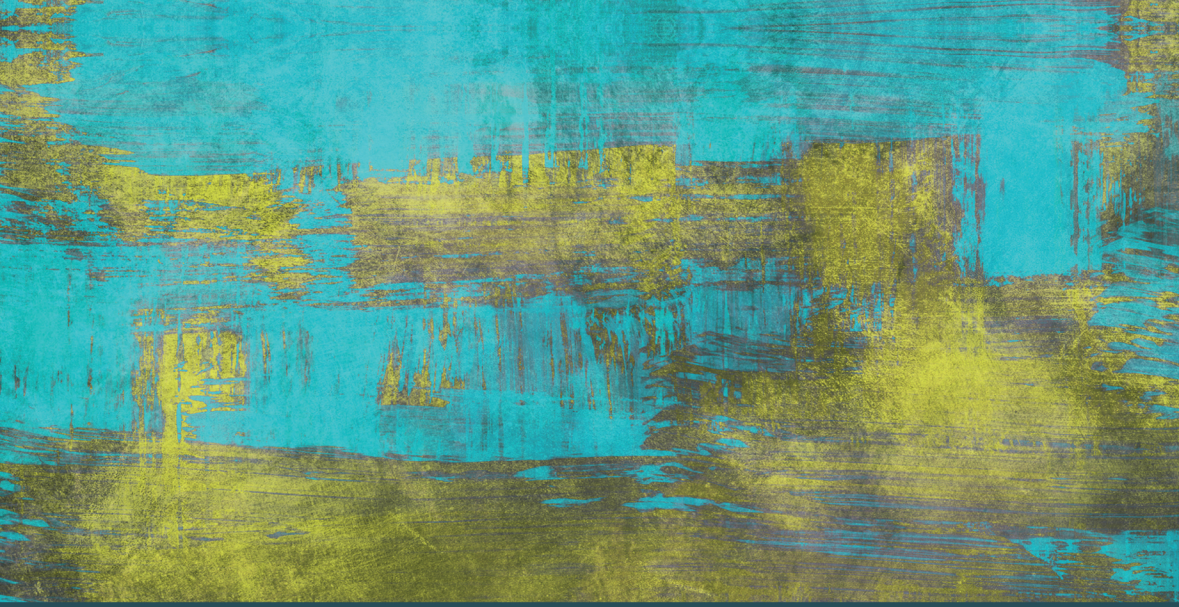

Ashgate Screen Music

MUSICAL SINCERITY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN FILM

REFLEXIVE FICTIONS

Timothy B. Cochran

Musical Sincerity and Transcendence in Film

Musical Sincerity and Transcendence in Film focuses on the ways filmmakers treat music reflexively—that is, draw attention to what it is and what it can do. Examining a wide range of movies from recent decades including examples from Indiewood, teen film, and blockbuster cinema, the book explores two recurring ideas about music implied by foregrounded musical activity on screen: that music can be a potent means of sincere expression and genuine human connection and that music can enable transcendence of disenchantment and the mundane. As an historical musicologist, Timothy Cochran explores these assumptions through analysis of musical style, aesthetic implications, and narrative strategy while treating the ideas as historically-grounded and culturally-situated with conceptual origins often lying outside of film. The book covers eclectic critical terrain to highlight various layers of musical sincerity and transcendence in film, including the nineteenth-century aesthetics of E.T.A. Hoffmann, David Foster Wallace's literary resistance to irony (sometimes called the New Sincerity), strategies of self-revelation in singer-songwriter repertoires, Lionel Trilling's distinction between sincerity and authenticity, theories of play, David Nye's notion of the American technological sublime, and Svetlana Boym's writings on nostalgia. These lenses reveal that film is a way of perpetuating, revising, and critiquing ideas about music and that music in film is a potent means of exploring broader social, emotional, and spiritual desires.

Timothy B. Cochran is Associate Professor of Music History at Eastern Connecticut State University. His articles on Olivier Messiaen and Claude Debussy have appeared in *The Journal of Musicology*, *Theoria*, *19th-Century Music*, and *Twentieth-Century Music*. His additional research interests include composer Bernard Herrmann and music in Indiewood.

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Musical Sincerity and Transcendence in Film

Reflexive Fictions

Timothy B. Cochran

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To my wife, Carrie, for her faithful love and support and for being a great movie-watching partner

To my kids, who are too young to watch most of these movies

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Introduction

Musical reflexivity

In a memorable scene from *Almost Famous* (2000), members of fictional rock band Stillwater exhibit relational tension by stewing in silence as they travel down a country road. Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," which had provided background accompaniment to shots both inside and outside the tour bus preparing to depart, continues during the drive as characters stare straight ahead or through the windows as a sign of emotional isolation from one another. However, soon the mood lightens as characters begin to bob their heads to the music and eventually sing along collectively. This group participation reveals that what we thought was part of the compilation score is instead something that the characters hear, know, and enjoy. Characters gradually begin to look at each other when they sing until friendly touches—jovial pats that line up with the rhythms of the piano in the turn around to the repeated chorus—suggest that divisions within the band have been healed, at least temporarily.

As with most source music, the song occupies space within the film world in order to define the setting: this is music that rock musicians and fans in early 1970s America would have presumably heard, known, and enjoyed. In this case, the music also serves as narrative shorthand: like a montage sequence that telescopes the passage of time or distance, "Tiny Dancer" resolves a plot tension and closes an interpersonal rift within the efficient span of a radio single.

Source music of the kind found in *Almost Famous* does not merely establish the setting and provide a convenient narrative device, however. Such scenes of self-conscious musical activity also call our attention to the music itself—that is, to what it is and what it can do. The word *reflexivity* is often used to describe self-consciousness in film and other arts. Filmmakers have historically highlighted the filmmaking process within movies as a way of interrogating and revealing properties of the artform (Siska 1979, 285; Fredericksen 1979, 301; Plantinga 2009, 90), but film is also a means of interrogating and revealing properties of music. Filmmakers often highlight music within film worlds in ways that invite us to consider its power, pleasure, and significance for the movie and beyond. In short, filmmakers *use* music, but they also *define* music. For example, in *Almost Famous*, the

embodied responses and group karaoke present an ideal vision of music as powerful to alter moods, create community, and heal conflict. This book will explore how musical reflexivity in film—moments where we become aware of music as music and where characters make, use, or react to music self-consciously[1]—often provide vehicles for expressing and critiquing ideas about music. I will treat musical reflexivity as a means of perpetuating assumptions about music that in turn serve the unique narrative goals of individual films.

Over the past two decades, the meaning of music in the film foreground has drawn the attention of various scholars. In the introduction to their edited collection on the topic, Estella Tincknell and Ian Conrich use the term *musical moments* to denote musical performance in films beyond the film musical genre. Rather than outlining a systematic theory of musical moments, the authors use this broad and inclusive category to encourage consideration of performance on screen not as mere source music but as socially, politically, narratively, and aesthetically significant. The authors also highlight the capacity of the musical moment to create "a particular point of disruption, an isolated musical presence in a non-musical film" with the "potential to disturb the texts through its unexpectedness or at times excessiveness" (2006, 1–2).[2] They propose that the musical moment often involves a "double articulation" in which musical performance is at once disruptive and essential to narrative (5). Making related critical observations, Amy Herzog uses the same term for instances "when music, typically a popular song, inverts the image-sound hierarchy to occupy a dominant position in a filmic work" (2010, 7). Herzog notes that such moments are often points of "rupture" (3) and "dissonance" (5) that rearticulate clichés and ideologies (repetition) on one hand and remap existing ways of thinking (difference) on the other (2–5). Herzog highlights the unique narrative and critical power given to music when a film draws our attention toward it. Observing the narrative implications of music foregrounded by image, performance, and/or musically reflexive dialogue (Powrie 2017, 73–77, 97), Phil Powrie has identified a related disruptive power in "crystal songs," which create "epiphanic moment[s]" (3) of "frisson" (12–13) that, often via odd elements of song or sound, lead the spectator through "a combination of […] soaring emotion [and] searing insight" (3). He describes the crystal-song as "the moment when the music does not just dominate the film, but determines its structure, reconvening the film around it in a moment of illumination" (172). These scholars have done much to demonstrate that music on screen can be just as significant, resonant, complex, and thus worthy of scholarly attention as the contributions of a traditional film score.

What demands further attention is how foregrounded musical activity rearticulates and redirects ideas about music itself with origins lying outside of film or at least in a deeper history of film. If, as Herzog claims, musical moments can "reproduce, standardize, and codify certain cultural fictions" (2010, 8), my focus in this book will be on how musical reflexivity can

revise and reinforce culturally persistent fictions about music specifically, hence the book's subtitle. Cameron Crowe's representation of music as a type of language capable of creating social unity is not unique to *Almost Famous*; rather, his film perpetuates and contributes to a history of ideas about music's social role. Crowe may or may not be versed in Plato's theory that certain musical sounds will affect the order and ethics of a society, nor can we confirm his familiarity with the tale of Orpheus and its representation of music as supernaturally persuasive across ontological barriers; but the filmic trope of socially unifying and pacifying music has a long history nonetheless. This history originated outside of film (in fact well before the invention of film), but its components are carried through film implicitly via repetitions and variations that obscure their ancestry. If as Herzog maintains musical moments are used to "propagate certain types of representational strategies" (2010, 8), then what kinds of representational strategies do filmmakers employ for ascribing meaning to music itself? How do those representations connect with existing ideas about music, and how do they articulate, vary, disrupt, and evaluate those ideas for their own cultural moment and unique narrative or expressive goals? The historically grounded and culturally situated assumptions about music that pervade scenes of musical reflexivity warrant critical exploration.

In this regard, my project shares a closer kinship with Ben Winters' book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film* (2014), which explores the reciprocal relationship between musicianship on screen and musical activity enacted in the real world. He examines how film can mediate a spectator's concert expectations, musical experiences, and imaginations of musical behavior (2–3). In short, the book addresses representations of musical performance on screen, the myths they perpetuate, and how they affect spectators' engagement with music within and without the film.

Although paralleling Winters' interest in film representations of music-making and their impact on narrative and spectator experience, this book charts a different path through musically reflexive terrain. Winters focuses primarily on the performance of Western classical music, while a majority of the scenes analyzed in this book feature listening to, sharing, using, and making (although not always performing) music in settings beyond the concert hall and with repertoires outside the classical tradition. The distinction here with Winters is not a mere matter of scope but also of critical focus. The organizing theme of this book is how filmmakers often frame music as a psychologically and socially transformative power for participants—in other words, how foregrounded musical activity on screen is often bound up with a character's interior desires and experiences as well as external expressions and communal objectives. Characters use music commonly to experience emotional depth and pursue affective intensity, to express interiority and escape reality, to create social bonds, and to play with their roles in society. Thus, the reality and unreality of musicianship are not the targets here but rather how filmmakers frame music as a means

of personal sincerity and striving for forms of transcendence. These terms come loaded with connotations: sincerity may call to mind heartfelt and honest expression, genuine feeling, and/or the desire for relational connection; transcendence may suggest transformative, ecstatic, and/or spiritual experiences or any means of rising above what is mundane, fearsome, unjust, or broken. Although each of these connotations will appear throughout the book, sincerity and transcendence will acquire different critical dimensions in each chapter through various historical and philosophical lenses applied to aspects of musical reflexivity.

This focus on self-awareness in both musical and social/psychological terms has further implications for the organizing concepts and scope of the project. First, I opt not to refer often to "musical moments," although the term would be apt in many cases. Herzog's notion of musical moments is quite inclusive such that the term would apply to any instance where music becomes "the dominant force in the work" including both source music and film scoring; but her fascination lies with a "unique type of musical moment" found mostly in film musicals and correlating contexts (2010, 6) whereby music (especially song) controls aspects of image (7). Similarly, Conrich and Tincknell leave the application of musical moments open to instances of foregrounded music beyond the classical film musical genre, but many of the contributions to their collection situate the material in relation to film musicals of other varieties, film musical reception, or musical tropes and concepts familiar to the genre (e.g., star power, utopian sociality, backstage narratives, spectacle). On one hand, the term musical moment is too general to define the phenomena by which film invites us to attend to ideas about music in relation to sincerity and transcendence even if musical reflexivity does often involve filmic strategies that render music a "dominant force." On the other hand, the word "musical" in musical moment for Herzog and Conrich and Tincknell would seem to also connote points of reference, at least marginally, from the film musical genre and is thus too narrow. With my focus primarily on the strand of musical moments that emphasizes a heightened musical awareness, I prefer the multidimensional concept of musical reflexivity in order to direct our attention to the varied ways filmmakers represent music's implicit functions and definitions. Furthermore, analyses of musical moments tend to be biased toward on-screen performance, which is only one means by which film engages assumptions about music's social, expressive, and quasi-spiritual power. Characters also select recordings, react to musical stimuli, interpret its significance for others verbally, employ sound technologies, make playlists, compose, engage memories through music, perform privately, lip-synch, head-bang. In some cases, such musical reflexivity need not even be driven by source music. Finally, although most examples in this book feature music playing an explicit role in the scene, the examples do not all involve the music disrupting or controlling narrative progress. Music defines the pacing of some scenes and not others in this study; some feature music as a narrative disruption, while

others weave music into the narrative progression seamlessly without an obvious "double articulation." I aim to track representations of musical sincerity and transcendence in film through various kinds of foregrounded musical activities that may be limited by the current scholarly framework of musical moments.

Second, although the book's subject matter warrants exploration of various film genres and periods, I do not seek to identify and categorize forms of musical reflexivity but rather to develop a richer, more complicated understanding of how film presents, revises, and critiques historical ideas about music, particularly in relation to sincerity and transcendence. This orientation leads to several case studies (mostly taken from the last four decades) in which musical reflexivity is bound up with other forms of reflexivity and experimental narrative techniques, which invite us to both affirm and question (sometimes simultaneously) our ideas about music. Musical reflexivity is often most interesting when housed in the framework of reflexive film techniques. Especially in examples drawn from Indiewood productions (independent films with mainstream distribution and appeal), such musical reflexivity also often provides a filmic vehicle for exploring broader social and psychological tensions created by self-examination and the desire for self-expression, mental escape, or overwhelming intensity. William Siska describes reflexivity as manifested in either "the artist reflecting upon his [sic] medium of expression" or "the artist as creator reflecting upon himself [sic]" (1979, 285)—in other words, reflection on the created artifact or the creator of the artifact. Musical reflexivity is not always creator-centric, but many examples in the book involve reflection on the musical medium, the self engaged with it, and how one comments on or conflates with the other. In short, I view musical reflexivity, film narrative, and character self-awareness in an integrated relationship where one informs the others around the themes of sincerity and transcendence.

Outline of the book

The first chapter introduces musical sincerity and transcendence as overlapping concepts in films that revise nineteenth-century musical aesthetics for the present. To establish an intellectual history for what I call *romantic listening* in film, I unpack the nineteenth-century notion found in the writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder that music is a utopian and possessive power capable of transporting listeners away from the mundane or tragic present. I illustrate the connection with film through a scene from *Almost Famous* (2000) that features a transcendent response to music blending ecstatic listening and psychological travel. I argue that many cinematic expressions of romantic musical aesthetics over the last thirty years participate in a broader cultural negotiation between ironic and sincere modes of being, a tendency often labeled the New Sincerity. The chapter lays out two contrasting critical paradigms with relevance

for film: one theorized by Jim Collins, who argues that genre films of the 1990s reacted to mass-mediation by either avoiding irony through excessive sentimentality or by embracing intertextuality; the other by David Foster Wallace, who advocates for sincerity in an ironic context as a type of rebellion. Four case studies show how romantic listening from the era in question served Collins's cultural poles of New Sincerity (*Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Philadelphia* (1993)) and ironic juxtaposition (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Beetlejuice* (1988)). The chapter concludes by using Wallace's appeal to rebellious sincerity to analyze the intertextual role of Benjamin Britten's music in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012).

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on issues of musical sincerity primarily, particularly how filmmakers frame music as enabling sincere expression and as an affective space of human connection respectively. Chapter 2 explores various ways Indiewood filmmakers have represented musical styles and performance techniques associated traditionally with singer-songwriters as vehicles for revealing emotional interiority. Continuing to examine the productive tension between sincerity and irony developed in Chapter 1, I draw heavily from Lee Konstantinou's concept of post-irony in which artists use reflexivity to reach toward honesty against the foil of ironic contradiction. The first part of the chapter explores the post-ironic dimensions of singer-songwriter Jon Brion's performance practices and his score for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). I interpret Brion's music as a post-ironic soundtrack because it uses markers of indie singer-songwriter styles to highlight the emergence of characters' expressive sincerity amid reflexive narrative slippages. Analyzing scenes from *Eternal Sunshine*, *Magnolia* (1999), and *The Life Aquatic* (2004) in the second half of the chapter, I examine how the presence of singer-songwriter voices in the soundtracks and sometimes performing bodies on screen can contribute to a film's post-ironic narrative by acting as confessionally sincere presences.

Unpacking the historical assumption that music is a means of social connection, Chapter 3 foregrounds the subtheme of musical intimacy from earlier chapters. Throughout music history (from Orpheus to Bernstein), music has been construed as an ideal means of sincere connection that mitigates the individual's alienation. After framing this historical concept in relation to Lionel Trilling's understanding of sincerity, I explore how filmmakers often echo this perspective by representing shared listening as an intersubjective space where the lonely self understands the other affectively. Scenes from *WALL•E* (2008) and *Garden State* (2004) demonstrate how filmmakers idealize music's connective power by featuring technologically mediated musical community. The *Her* (2013) soundtrack complicates these historical assumptions about musical connection with a more ambivalent perspective. I conclude this brief chapter by asking: what do these scenes afford socially and emotionally for spectators immersed in such film narratives and the music they feature? With reference to *High Fidelity* (2000), I argue that representations of shared listening create intimacy with characters on screen

through both visual and aural means and that this virtually social encounter leads to an enhanced musical enjoyment.

Although still engaging with self-expression at times, Chapters 4 and 5 tilt primarily toward the issue of musical transcendence as a strategy of playful escape and quasi-spiritual sensory intensity respectively. Applying concepts from ludology usually reserved for video game music, Chapter 4 explores films that define music as a catalyst and site of play within the mundane world. Exploratory and immersive musical playfulness is a recurring feature throughout film history, especially in movies that value youthfulness over the adult orders of routine, decorum, and work. Using criteria theorized by Johan Huizinga, the first part of the chapter demonstrates how music is an efficient means of defining a playground in film, as illustrated by scenes from *A Day at the Races* (1937), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), and *The Sound of Music* (1965). I argue that when play and music are framed in a reciprocal relationship, they form especially potent insulation from work and routine. The next section of the chapter focuses on musical equivalents in more recent film for Roger Caillois's types of play: agon (i.e., competition as illustrated by *School of Rock* (2003)) and alea (i.e., chance/destiny as illustrated by *Amadeus* (1984)); mimicry (i.e., make-believe) and ilinx (i.e., vertigo) are explored through the teen film genre in which musical play is not simply a vehicle for fun but also a means of resisting the prospects of an unsatisfying adulthood. I first analyze *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) to show how musical make-believe as lip-synching offers teen film characters a vehicle for escaping into and trying on pre-existing sonic and expressive identities, and conclude by interpreting teenage music-making in *Ferris Bueller* and *The Breakfast Club* (1985) as a force for appropriating space and time for play.

Chapter 5 focuses on film representations of rock music amplification technology as a force that demands quasi-religious awe. In *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye frames the "American public's affection for spectacular technologies" (1994, xiii) as motivated by desire for new sublime experiences beyond nature in which grand technological innovations elicit collective emotions of transfixing awe. Although action and sci-fi films demonstrate that cinema often affords such technologically sublime experiences, I analyze film representations of music amplification technology specifically as perpetuations of this historical fascination. Nye's theory of the technological sublime is introduced through *Back to the Future*, which can be read as a narrative of pursuing the technological sublime not only through its central conceit—an atomically fueled time machine—but also musically: Marty McFly seeks transcendence through increasingly intense musical experiences with amplification technologies, and he uses heavy metal to elicit fear-induced awe from his 1950s peers who are more susceptible to the sublime impact of future technologies. I argue that the music technological sublime relies not only on volume but also the audible manifestation of technology in timbre, what Michel Chion calls "materializing

sound indices" (2016, 103). Resonating with the focus of Chapter 2, a scene from *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010) adds a layer of expressive sincerity to the music technological sublime by connecting the power of music amplification technology with internal emotions: technology is used to amplify the sublime self. The chapter concludes by suggesting that, more than a comic strategy, the music technological sublime in film is an implicit goal of more recent film scoring in which the line between sound design and music is blurred and the immersive and visceral impact of sonic power is privileged. The case studies of *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014) assist the development of a broader concept of the music technological sublime beyond parodies of rock culture.

Tying together threads from throughout the book by invoking concepts from each chapter, Chapter 6 focuses on the heritage of a single piece of music, Claude Debussy's "Clair de lune" from *Suite bergamasque* (1890–1905), which has often been treated cinematically as a stimulus of nostalgic longing. Earlier chapters demonstrate how filmmakers revive historical ideas about music, often in order to revise them for the present and for the narrative. In this concluding chapter, I explore how musical reflexivity with a single piece takes unique shape across time and varied film contexts. The chapter introduces the association between memory and "Clair de lune" through an analysis of *Music for Millions* (1944) that draws from Svetlana Boym's understanding of nostalgia and Marcel Proust's descriptions of involuntary memory. In the second section, I analyze the popular imagination of the work that may have informed the way spectators perceived these filmic representations. Reviews of concerts featuring "Clair de lune" from the 1940s, 50s, and 60s demonstrate that critics and advertisers tended to place the piece in one of two categories: trivial/commonplace or dream-like/enchanting. These seemingly paradoxical associations comprise key elements of nostalgia in *Giant* (1956). The chapter concludes by examining a pair of more recent "Clair de lune" films (*Atonement* (2007) and *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007)), which complicate both sincerity and transcendence through longing for an alternate rather than idealized past.

Put together, these chapters provide a more nuanced and multidimensional perspective on the narrative strategies, cultural assumptions, and historical relevance of musical reflexivity generally and of music-oriented sincerity and transcendence specifically. It seems appropriate to end the introduction to a book emphasizing the pursuit of sincerity on an autobiographical note. I put many of the final touches on this book during the early stages of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during which people were urged to shelter at home where possible for several months in order to slow the spread of the virus. Being isolated physically during the initial shutdown from extended family, friends, students, colleagues, community gatherings, and opportunities to worship in-person at our local church made my desire for genuine community and a transformed and unrestricted reality especially palpable—desires only partially fulfillable by the half measures of

video conferencing and streamed events. Despite these social challenges (not to mention concern over the virus itself and its impact on the economy), this initial quarantine period also led to opportunities for unexpected heartfelt expression, creativity, and reevaluation of priorities: phone calls to express concern or to revive connections that might not have been made within a busier schedule; contactless driveway drop-ins and alternative digital birthday greetings; making music and a mini-movie with my kids and exploring the glorious emergence of spring on local hiking trails; family prayer. These activities were ways of confronting and redeeming isolation, ensuring human connection, and pursuing hope beyond the restrictive and fearsome present. That filmmakers have been invested in exploring these desires for sincerity and transcendence musically throughout film history tells us that such longing for rich human interaction and participation in something greater than solipsism runs deeper in human hearts than the present health crisis or any film's narrative strategy. It also tells us that music has the capacity to tap and express these desires in precise ways. When film calls attention to music as music, it may be a way of revealing, questioning, and pursuing what we are already yearning for.

Notes

1. Frank Lehman used the same term in the title for his unpublished paper "What the Sith Lord Said: Monologic Narration and Musical Reflexivity in Leitmotivic Scores," Paper Presented at The Music & the Moving Image Conference, New York, NY, May 2017. Although Lehman's paper addresses phenomena that could fit the definition proposed here, his usage of the term is implicitly focused on aspects of "epic narration."
2. The term appears to have been introduced in Ian Conrich, "Merry Melodies: The Marx Brothers' Musical Moments," in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, eds. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), 47.