

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

Narrative Popular Music in Teen TV

Using *The O.C.* as a case study I want to argue that the narrative space of serialized drama allows for interesting interweavings of popular music and narrative, focusing on its occasional use of popular music as a reoccurring score-like theme/leitmotif both within and across episodes. The show combined teen melodrama, trashy soap and witty comedy and central to its affect was its music. It utilised indie-rock’s social and ideological meanings to construct a hip outsider identity despite its status as a prime-time network drama and popular music also played a key role in its audience engagement. The emotion-led portions of its soundscape – plaintive indie-rock and new folk – allowed music to provide the emotional connection that contemporaries like *One Tree Hill* laid bare through dialogue and tone. This allowed audiences to revel in the ‘knowing’ outrageous actions of characters and the teens’ witty banter, whilst also being drawn to the emotional realism of the musical moments.

The O.C.’s close integration of character, narrative and music combined with its underlying reflexivity allowed its use of popular song to be both emotive and playful. Playful aspects are seen in the multiple appearances of a track within an episode, building into a score-like theme. Whilst much of its music-use works to soften popular song’s ‘disruptive’ presence, these repeated ‘break-ins’ intentionally foreground moments of popular song, functioning as subjective music or commentary through their accumulated meaning.

These can be emotion-led, figuring as suppressed emotion, as in ‘The Links’, where Puddle of Mud’s ‘Away From Me’ breaks-in to connote Ryan’s struggle to contain his anger, the track’s punk-metal tone foregrounded against the show’s indie rock soundscape. *This* theme oscillates between comedic and emotional connotations, however other themes are employed as comedic stingers, emphasising action or providing commentary. Louis XIV’s ‘God Killed the Queen’, reoccurs as a ‘lesbian kissing’ theme throughout ‘The Rainy Day Women’, its instrumental rock-guitar section appearing whenever Marissa and her new girlfriend Alex make-out – and when Seth and Ryan think about this. The multiple uses of the edgy rock track, with its “awgh” vocal cry and sudden cut, codes the action as fun and sexy, winking at its status as a sweeps stunt. Here popular song’s allusive qualities are constructed *within* the episode and can be induced through a musical fragment, functioning similarly to themes in the Classical Hollywood score. However, while a score’s themes act subconsciously, these moments often use popular song’s sonically disruptive nature, creating a playful, reflexive relationship between text and audience.

Claudia Gorbman argues a film score’s themes ‘evolve and contribute to the dynamic flow of the narrative’. *The O.C.* showcases a televisually-specific form of popular music theme, which can evolve and construct resonance across seasons, drawing on series memory. The use of Jeff Buckley’s version of ‘Hallelujah’ acts as a series theme,

appearing three times and developing meaning within the narrative. First appearing diegetically in episode two, it accompanies an angst-ridden conversation between Ryan and Marissa, with Buckley's melancholic vocals underlining their conflicted emotions, working to establish their cross-class relationship as a tragic 'great love'. The song reappears at the close of the season finale when Ryan has decided to leave Newport, drawing on audience memory of its association with Ryan and Marissa's relationship, providing a bookend to the season and reflecting on narrative development. Here 'Hallelujah' non-diegetically coheres a montage of moments illustrating the emotional effects of Ryan's departure on his friends and adopted family. Buckley's rising refrain of 'I lived alone till I met you', which earlier connected Ryan and Marissa, now developed to relate to Ryan's relationship with all the central characters.

'Hallelujah' returns in the season 3 finale, with Imogen Heap's ghostly acoustic version appearing after Ryan and Marissa's car crash, as he carries her - fatally injured - from the wreckage. Building on the song's accumulated series meanings the sequence compounds audience memory by using the recurring visual motif of Ryan carrying an unconscious Marissa, with ghostly flashbacks overlaid upon the sequence. This moment demonstrates serialised television narrative's ability to fold back upon itself, its layering of traces. Heap's esoteric electro-pop appeared multiple times in *The O.C.*, and closed the season 2 finale, so 'Hallelujah's function as an emotive series leitmotif is enhanced by the use of Heap, bringing reflections of previous season finales. Yet the use of Heap's breathy, slow, electro vocal instead of the familiar Buckley version creates a sonic and memory disjunction which constructs the death as an emotional fracture.

'Hallelujah' shows how television's serial structure can allow a song to accumulate and develop meaning through repetition. *The O.C.*'s use of popular music themes highlights the show's oscillating relationship with popular music - playful yet also emotionally invested, creating a particular depth of meaning through its soundscape.