, and trying to combine this with the theoretical reflection we outlined at the start, we can say that films on the rock world show some common features, concentrated particularly in the moment of performance. In this context the hypothesis of a possible articulation between secondary signification, consisting in the values associated with certain elements of rock cinema, and primary signification, inherent in the organization of images and sounds, becomes fundamental in interpreting all the examples we have examined. At a first, more generic level, these films occupy different positions in the conceptual scheme presented in the second section, but all can be included in the field of values defined by transitivity. At a second level based on the formal analysis of the two components, the ideal complex outlined by that concept finds expression in a similar audiovisual strategy at the macro- and micro- formal levels.

In the case in question, the performance has enabled us to concentrate on an element which is common to all the examples analysed, comparing the approach and the outcome in shaping the overall meaning of the film. Our investigation of this audiovisual *topoi* of rock films has revealed the presence of two opposing attitudes in audiovisual terms, even though both are perfectly in keeping with the presentation of values relevant to each example. In the first case, that of *Don't Look Back*, the realism of the performances on stage is called into question at the beginning of the film through the repeated 'camouflaging' in audio terms designed to problematize all the subsequent performances presented on the screen, forcing the spectator to make a direct comparison between Dylan's previous and current output. In the second approach, covering the other three examples, the live song makes it possible to synthesise parts of the narrative, which may even be quite substantial, pursuing different threads of the plot at the same time through to the unitary context provided by the on-going song. The difference between these two modalities of representation of the performance derives from a different use of this narrative device: in the first film the song is reproduced in a documentary manner, as part of a well defined environment and context, while in the others it tends to encompass the story of the film. In this case the music, rather than being a mere pretext for the narrative, becomes its repository, as if to include the whole world represented by the audiovisual construction. To judge from what has emerged concerning the paradigmatic figure of Bob Dylan, rock music seems to have influenced the films featuring it both from the point of view of values and technique and from that of organization and syntax. In these respects the sound plays a crucial role

whether as the principal inspiration for the storyline or as a force able to influence the audiovisual syntax at various levels, articulating within a unitary conceptual system the values, technical choices and micro/macro formal details of the artefacts in question.

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Film details

Pennbaker Don A., *Don't Look Back* (USA 1967, 96')

SCRIPT, EDITING: D. A. Pennbaker – PHOTOGRAPHY: H. Alk, J. Alk, E. Emshwiller, D. A. Pennbaker – PRODUCERS: J. Court, A. Grossman – CAST: B. Dylan, A. Grossman, B. Neuwirth, J. Baez, A. Price, T. Burns, Donovan, D. Adams, H. Alk, J. Alk, C. Ellis, T. Ellis, M, Faithfull, A. Ginsberg, J. Mayall, B. Pendleton.

Dylan Bob, *Eat the Document* (USA 1971, 54')

EDITING: H. Alk, B. Dylan – PHOTOGRAPHY: H. Alk, J. Alk – SHOOTING: D. A. Pennbaker – PRODUCTION: Rangoon Corporation – CAST: B. Dylan, R. Manuel, R. Robertson, R Danko, G. Hudson, M. Jones, J. Lennon, J. Cash.

Charles Larry, *Masked and Anonymous* (USA-GB 2003, 106')

SCRIPT: R. Fontain, S. Petrov (L. Charles, B. Dylan) – EDITING: P. Scalia, L. Alvarez y Alvarez - PHOTOGRAPHY: R. Stoffers – SOUNDTRACK: B. Dylan – PRODUCERS: J. Rosen, N. Sinclair – EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: M. Cantin, J. Cohen, V. Dostal, G. East, A. Fradis, P. Scalia, D. M. Thompson – CAST: B. Dylan, J. Bridges, P. Cruz, J. Goodman, J. Lange, L. Wilson, A. Bassett, S. Bauer, M. P. Chan, B. Dern, E. Harris, V. Kilmer, C. Marin, C. Penn, M. Rourke, R. Sarafian, C. Slater, F. Ward, R. Wisdom – MUSICIANS: (Simple Twist Of Fate): T. Garnier, L. Campbell, C. Sexton, J. Receli.

Haynes Todd, *I'm not There* (USA-GER 2007, 135')

SUBJECT: T. Haynes – SCRIPT: T. Haynes, O. Moverman – EDITING: J. Rabinowitz - PHOTOGRAPHY: E. Lachman – MUSICAL SUPERVISION: R. Poster, J. Dunbar – PRODUCTION: Endgame Entertainment, Killer Films, Vipmedienfonds 4 in association with Rising Star, Grey Water Park Production - PRODUCERS: J. Goldwyn, J. Sloss, J. D. Stern, C. Vachon – CO-PRODUCER: C. Pugliese – EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: H. Panahi, P. Elway, A. Grosch, D. E. Hansen, W. Japhet, A. J. Kaufman, S. Soderbergh, J. Wells – CAST: C. Blanchett, B. Whishaw, C. Bale, R. Gere, M. C. Franklin, H. Ledger, K. Kristofferson, D. Francks, R. LaFortune, L. Day, P. Cagelet, B. RC Wilmes, P. Fortin, R. Havens.