

## CUT AND CATHEXIS

Ed McKeon

Cut: edit. Cut: admix. Cut: sever. Cut: puncture.

Cutting multiplies. It edges.

Material renders unforeseen and original thresholds at the blade's point. Material history, cut from time's cloth, reveals its unknown shapes at the pen's tip and the delete key.

*American Graffiti* emerged from two cutting technologies, the director's suite and the sound desk. One edge cut with another.

After limited success with their futurist dystopia, *THX 1138*, which became the number plate for John's car in *American Graffiti*, this nostalgic "human comedy" reversed time and fortune for George Lucas and Walter Murch. If the future citizens it foretold would be controlled by mind-altering drugs, with emotions and family prohibited, perhaps a Utopian version could be re-programmed by returning to an innocent age. Collective revolution might be re-imagined as individual rebellion. For youth, mirrored in the adult imagination, anything seemed possible. This cuts both ways.

Tape can be cut, reversed, speeded up, slowed down, layered, looped, re-recorded, repeated. Murch was amongst the first to grow up with affordable home tape recorders. Aged 10, he experimented with microphones to capture ambient sounds beyond the edge of hearing, later "pirating" music from the radio and resplicing recordings "in different, more exotic combinations". It's not surprising, then, that his soundtrack for *American Graffiti* was cutting edge.

In conjunction with the moving image, we can identify three temporal relations: diegetic, non-diegetic, and what Michel Chion called "on-the-air" sound. The first comprises mostly direct speech, sound effects and location recordings. Famously, 41 songs embody the character of an imaginary 1962, most of these emerging offscreen, perhaps from the radio whose omnipresence is marked by The Wolfman, a cameo appearance of this (post-)Freudian DJ of time. "On-the-air music can transcend or blur the zones of onscreen, offscreen and nondiegetic." The film has a dream-like quality, then, combining simultaneously its narrative time, a suspended imaginary time, and a shifting time that edges both.

No wonder Fredric Jameson claimed the movie as the first major nostalgia film, though overlooking a significant detail of his own insight. For here we encounter the postmodern cutting both ways, both modern and "post". The diegesis aims for Realism, the natural relation of sign to referent as Jameson reminded us. The sign abstracted, cut off, made autonomous, is Modernism's innovation. This corresponds to the de-realization of the image by the soundtrack, the self-referential quality of its imaginary of an innocent past. In Jameson's schematic periodisation, postmodernism marks the cut *within the sign itself*, the signified reclassified as a signifier for another signifier in an endless chain. Here, the principle of exchange rules. As Lucas remarked of Murch's "sound

montages...the amazing thing we found was that we could take almost any song and put it on almost any scene and it would work”.

This helps to explain the ideological effect of two self-conscious moments, with two different effects. In a moment of fantasy, arc lights illuminate the roadside stage – and the filmic apparatus – for a playful scene of goofy revenge: a postmodern nod to its own textuality. More subtly, Curt’s visit to The Wolfman involves a knowing example of de-acousmatisation, making thematic the multiple functions of on-the-air sound: offscreen (“He’s on tape. The man is on tape”); onscreen (broadcasting live); and nondiegetic *acousmêtre* (“Well, where is he now? I mean, where does he work?” “The Wolfman is *everywhere*.”). The illusion here is not *within* the film, but – more critically, perhaps – *of* the film: it doesn’t de-realise the diegesis so much as the film’s *affective* logic directed at its viewers...

... which returns us, surprisingly, to the edge of history. Recall that nostalgia is a sickness, a sweet sickening for a “home” – or identity – that cannot be regained. In its symptomatic postmodern form developed by Jameson, this implies a splitting of the self through an attachment to a past that is simultaneously marked as definitively past, incommensurable. Here is history traumatised, the constitutive failing of cathexis, the process by which external events are affectively internalised within self-narrative: the imagination of what once was feels more “real” than the present that now is. By this account, postmodern subjects are cut from identifying fully with their own modernist narrative which is de-realised, felt as fiction.

Murch’s soundtrack, then, offers a homeopathic remedy, not by creating a soundworld that will always simply be 1962 on the US West Coast, nor by anachronistically employing songs contemporaneous to the film’s 1973 release. Rather, the ambiguity of the on-the-air music opens to other possible histories that complicate the now-conventional notion of nostalgia *American Graffiti* is thought to present. A short elaboration of shifts in modelling historical experience will help to clarify.

The binding function of cathexis acts to integrate - or suture - as subjective narrative the non-symbolised effects of accidents, the affective contact between the psyche’s twin systems of self-representation and representation of the world, “inside” touching “outside”. Neurosis signals the failing of this operation. Freud insisted on the sublimation of an affective to a symbolic economy, whereby the wound (Greek *trauma*) triggers the reawakening of earlier, unconscious memories. For Freud, everything signifies, especially that which the subject considers *in*significant. This history has no accidents, nothing that resists explanation. Today, however, neuropsychiatrists propose a different model,

insist[ing] upon the unexpected and irreducible character of the traumatic event, which even if it recalls past trauma, cannot do so without *profoundly modifying the vision and content of the past itself*...such an event introduces an *inauthenticity*, a *facticity* within psychic life. It creates another history, a past that does not exist.

Catherine Malabou refers to the military psychiatrist Claude Barrois’ opposition of the Oedipus myth by the Orpheus myth. The victims of contemporary trauma return not from childhood, but from hell. Within Jameson’s schema (and Lacan’s, from whom he borrows), this subject is not only split, unable to reconcile self and self-representation. Rather, she is aware that her systems of representation are illusory. The world stops making sense, often becoming devoid of affect. It was

the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1979, principally in veterans of the Vietnam War, that initiated neuropsychiatry and its re-evaluation of Freud's legacy, and it would take until 1994 for the condition to be recognised as a state of shock recognisable in many *non-combat* victims of a world severed from signifying order.

We might, in this light, revise our understanding of the ageing of nostalgia in this film. Writing in 1999, David Shumway claims – *pace* Jameson – that *American Graffiti's* soundtrack doesn't so much render the past meaningful so much as it connotes a self-consciously *mythical* past. It “appealed to an audience that included many too young to have grown up with the music in the film. Thus, the songs need not literally bring the past to life for the viewer but give the impression of such an experience, creating a fictional set of memories that...may actually come to replace the audience's ‘original’ sense of the past”.

Perhaps, then, both Jameson *and* Shumway might have been right, but only for the time of their own writing. For its 1970s audiences, rocked by the revolutions of 1968, civil rights, uncivil unrest and the return of legions of war wounded, the 1950s and 60s soundtrack may have conjured a lost world, but not one that was mythical. By the late 90s, after the putative “end of history”, the era of pre-assassination Kennedy was but a legend, and the film's music relayed a now canonised rock 'n' roll. Nostalgia itself is wounded by the history from which it is carved.

### Postscript

The soundtrack to *American Graffiti* offers one moment, the briefest clip of yet another temporality. Recall that the film has not one but two *acousmètres*. The unveiling of The Wolfman transfers the role of *acousmètre* to another, the woman – the opening of possibility, a new edge – whom Curt is seeking. The Wolfman broadcasts his invitation for this mystery woman to call, which she does, waking him – from the film's reverie? – immediately prior to the scene of his flying departure. What is peculiar about this conversation is not her voice, modulated through the telephone's apparatus, but her insistence that she knows who he is. Hers is the voice of the Future, of chance itself; but she is not destiny. Flying off into the horizon, Curt leaves the dream of a future in 1962 and before the credits roll, the film's message seems clear. That dream, however seductive, is illusory. If your future is in 1962, your choice is between senseless accident (John), senseless war (Toad), or a repetitive, senseless life (Steve). (The female characters are not given futures.) Only Curt escapes to invent a new praxis of history, beyond the edge of the known world.

**Ed McKeon** works with musicians and artists at the points where music indisciplines others—whether theatre, installation, or performance—collaborating with artists from Pauline Oliveros to Heiner Goebbels, Elliott Sharp to Jennifer Walshe, and Kuljit Bhamra to Brian Eno. He led an MA programme on Music Management at Goldsmiths from 2013 and completed his PhD on musicality and the curatorial in October 2021. His book *Heiner Goebbels and Curatorial Composing After Cage* was published by Cambridge University Press in November 2022. As a Research Fellow at BCU, Ed is exploring shifts within historicity from the 1960s through musical and more-than-musical practices.