

‘Anything can happen’: Narrative Ambiguity and Musical Intertextuality in THE HOLIDAY

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Romantic comedies are not renowned for intricate storytelling and have rarely been deemed worthy of the sustained scholarly attention of analytic ‘close readings’. What applies to the genre as a whole applies no less to its music, which has yet to be discovered by film musicology as a field of enquiry. But genre films such as romcoms can be highly self-conscious and self-reflexive, and can show a playfulness in their use of cinematic techniques that may be as much fun for the analyst as for the audience.

A good example is the pre-rol and credit sequence of *THE HOLIDAY* (2006), written and directed by Nancy Meyers, with original music by Hans Zimmer – a sequence which introduces the principal theme of the movie, establishes all of the primary characters and their stories, and forges an intimate bond between the viewer and the narrator/character, and a sequence that is characterised by the complex, shifting nature of the relationship between music and the diegesis, showing intriguing structural and thematic facets relevant for the relationship between this opening and the film as a whole.

A brief synopsis of *THE HOLIDAY*: Iris (an English journalist played by Kate Winslet) and Amanda (an American film trailer editor played by Cameron Diaz) swap houses for the Christmas vacation in an attempt to escape their ‘guy-troubles’. Whilst at each other’s homes, they meet Miles (an American film composer played by Jack Black) and Graham (an English book editor played by Jude Law) respectively. Ironically, the

two pairs become romantically involved. As a side story in the film, Iris and Miles befriend Arthur (an elderly, retired film script writer played by Eli Wallach).

At the start of the film, we are presented with an image of an idyllic riverside setting. The image is overlaid with the names of the production and distribution companies. The music, which has been gently underscoring the sequence so far, swells as a young man and woman enter the shot and kiss. As the camera pans away it reveals the fact that the image is actually located on a computer screen located within the real setting – we have to re-assess our assumption about the status of the music and now suppose it to be diegetic, apparently a *recording* of the film score, emanating from the computer. The opening credits for the film continue, now overlaid on the image of the *actual* film (i.e., THE HOLIDAY), having switched allegiance from the film on the computer screen to the film we are watching. Our assumptions are challenged further as the camera pans across to reveal Miles sitting at the computer playing a keyboard: We discover that although still emitting from the same source within the diegesis, the music is being played manually.

After having established that the music is diegetic, a nondiegetic element enters the film – a voice-over the source of which is unclear. We see Miles with Maggie (Shannyn Sossamon), but when the scene makes a transition to an exterior shot and the title THE HOLIDAY appears, Amanda is introduced, sitting in a car and offers another potential source for the voice-over. As we do not see anyone speak, at this point both music and voice-over are apparently nondiegetic. The dynamics of the music respond to the presence of the voice-over, sensitively underscoring the establishing sequence, riding the mood of the images, i.e. at bar 45 (see appendix), the orchestration alters in order to better suit a poignantly nostalgic shot of the elderly Arthur Abbott (Eli Wallach). Such subtlety in following the images suggests that the source of the music is not Miles anymore, but that the music that started with him has now become the nondiegetic film music of THE HOLIDAY. Perhaps we are to assume that Miles ceases to be playing the music at the appearance of the film's title.

But I am inclined to discount this interpretation, for the following reasons: Firstly, the music continues in the same manner as when Miles was playing it a moment before. Secondly, at bar 33, he recognises and physically accentuates the change in texture by leaning forward and nodding his head in time with the beat. The music still seems, in a tenuous way, linked to Miles, even when he is no longer visible as its source. If we do indeed assume at this point that Miles is still playing the music which underscores the remainder of the sequence, then the film's entire score is based upon music which exists within, or is connected to, the diegesis, almost suggesting that Miles might be scoring not just the film he has on his computer screen, but also the film he is in!

The continuation of the music throughout this sequence threads the images together. This thread ends as the first lines of diegetic dialogue are spoken. Through this device, the viewer is gently eased into the first scene; unfazed by the drastic change in setting. At bar 17, the dialogue began as a voice-over, and continued over relevant images of the other characters of the film – Maggie, Amanda, Ethan (Edward Burns), Arthur, Jasper Bloom (Rufus Sewell) – before it settles on its source, Iris (who had been hinted at as the source from the start: when the voice-over starts, the name ‘Kate Winslet’ appears in the credits). The dialogue still appears to be nondiegetic, as we do not see Iris speak, until (at bar 72) it refers to the character of Jasper, who is in the room with Iris at an office party. The choice of the words “that man” and “Oh God! Just the sight of him...” imply that the thoughts of the voice-over narrator belong to that very diegetic moment, that they are metadiegetic (Genette 1980, 228). This deduction prompts the assumption that the *entire* voice-over narration consisted of the mental meanderings of Iris at the office party, though a large part of it has become displaced to the images of the other characters of THE HOLIDAY (and may indeed comment on them as well as on Iris’ own love dilemma, even though we do not know yet about their stories).

This brief opening sequence (only ca. three and a half minutes until the first line of diegetic dialogue) toys with our clutch on purported reality and filmic convention. Through relentless and ambiguous transformation of the narrative status of images, music and voice-over, it succeeds in undermining the sense of a stable diegesis before one has become established. The abundance of such manipulation prepares the viewer for a scene in which we become privy to Amanda’s inner thoughts. While attempting to sleep during her long-haul flight to England, Amanda’s active imagination is keeping her awake by visualizing her life as a movie trailer. This metadiegetic sequence is complete with music and a voice-over and is interspersed with shots of characters and situations relevant to the dialogue. The sequence implies that she has been so immersed in work that she is unable to escape it even in her down-time. The self-reflexive surrealism of Amanda imagining her own life as one of her movie trailers has been prepared by the surreal narrative shifts and ambiguities of the opening sequence.

Closer analysis of the musical material of the opening sequence of *The Holiday* beyond the narrative structure shows further intricacies on an intertextual level. Links can be drawn between the composer within the film (Miles), the actual composer for the film (Hans Zimmer), and film scoring classic Ennio Morricone. A variety of musical elements within this opening sequence and throughout the whole film support this premise. The opening of the first musical cue, *Maestro*, which is played diegetically by Miles and attributed to Zimmer, is a direct quotation of *Deborah’s Theme* from Ennio Morricone’s score for ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA (1984).

Maestro



Deborah's Theme



Fairytale of New York



It is significant that Zimmer chooses *Deborah's Theme*, as it is the 'love' theme from that film; and so with the very first notes heard in the *THE HOLIDAY*, the film already intertextually alludes to the prominence of love to its own narrative. Coincidentally, *Maestro* and *Deborah's Theme* are both very similar to the opening line of *Fairytale of New York* by The Pogues – one of the most popular Christmas songs in the UK. It is not clear if that connection was consciously made by Zimmer; but even if not, it is an interesting coincidence that the same theme should have connotations of love and Christmas, two central themes of *THE HOLIDAY*.

Near the end of the film, Amanda and Graham share a poignant kiss. Previously, Amanda has been incapable of crying; as she is leaving Graham, to return to America, she cries and realises that she must be in love with him. The music underscoring this filmic climax is Zimmer's cue titled *A Kiss Goodbye* – a cue which also includes a quotation of Morricone's *Deborah's Theme*. Other than at the opening, there has been no other reference to this theme. Because of its absence, the eventual appearance is all the more significant – it implies that prior to this moment, though romantically involved, none of the characters were truly in love. The two most important cues in the film, its opening and its climax, are based on music written not by Zimmer, but by Morricone.

This does not just use film (music) history as an echo chamber for *The Holiday*, but is also fitting given the film's obvious reverence for classic Hollywood, embodied in the figure of Arthur, but scattered throughout the film, if not always in a particularly subtle manner: One of the more obvious (and ironic) moments occurs when Miles (whilst standing in the middle of a DVD rental store) sings renditions of several famous film themes including *CHARIOTS OF FIRE (1981)* by Vangelis, *DRIVING MISS DAISY (1989)* by Hans Zimmer, and *Gone with the Wind (1939)* by Max Steiner.

Zimmer quotes Morricone elsewhere in the score, less explicitly than at the beginning with *Deborah's Theme*, but still relatively obvious to someone who knows the originals. There are numerous variations of Morricone's *Toto and Alfredo* theme from the score of *CINEMA PARADISO (1988)* – an interesting reference, given that the narrative of *CINEMA PARADISO* is a celebration of film, as is *The Holiday*. These themes are usually used in relation to Iris and Miles; when, for example, Iris finds out that Jasper is engaged and returns home crying, Zimmer has interwoven a complete quotation of Morricone's theme into the music underscoring this sequence. Later in the film, Miles arrives at Amanda's house. A recording of *Toto and Alfredo* is playing on his car stereo. He even comments "the flutes – this is the best part!" and "I wish I wrote this [gesturing toward the source of the music] – this is the great Ennio Morricone." Ironically, the opening music of the film, which Miles is purportedly composing, directly quotes Morricone; if we are to believe everything we see and hear, he has directly plagiarised the revered master.

After the *Toto and Alfredo* theme subsides, the main theme and title music from *Cinema Paradiso* plays on the car stereo. This beautiful theme diegetically underscores Iris and Miles' first conversation and subsequent 'meet cute'. The irony continues: the music which Miles idolises is underscoring his own life. The music is treated as if it were non-diegetic, reinforcing every significant tender moment between them – transparently pre-empting the fact that the two characters fall in love later in the film. After their meeting, Miles drives away and the diegetic music fades out (reminding us of the fact that it was indeed diegetic). At this point, nondiegetic music begins to play as Iris gazes poignantly after Miles. The music includes a subtle references to Morricone's *Toto and Alfredo* theme (see image below) – directly juxtaposing the original diegetic version with a re-scored non-diegetic version of Morricone's music.



Near the conclusion of the film a musical moment validates the theory that Miles is essentially scoring the film he is in – an interpretation first suggested by the opening sequence. Miles and Iris are spending the evening together. He plays her two themes he has composed: one for their friend Arthur; the other for Iris. Arthur's theme will be used as diegetic music at an award ceremony later in the film. Moments before this



diegetic quotation, Arthur and Iris share a poignant moment together, during which both their themes are heard in the nondiegetic music underscoring the scene.

These themes exist both within the diegesis and outside of it. This is a pertinent example of the film's strategy of narrative ambiguity, akin to the ambiguity prevalent in the opening sequence of the film. This particular instance is all the more relevant given that the music was initially composed within the narrative world. The film makers are surely conscious of the ironic nature of the musical treatment.

An example of a similar approach can be found in the opening sequence of another Christmas-release romantic comedy: *LOVE ACTUALLY* (2003). Whilst recording the vocals for a ridiculous Christmas pop song,

Christmas Is All Around Us, Billy Mack (an ageing pop star, played by Bill Nighy) states “This is shit, isn’t it?” “Solid-gold shit”, answers his manager (Gregor Fisher), freely admitting the depraved commercialism of the enterprise. Despite this (or because of this?), the very same music then proceeds to underscore the entire, seven-minutes long opening credit sequence of *Love Actually*, which introduces all major characters of the film. In a blatant case of postmodern auto-irony, the unabashed commercialism of the fictitious musical Christmas hit underscores and thereby underlines the unabashed commercialism of the film itself, released five weeks before Christmas, just as a title card introducing the main plot informs us. In this film, too, there is an intertextual element: *Christmas Is All Around Us* is putatively based on Billy Mack’s earlier hit *Love Is All Around Us*, which in real life was used in *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*, the script for which had been written by Richard Curtis, the director and writer of *Love Actually* – art and life intertwine across narrative boundaries and across different films. (My thanks for the example from *Love Actually* go to Guido Heldt, who used it in a lecture at the University of Bristol Department of Music.)

In conclusion: Even in a relatively brief sequence in a not particularly outstanding romantic comedy such as *THE HOLIDAY* one can discover a wealth of intriguing filmic tricks and techniques: The opening sequence does not just establish style and genre and introduces all main characters of the film, but it also builds the foundation of a strong link with the characters of Iris and Miles, pre-empts the musical treatment of the film as a whole with its extensive inclusion and manipulation of music by Ennio Morricone, it executes a large number of complex changes in the music’s apparent source, including the implication that the character of Miles is somehow linked with the film’s non-diegetic music, and as a result consistently manipulates the boundaries of the diegesis. After meeting Miles for the first time, Iris says to herself “Anything can happen” – this belief in the possible reconciliation of one’s troubles is vital to the film. Through the fantastic nature of the music in the opening sequence, it is made abundantly clear right from the beginning that anything can, and indeed will, happen in *THE HOLIDAY*.

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