

UGLY MARGINS / THIS SCENE DOESN'T FADE

Iain A. Taylor

First, a confession. I hold a genuine dislike for the movie *American Graffiti*.

While attempting to write this short piece, I've found my mind continually returning to Timothy Taylor's (2001) reflection on the relationship between musical margins and an imagined centre ground. 'It is not that the mainstream offers no avenue to understanding people and their music in a particular place and time', Taylor argues, but rather 'the odd – the marginal – can often tell us more, for the margins often have much to say about the centres that those in the centres may not be aware of' (Taylor, 2001: 9).

American Graffiti is, for me, a film where the margins of the plot hold far more interest than the centre. It is, ultimately, a film about nostalgia, whereby viewers are invited to revel in a kind of collective cultural longing for a simpler time of imagined post-war prosperity and innocence. The power of its nostalgia stems primarily from its soundtrack, where the pacing of the movie is measured out in three-minute rock 'n' roll classics. A string of hit after nostalgic hit; of tracks which occupy a central position in Anglo-American cultural nostalgia for an imagined moment in the past.

As well as providing a nostalgic anchor-point for the film's narrative, the persistent centrality of the film's upbeat 50s soundtrack is interesting in that it masks the near constant ugliness and violence which ebb into the margins of the plot. Continual passing allusions to the burgeoning phenomenon of the American serial killer, peripheral depictions of casual violence, criminality, and misogyny abide at the margins of the plot, sitting in stark contrast to the playful coming-of-age exploits of the film's central characters. Yet these ugly margins, which offer caveat after caveat of the rapid darkening of the American cultural mood, find no expression in the film's soundtrack. Their silence, to me at least, is deafening.

While *American Graffiti* was intended as a love letter, or perhaps more aptly, as a mixtape, to the imagined innocence of post-war American prosperity – of muscle cars, diners, and rock 'n' roll radio – it is in these ugly margins that the truly telling insights into the wider social, cultural, and political changes which the film foreshadows can be gleaned. These ugly margins, however, have no soundtrack. They are condemned to remain on the periphery of the film, safely at bay, and unable to impinge upon the relentless and obnoxious obliviousness of the film's central characters, and the nostalgia in which we are invited to revel.

So, with the above in mind, below is my contribution to a special issue on a movie I can't stand: a reflection on its central characters' obliviousness to what happens in those ugly margins on the peripheries of their experience, and an open question – what might the absence of a soundtrack feel like for the movie's hapless protagonists?

This Scene Doesn't Fade

'One, Two Three...' - time is counted. A matter of frenzied, simple arithmetic.

Measured in twelve-bar phrases. Three-minute temporalities, clocks we rock around.

Punctuated only by the fleeting liminality of rushed chatter and panting breath.

Then repeat.

But spin faster this time. Or shuffle slower. It doesn't matter, really.

The pace of phrases fluctuates, but remains bound to three-minute measures.

They ebb and flow, expand and contract. Familiar rhythms. Units of time.

Which repeat.

Because to dance, to spin, is to keep yourself inside of time.

Fingers on fretboards. Needles in grooves. Bodies spinning. Figures on a clock.

This scene does not *fade*. It ticks. It tocks. Then it cuts.

Abruptly.

Cut to cars. Chryslers and Cadillacs needle in circles around the block.

Dancefloors or dashboards. Rock n' Roll bands or the radio. Just spin.

No space for silence, for the tyranny of liminality, of unstructured time.

Which repeats.

In ever closing circles. You can't hear the needle running out of road.

The needle is what we know. The road is what we know.

Deep cut grooves give us shape. We've no time for awkward silence.

Tick. Tock.

Silence is for that other time. That ominous, immeasurable, tunelessly infinite liminality.

Not the face of the clock, but the room it sits in.

There is no refrain for the tyranny of that space. Not yet.

That is where we fade.

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