

“Featuring Music From”: Song, Sound, and Remix

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Polytextual Clusters and *Mise-en-synergy*

In the long wake of AOL-Time Warner's disastrous attempt at synergy in 2000-2001, media conglomerates have been hesitant to pursue cross-platform integration; as one Vivendi executive recently remarked in the *Times*, "You don't hear the 's' word anymore." The profits from promotional and industrial synergies did not rise as expected, but the narrative and thematic possibilities that have arisen with artistic transmedia synergies is a bull market. In short, the top down effort to synergize through corporate acquisition has stalled, but the bottom up effort to synergize through the polytext has succeeded wildly. As artists increasingly collaborate across various converging art forms to create dynamic, cross-media 'worlds', hybridization blends genres, forms, modes, and styles in unpredictable ways. Analyzing these clusters of texts requires attention to multiple aesthetic nodal points in order to map polytextual dispersion.

Mise-en-scene provides a unique entry point into these artistic synergies, as multiple media can manifest within the diegetic world of an audiovisual text. "Putting into the scene" increasingly entails "putting another medium into the scene." With a wider definition of *mise-en-scene* that -- following Chion's *Audio-Vision* -- does not divorce image from sound, diegetic synergies can be evaluated simultaneously from economic and aesthetic perspectives. In this context, sound and music, and the 'popular song' in particular, can be isolated as a common element used to unite a plurality of transmedia texts. Confronted by complex clusters of cross-media polytexts, the contemporary critic can balance an economic/industrial analysis with an aesthetic/interpretative analysis by focusing on this *mise-en-synergy*.

By way of the Wu-Tang Clan, and a loose cross-cultural cluster formed around hip hop and cinema, with multiple other mediums at the periphery, we can consider some concrete examples of *mise-en-synergy*. Over two decades, the Wu-Tang Clan has grown from a group of nine rappers from Staten Island into a sprawling transnational business empire, diversified to include film and television (in directing, composing, and acting roles), multiple myth-building video games and comic books, and other assorted enterprises in addition to their continued, prolific group and solo musical output. The 'killer bees' motif they often brand themselves with has proven increasingly apt, as their swarm continues to circulate wider and wider: financially, aesthetically, and formally.

At the centre of this cluster is Robert Fitzgerald Diggs, or RZA, producer of the Wu-Tang Clan and composer for some key genre-bending, hip hop-infused texts, including Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* and avant-garde manga-turned-television series/film/video game *Afro Samurai*. RZA also worked on, and makes a cameo in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, Jim Jarmusch's modern day mash of the samurai and gangster genres, with a

climactic western showdown. On three separate occasions in the film, Jarmusch includes close-ups showing that Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker) brings along his own CD to listen to on various criminal missions. Often RZA-produced music, this is a diegetic soundtrack of the protagonist's own construction. He roams an unspecified urban landscape aimlessly, much like the samurai roamed feudal Japan, or more accurately, how cinema imagines the samurai roaming the landscape, accompanied by an atmospheric soundtrack and dramatic dissolves. In one of these sequences, the cinematography frames Ghost Dog against his barren urban landscape, the anachronism of his sword training -- despite using guns on actual missions -- is part of his identity construction as lone wolf, emphasized by his gritty personalized soundtrack. Like much of Jarmusch's work, these scenes would best be described as atmospheric rather than symbolic, and the *synergy-en-scene* is the primary way of establishing this mood.

In an attempt to explain the origins of their multifaceted mythology, RZA wrote *The Wu-Tang Manual*, a book that brings together all the conscious cross-media and cross-cultural influences that have inspired the Wu-Tang Clan. RZA systematically outlines his bizarre transmedial mixture that forms 'the Way of the Wu': martial arts, capitalism, comics, chess, organized crime, cinema, and chemistry. Integrating everything from Nietzsche to *The Simpsons*, Picasso to Garry Kasparov, Dr. Doom to Hitchcock, *Scarface* to the concept of synesthesia, RZA spins a dense web of forms, mediums, influences, ideologies, and cultures. For his forthcoming directorial debut, *Man with the Iron Fist*, RZA is writing, directing, scoring and starring in the film; i.e., he is hip hop's Orson Welles.

All in all, this polytextual cluster combines and samples hip hop soundtracks, kung fu films, comic book personas, urban styles, gangster archetypes, violent kinetics, samurai narratives, video game mechanics, and corporate conglomerates to produce a complex, synergistic stew. This brief, obviously incomplete foray into the Wu-Tang cluster demonstrates the necessity, when analyzing transmedia, to balance aesthetic concerns with the economic. One avenue for such a study within television-cinema-popular music is through *mise-en-synergy*, in which political economy is sampled and screened, for all to see.