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Deconstructing Incongruence: A psycho-semiotic approach towards difference in the film-music relationship

David Ireland

Abstract: This article summarizes the incongruent perspective, a psycho-semiotic approach towards the study of film-music difference that is contextualized by poststructuralist thought. Examples are cited from empirical research conducted alongside the initial theoretical deconstruction to demonstrate: how the perspective theorizes various levels of film-music difference, and their impact upon perceiver experience and response; and the ways in which empirical studies can facilitate inter- and multidisciplinary conceptual deconstruction.

The recent *Psychology of Music in Multimedia* includes a call to interdisciplinarity that reflects various approaches represented in the volume. The authors distinguish interdisciplinarity that aims to integrate various conceptual and methodological perspectives from multidisciplinarity that juxtaposes these.[1] At the intersection of music psychology and film music studies, arguably two inherently interdisciplinary areas,[2] the benefits and challenges of working across disciplinary boundaries are particularly pertinent for a psychology of film music. Both multi- and interdisciplinary approaches have something to offer. Researchers must remain aware of how methodological and epistemological approaches are combined in order to retain the qualities which may have led them to initially adopt a particular approach. However, they should also try to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the complementary or differing insights that may be obtained when these approaches are combined with others that have equally been chosen for their relevance to the research questions at hand.

This article presents an example of such research and outlines the *incongruent perspective,* an inter- and multidisciplinary mode of analysis that deconstructs incongruent or seemingly mismatched film-music pairings using a *psycho-semiotic* approach that is contextualized by poststructuralist thought. The term 'incongruence' forges links with studies in the psychology of film music whilst the idea of a 'perspective' implies the understanding that may be gained by considering the term within an inter- and multidisciplinary context. The incongruent perspective uses conceptually-relevant ideas from film music studies and semiotic theory to aid holistic interrogation of the nature and impact of difference within a film-music pairing: ideas of incongruence are contextualized by film music theories[3] which suggest how different sensory and semantic information provided by the auditory and visual components of a filmic moment can influence the construction and interpretation of meaning.

Due to the prevalence of ideas of congruence in film music psychology,[4] empirical work was influential in the development of the incongruent perspective.[5] Given the focus of the present volume, emphasis will be placed on the role of empirical work in the perspective: this article will consider the *appropriation* of results from existing empirical studies into a broader inter- and multidisciplinary conceptual context by outlining the perspective; later sections cite results from empirical work conducted during the theorization of the perspective and illustrate how practical psychological study can generate data to apply ideas raised through such conceptual study.

The incongruent perspective: appropriations of empirical research

A potential peril of inter- and multidisciplinary study is the 'different meanings ascribed to the same terms by different disciplines'.[6] Even within psychology studies 'congruence' and 'incongruence' are used in different ways to refer to perceived fit and/or appropriateness in a film-music pairing.[7] Within Cohen's seminal Congruence-Associationist model (CAM) 'congruence' refers to structural similarities, distinguishing the label from the adjectival sense in which it is often employed.[8] 'Congruence' and 'incongruence' are often operationally defined in relation to particular dimensions of the audiovisual relationship that researchers wish to measure. This creates specificity which is characteristic of the empirical approach and aids potential replication of studies. Yet, this approach can be reductive and emphasize differing attributes dependent on the aspects of the film-music relationship being studied: structural or temporal congruence may connote fit whilst semantic or mood congruence may more readily imply notions of appropriateness. The terminological specificity afforded by experimental designs must be explicitly explained and contextualized to ensure conceptual clarity. The incongruent perspective defines incongruence by drawing upon descriptions which refer to a lack of shared properties within a multimedia relationship.[9] The lack of dimensional specificity here (e.g. direct reference to structural or semantic properties) enables connections with ideas that recognize various levels of difference or congruity in a film-music pairing.

The psychologists Kim and Iwamiya note that assessments of structural and semantic congruence contribute to a broader judgment of overall subjective congruence.[10] To thoroughly conceptualize incongruence, the incongruent perspective seeks to address these holistic assessments *and* localized difference on various dimensions of the film-music relationship which contributes towards these. Analytical approaches incorporated in the perspective aid deconstruction of broad bipolar labels often used to describe the film-music relationship, such as parallel and counterpoint, which Robynn Stilwell describes as music that works 'in agreement with' or 'contradicting the evident meaning' of concurrent visual and narrative content.[11] This dichotomy does not reflect the complexity and multidimensionality implicit in judgments of film-music fit and appropriateness, and neither do broad applications of the labels 'congruence' and 'incongruence'. Thus, the incongruent perspective draws upon ideas from film music studies about audiovisual difference that contributes to an emergence of filmic meaning, notions which date back to the work of Eisenstein.[12] As Nicholas Cook's discussion of complementary and contesting multimedia relationships illustrates, difference can contribute towards the construction of meaning in a range of ways[13] which may or may not be considered appropriate or congruent. Such ideas challenge holistic labels and any preconceptions of appropriateness which may accompany them, as distinct sensory information can contribute towards emergent meaning in complex and subtle ways.

The combination of theoretical ideas outlined below allows holistic judgments of congruence and the localized contribution of film-music difference to be related to perceiver experience given the incongruent perspective's grounding in psychological research. Data from empirical studies suggest *how* perceived incongruence can influence film perception and the interpretation of meaning. Work by Marilyn Boltz highlights that mood-incongruent film music can result in independent encoding and memory storage of auditory and visual information.[14] Similarly, Lipscomb and Kendall note that accent alignment and judgments of the perceived appropriateness of an audiovisual pairing both

affect assessments of congruence[15] and that, in informationally complex stimuli, perceived semantic appropriateness acquires greater influence in such judgments.[16] As David Bashwiner notes, researchers 'must be sure to have at their disposal the requisite tools for understanding what makes a work complex and how these complexities give rise to dramatic potentialities'.[17] Specific operational definitions and qualities which are systematically varied and measured in empirical studies are one such tool.

Additional tools in the incongruent perspective aid textual analysis which can also help to consider such complexity. Semiotic approaches such as Nattiez's tripartite programme[18] account for: varying levels of textual engagement that may influence the construction of meaning; and degrees of perceiver competence that may shape expectations, interpretations and response. Awareness of the potential perspectives of the individuals represented by the levels of Nattiez's framework can facilitate understanding of any intentionality, intertextuality or subjectivities that may influence interpretation of meaning, emotional response and aesthetic appraisal. This information can contextualize consideration of higher-order processes that may influence subjective judgments of congruence: for example, familiarity with genre conventions or a director's aesthetic can shape expectations about how film music may be used or how it may fit with concurrent visual and narrative content. Leonard Meyer's influential work linking emotional response to music with the fulfilment or violation of expectations states that '[m]ental activity tends to become conscious when reflection and deliberation are involved in the completion of the response pattern, that is, when automatic behaviour is disturbed because a tendency has been inhibited'.[19] Independent perceptual encoding due to a lack of shared properties in an incongruent film-music relationship can be seen to conform to this description. Meyer cites principles of gestalt psychology such as regularity, symmetry and simplicity, and considers how deviations from these can violate expectations.[20] Similarly, in relation to film music perception, Cohen observes the consistency between gestalt grouping principles and the direction of attention to shared stimulus features when discussing structural congruence and the CAM.[21] Whilst these grouping and bottom-up principles identified by empirical work offer some explanation for the implications of perceived incongruence, the combination of tools for textual analysis in the incongruent perspective allows further consideration of top-down principles that influence such judgments. Factors such as expectation and familiarity that can influence higher-level processing correspond with the level of the CAM that deals with long-term memory. Yet, additional factors may also implicitly influence top-down processing and expectations: these are accounted for by the broader poststructuralist context of the perspective.

The emphasis on the deconstruction of dichotomous oppositions in poststructuralism is relevant in this context given the inadequacy of broad bipolar labels to account for complex film-music relationships and the active contribution of music to filmic meaning. The critical focus placed on the use and power of language also provides opportunity to consider the subjectivities associated with individual interpretations (including those of holistic congruence) and emotional response. Beyond these broad overlaps, specific parallels can be drawn between ideas of film-music difference contributing towards emergent meaning and aspects of Derridean deconstruction. In an introduction to poststructuralism, Catherine Belsey claims that difference is '[t]he key term' within the history of the movement, given the premise that 'meaning is differential, not referential':[22] this view is reminiscent of Cook's assertion that 'multimedia is predicated on difference'.[23] Derrida's incorporation of difference within his 'motif' of *différance* is particularly relevant to incongruence:[24] *différance* 'is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means

of which elements are related to each other'.[25] This spacing is described as a simultaneous activity and passivity that 'cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition' and that contributes towards production 'of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function'.[26] The differential construction of meaning[27] can be compared to the interpretation of filmic meaning and incongruent music can especially be regarded as contributing towards meaning differentially: through the very attribute of being different from congruent film-music relationships (perhaps through violating expectations based on genre conventions), incongruence can invite greater interpretation of the contribution of the component parts of a scene and the nature of their combination. Previously cited empirical evidence[28] can be seen to support this idea as the independent processing of incongruent auditory and visual information can direct attention to individual components which comprise a scene, allowing for more conscious consideration of differences within the text and with other texts or types of film-music construction. Of relevance to this latter idea is the appropriation of notions of deferral within *différance.* Derrida writes that '*différance* refers to the (active *and* passive) movement that consists of deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving'.[29] In the case of incongruent film music, perceived differences may defer the interpretation of meaning as the perceiver attempts to understand and perhaps reconcile the differing information in the audiovisual combination. Such notions depend on the competencies, knowledge and experiences of the individual, emphasizing the relevance of a semiotic dimension in the incongruent perspective.

To summarize, the incongruent perspective accounts for various guises that difference may take in a film-music pairing. It acknowledges the role of difference in: the construction and deferral of meaning; in influencing perception and response; and in influencing subjective judgments of film-music fit, appropriateness or congruence. Incorporating several approaches, the perspective highlights the need for the conceptual specificity afforded by empirical methods and the contextual awareness which poststructuralist and semiotic approaches account for. The combination of such qualities can allow a more holistic understanding of the impact of film-music difference on perceiver experience to emerge. Reflecting the levels on which difference can operate, the perspective allows for consideration of the idea that audiovisual incongruities that are identified analytically may not always be consciously perceived: such factors may well influence holistic judgments of congruence. A potential inference from the psychology literature is that separate perceptual encoding associated with incongruence may be more noticeable to the perceiver: as Boltz notes, mood incongruent film music is often highly memorable.[30] Yet, this is not always the case. The incongruent perspective provides the opportunity to unite these perceptual concerns of film music psychology with textual analysis to further deconstruct the film-music relationship and consider such aspects of perceiver experience.

The incongruent perspective: applications to empirical research

Empirical work was undertaken alongside the development of the perspective. A multi-stage mixed-methods study was conducted and the following paragraphs overview this work. An example from the results is presented to illustrate how data from empirical study can complement conceptual deconstruction. Qualitative data collection and analysis was influential in this work. The rich description and sense of contextual awareness associated with such approaches provide an ideal

tool with which to consider textual complexity and deconstruct binary oppositions like congruence/incongruence. Qualitative approaches have been used previously within the psychology of film music.[31] Yet, here they complement poststructuralist and semiotic elements of the incongruent perspective and align with an approach towards psychology which suggests that postmodernism can marginalize methodology and emphasize contextual reflection.[32] The various stages of the present empirical work reflect such qualities. By capturing qualitative and quantitative data, and studying the same texts at differing levels of contextual reduction, emphasis is placed on individual perceivers and films. This removes sole reliance on traditional quantitative methods. Instead, detailed consideration of the impact of various forms of audiovisual difference on the construction of meaning and judgments of congruence is provided by the way in which these data support contextual reflection by accounting for different perceivers' interactions with specific texts.

Method: The study involved three stages[33], initially comprising focus group work with student participants from Leeds University Union Film Society and then the Institute of Communication Studies at the University of Leeds. Participants attended four/five sessions as determined by factors such as the timing of University holidays which influenced their availability. They were shown extracts from commercial films of various genres, chosen to represent different types of incongruent film music (e.g. music which was structurally misaligned with the visual content or which presented contrasting semantic cues). Participants were asked to discuss elements of the scenes that they found noticeable or effective. The musical focus of the project was not revealed so as not to potentially direct participants' attention to this element of the stimuli. The position in the discussions of comments about the music was in part used to ascertain its salience. On the few occasions where participants failed to mention the soundtrack the group moderator asked about it, and other aspects of the scenes to maintain the covert nature of the procedure. The length of the extracts (c.5-10 minutes as determined by the surrounding narrative) adds a level of contextual validity as much empirical work uses shorter stimuli chosen to represent a particular emotional state. The purpose of the groups was to collect a range of responses to the scenes: these represent individual interpretations that can help to identify the potential influence of specific elements from the excerpts on judgments of incongruence.

Empirical work was then conducted involving 35 student participants. 16 film excerpts without sound and 16 musical excerpts, all c.15 seconds in length, were used. Each excerpt was chosen to reflect a particular emotional state and to, as a set, represent a range of genres. Some of these excerpts originally were pairings from films, some of which had been shown to the focus groups. Numerical responses to these stimuli were obtained using scales as described below. Participants were also asked to write a word of their own choice to describe the perceived emotional content of the stimuli, providing qualitative data to contextualize their ratings. The study was a pretest to generate stimuli for a later experiment which would test hypotheses about the influence of different levels of perceived semantic congruence within systematically manipulated film-music pairings.[34] However, the data generated by the pretest and focus groups, given that the procedures shared some stimuli, also aids deconstruction of incongruence by facilitating textual analysis.

Discussion: An example of the potential application of these data can be found in the responses to the opening of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Gilliam, 1998) (hereafter *F&L*). This sequence was

shown to the focus groups and features images of Vietnam War protests and a scene showing two protagonists driving through the desert *en route* to a drug-fuelled stay in Las Vegas. The sequence opens with war protest images which are paired with the Lennon Sisters' slow, minor version of Rogers and Hammerstein's 'My Favorite Things'. It was hypothesized that this would be deemed subjectively incongruent, partly due to the positive nature of the song lyrics and the negative connotations associated with war and violence. Yet, none of the focus group participants mentioned the music without prompting and some were unable to recall it. This was interesting as they readily noted the use of song with ironic lyrics in other stimuli such as a scene from *L4yer Cake* (Vaughan, 2004) in which Duran Duran's lively 'Ordinary World' accompanies a brutal beating.

However, data from the pretest support the hypothesis that the *F&L* pairing is holistically incongruent. Participants rated components from the opening of the sequence using 1-7.4 point scales loosely based on Russell's circumplex model[35] that describes emotions using the dimensions of arousal and valence: to ensure accessible language for participants these scales were labelled agitated-calm (A) and happy-sad (V), and higher ratings represented agitated and happy respectively. Mean ratings for the film were A = 5.16 (SD = 1.37) and V = 2.68 (SD = 1.11). Mean ratings for the music were A = 2.88 (SD = 1.27) and V = 4.41 (SD = 1.43).[36] These data place the film and music in opposing halves of each scale: the film represents high A and low V; the music represents low A and high V. Whilst broad generalizations should be avoided given the sample size (n = 32), some observations can be made from these ratings.

To numerically explore the data, the centre of each scale was used to classify each rating as either high or low. These rankings were used to speculate about how participants might assess congruence when the two excerpts were paired. Based on these calculations 81% (n = 26) of participants might find the pairing incongruent on at least one scale: 44% (n = 14) of participants' ratings suggest potential incongruence on both scales; 25% (n = 8) suggest incongruence only on the A scale; and 13% (n = 4) suggest incongruence only on the V scale. All of the participants whose responses suggest incongruence on both scales agree that the film has high A and low V, whilst the music has low A and high V. Those whose ratings suggest incongruence only on the A scale all suggest the film has high A and the music has low A. The four participants whose ratings suggest incongruence only on the V scale rated both components as low on the A scale, and indicated that the music has high V whilst the film has low V. Of the participants whose responses suggest congruence on both scales, four felt that the film and music were both high A and low V. Only six participants felt the film had low A: two whose ratings suggested congruence on both scales; and four whose responses suggest incongruence only on the V scale. These data indicate that the majority (81%) of participants' ratings suggest incongruence on at least one scale: marginally more responses suggested incongruence on the A scale (69%, n = 22) than on the V scale (56%, n = 18). These data also indicate differing interpretations of these qualities of the stimuli, notably on the V scales. Calculating the differences between individuals' ratings on the V and A scales for the film and music also identified variance in the potential degree of difference between the components, (e.g. some participants' ratings indicate a larger difference between the V judgments for the film and music than others).

Assessing congruence by the mid-point on two bipolar scales in this manner is reductive although these data offer conceptual focus and can suggest trends in response. Qualitative data from the pretest can further explain the results, deconstructing the scales and accounting for how additional factors such as narrative context and participant subjectivity influence the construction and

interpretation of meaning. Whilst the mean V judgment for the music was high when using the mid-point of the scales to categorize responses, the numerical figure was close to the centre of the scale and almost neutral (4.41). Free-word responses reflected two trends which help to explain this figure. Some participants described the music using words such as 'nostalgic' and 'calming' whilst others viewed it more negatively as 'sinister' and 'haunting'. These adjectives provide some insight into the rating and the overall distribution of response which suggests broad agreement towards the centre of the scale. A focus group participant stated that 'the music with the clips was chilling. It was kind of creepy' (V, 2.2)[37]; the term 'creepy' was also used by three pretest participants and shares connotations with other adjectives used to describe the music such as 'sinister' and 'eerie'. Participant V continued to discuss the bloody graphics which intercut the protest footage, implying a link with the creepy character she attributed to the music and perhaps suggesting a complementary relationship. When providing demographic details, V identified horror as one of her favorite genres of film, perhaps suggesting preference for, or at least familiarity with, content of this nature. These factors may have influenced her interpretations and which elements of the informationally complex sequence she noticed. Such contextual detail relates to the esthesic level of Nattiez's framework[38] that accounts for the interpretation of meaning and therefore various factors which may influence this process such as preferences. The fact that some pretest participants used similar words to describe the music in the absence of any visuals also indicates the influence of the trace level – the song itself – suggesting that such affective qualities may be connoted by sonic properties of the music, perhaps the minor tonality and slow tempo.

In the pretest data there was a strong agreement towards the negative end of the V scale for the film, matching the negative opinions of the music cited above. Yet, free-word data also revealed differing underlying attitudes: some responses focused on 'injustice' and 'saddening' connotations of war whilst others referred to 'justice' and the 'togetherness' of the protestors. These contrasting interpretations emphasize the subjectivity inherent in responses to complex stimuli. Focus group participants largely agreed on the negative way in which the images depicted the war: 'it's definitely a sort of negative image' (T, 1.2); 'very one-sided […] they didn't represent people that were going to fight or the reasons why they went to war' (L, 2.2). Due to the greater length of material shown, focus group participants' comments tended to focus on content shown after the protest footage, which is unsurprising given that it comprises just 30 seconds of the four minute sequence. Yet, they were able to reflect upon the way in which the early material set context for the film, noting contrast - or difference - with later content: 'You might think the two are quite separate but I think when the film […] goes on […] you can see why they put it in' (T, 1.2). The latter content provided context in which to assess the earlier music. When questioned, participants in both groups tried to interpret the song in the context of the film: one participant drew parallels between the 'favorite things' cited in the lyrics and the protagonists' drug use (T, 1.2); another related the lyrics to his opinions about the perceived priorities of an authority figure shown in the footage whom the protestors may regard as being pro-war (L, 2.2). Regardless of individual interpretations, the way in which some participants appear to use the later material to interpret the music complicates judgments of subjective congruence as subsequent information is used to comprehend earlier content and perhaps explain any initial ambiguities in meaning created by film-music difference.

These data highlight various levels on which difference can operate; the need to deconstruct broad bipolar labels used to describe film music; and the relevance of poststructuralist and semiotic tools which recognize perceiver competence and subjectivity. Whilst the isolated components of the

pretest highlight specific surface-level semantic incongruities for some perceivers, focus group participants' responses to the longer sequence suggests the impact of filmic and perceiver context and complements ideas in the literature about the ongoing construction of working narrative whilst watching a film. This reflects processes identified in Cohen's CAM: focus group participants' apparent use of top-down and bottom-up processes to interpret the unfolding narrative provides another lens with which to consider the congruence and impact of the music. As Cohen notes, 'story grammar may play a role in our understanding of music […and] is a means of making sense out of complexity'.[39]

Such ideas may help to explain the focus groups' initial failure to recall this music. The range of responses in the pretest emphasizes the differing ways in which congruence may be judged, even on very specific scales, supporting the idea that subjective congruence may be influenced by broader judgments of the associative content inherent in the pairing in complex stimuli[40] rather than localized difference. This idea reflects the varying impact of different types of incongruence: dependent on the elements of a scene perceptual resources are focused towards, incongruent music may draw attention to its self or be overlooked if resources are attending elsewhere.[41] The wealth of data provided by a multi-stage study of this kind reported above serves as a tool to reconcile the perceptual concerns of film music psychology with the close analysis facilitated by other elements of the incongruent perspective: textual analysis and empirical data collected using ecologically valid stimuli and replicable methods reflect a range of responses and the potential impact of difference at various levels in the film-music relationship. The data also reiterate the need to deconstruct binary labels used to describe film music, given the active manner in which difference can contribute towards the deferral and construction of perceived meaning. Given the exploratory intentions of these early stages of the empirical work conducted alongside the development of the incongruent perspective, participants were not directly asked to rate the subjective congruence of the *F&L* sequence: such questioning would produce interesting data to further deconstruct the role of difference in this excerpt and its impact upon response.

Conclusions

The incongruent perspective provides an inter- and multidisciplinary approach towards the study of film music difference and its impact on perception, the interpretation of meaning and emotional response. Empirical work is influential within this perspective: data from such studies can aid conceptual deconstruction, textual analysis and understanding of perceiver experience. As such the perspective, and the conceptual interrogation that it facilitates, carries implications for conducting empirical work, a detailed treatment of which extends beyond the scope of this article. Yet, as the examples cited here demonstrate, mixed-methods approaches, and the rich accounts of participants' responses that they generate, can aid deconstruction of bipolar labels. Such approaches emphasize the role of language in the design of empirical studies and the importance of contextual reflection when interpreting textual data. They highlight the need for detailed consideration of how scales in questionnaire studies may be labelled and how these might best account for the complexity implicit in dichotomous scales such as congruence/incongruence which may not be best represented by measures which merely replicate bipolar oppositions. Such ideas, characteristic of a postmodern approach towards psychology, do not represent rejection of traditional empirical methods or

advocate reductive assimilation of differing perspectives. Instead, these data suggest the potential that can emerge conceptually and methodologically by using complementary and conceptually-relevant approaches to account for context and complexity in relation to perceivers and texts. Much like incongruence itself, the combination of different conceptually-relevant methods and disciplinary perspectives can enable insight to emerge through their juxtaposition as well as via the individual qualities of each approach. The specificity afforded by empirical approaches can help ground the abstract nature of theoretical deconstruction and, contextualized in this conceptually-driven manner, emphasizes the benefits of inter- and multidisciplinary approaches which place an emphasis on the experiences of the perceiver. Such approaches can help further understand processes underlying film music perception and their impact on the construction of filmic meaning and emotional response, in addition to reflecting the richness and complexity of individual texts.

END NOTES

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