



SOUND STRUCTURE AND IDENTIFICATION: VOICE AND IDEOLOGY IN *ALMOST FAMOUS* AND *VELVET GOLDMINE*

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Abstract

Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2001) and Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) tell similar stories of reflection, myth-making, and nostalgia: In the mid-1970s, a teenage boy interacts with flamboyant rock stars, matures as a result, and grows up to become a reporter. Beyond these content-oriented similarities, however, these pop-music films diverge in their formal approaches, each guiding its audience toward different ideological ends, the former celebrating a self-celebrating conformity, the latter tending toward an uneasy world of self-awareness. Operating under the assumption that film form and content are inseparable (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004), this paper explores the relationship between a formal aspect of cinema (sound) and ideological identification by exploring how this aspect operates in *Almost Famous* and *Velvet Goldmine*.

On a broad formal plane, these films are structurally fascinating as each relies on a reporter to anchor the narrative. The reporter is a stock element in Hollywood cinema, from Hawks' *His Girl Friday* to *All the President's Men* to the recent scandal-exposing *Shattered Glass*. Reporters serve a useful formal function within filmic narratives because they are able to serve a double-framing function as both objective story presenters (they gather information for us) and subjective plot interpreters (they discriminate this information). As such, in classical Hollywood cinema, we expect reporters to bear witness in our stead and for the spectator to identify with them as characters. *Almost Famous* chooses this straightforward narrative approach to structure, plot, and identification, while *Velvet Goldmine*'s narrative structure mimics that of *Citizen Kane*, in which the reporter is at the center of the story of discovery, but is not the featured character in his own story, limiting the possibility of identification.

At their core, these films are exercises in Western ideology, both celebrations of the freedom-enhancing possibilities of rock/popular music and paeans to the importance of popular music in youth-identity formation. On a formal level, these ideological ends are served in obvious ways, through, to paraphrase David Bowie, the gift of sound and vision. And Bowie serves as an appropriate fulcrum for the ideological purposes of each film, as he is a primary point of reference in each film, a floating signifier able to meld the Cartesian division between the conservative, muscle-flexing heterosexuality of *Almost Famous*' hard-rock body and *Velvet Goldmine*'s more introspective and intellectual glam-rock mind.

Sound acts as a formal marker for ideology and identification in these films. The ideological difference between the two films is positioned by the choice and performance of songs. *Almost Famous* is a traditional story about trying to figure out how to fit in. As such, the musical lessons for William Miller (Patrick Fugit) are



presentational (“here’s how to act”) and come primarily in the form of rock standards by Led Zeppelin and The Who and songs from the fictional Stillwater, an amalgam Zeppelin and other mid-70s hard rock bands. What is important about the use of these songs as formal markers is that these songs structure a set of standard American narrative choices for the character Miller (to value honesty, friendship, etc.) and an array of options for facile spectator identification with Miller.

Conversely, *Velvet Goldmine* is a story that attempts to figure out why someone doesn’t fit in. Arthur Stuart’s (Christian Bale) musical lessons are representational (“You can make the choice to act, too”) and come in the form of a lesser known rock songs of the period, some original performances contemporaneous with the film’s setting (Brian Eno, Roxy Music, Lou Reed), some re-presented by contemporary artists (Placebo, Pulp) and one-time groups (The Venus in Furs, Wylde Rattz). As formal markers, these lesser-known songs offer Stuart a wider, more ambiguous range of narrative options and the spectator less opportunity for direct identification with Stuart. Through songs, *Velvet Goldmine* opens up meaning both within the narrative and in relation to a more general liberal ideology.

Ultimately, the sound/music divide between these two films echoes the chasm between Chion’s (1999) two I-Voices. The first voice is reverberating, embracing and complicit (and ideologically correct – Chion cites Marion’s internal monologue and decision to return the money in *Psycho*) while the second is sharp, embraced and distanced, a voice that, in reference to Norman Bates, “cannot be reintegrated...into the appropriate body . . . unless somehow he were to master it in himself, circumscribe it, impose limits on it.” (Chion, p. 53). Through the formal element of sound, *Almost Famous* is a story of mastering this embracing complicity, while *Velvet Goldmine* is a story of reporter Stuart coming to terms with his self-circumscription.

Keywords: *Cinema Form, Music, Sound, Ideology, Reporters, Narrative*