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A strophe, a chorus, and a bridge walk into a bar...

On the connections between song formats and narrative strategies

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Abstract: Building up on Paul Cobley’s work on narrativity in film and literature, the present article aims at exploring how pop songs convey narrative elements via their own structure (or “format,” as it shall be called here), and their single components (intro, outro, bridge, refrain, etc.). Some of the most recurrent formats (particularly Strophe–Refrain and Chorus–Bridge) as well as some of the most unusual ones (e.g. the suite) are discussed within the framework of the three main narrative movements analyzed by Cobley (realism, modernism, and postmodernism), and additional parallels with literature and cinema will be proposed in the area of what here will be called “conceptual space” (diegesis, non-diegesis, fourth wall, etc.).

Keywords: diegesis and non-diegesis; narrativity; Paul Cobley; popular music; song formats

1 Introduction

Being a semiotician and having to select one of Paul Cobley’s publications to honor him is not unlike being a child in a toy store: so much to like and to choose from. The stature of Paul as a scholar, indeed, resides not only in the quality and *finesse* of his scholarship – something that, alone, is very worthy of a celebrative collection like the present one – but also in the variety of his research interests. This is particularly inspiring for me because, in my own small way, I also aspire to follow a similar path: that of – mentioning that old joke – knowing nothing about everything, rather than everything about nothing. Paul never seems to get bored or stuck on one single topic, and yet he is always pertinent, whether he talks about biosemiotics or narrativity, semiotic theory or Hollywood cinema: this is one of the main reasons for me to look up to a colleague like him.

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Back to the toy store: what to pick, what to pick. I am aware of the possible expectation, from the part of those readers acquainted with my work, that my selected target should be any of Cobley's recent research on biosemiotics, particularly Cobley 2016. And for some time that was my idea too. Eventually, though, I had to remind myself of how vast, and not necessarily interconnected, the field of biosemiotics is, and how distant I often feel from the approach, the conclusions and in a sense the "attitude" of biosemiotics. Discussing Cobley 2016, as insightful as the book is, would more spur my wish to underline that distance (particularly targeting what I called the "*Unlike animals*" syndrome – e.g. Martinelli 2017), rather than embracing the similarities. I did so with Thomas Sebeok, I did so with our common dear friend John Deely: this time I will be wiser and keep it to myself.

On the contrary, there is a whole thematic area covered by Cobley in his three other single-authored monographs (Cobley 2000, 2001, and 2013) and in various articles, that, generally speaking, concerns the complex network of problems related to narrativity in literature and cinema. These are works that combine a subtle critical analysis with a propaedeutic dimension to their respective topics – a noble art that Cobley masters in many ways, from the encyclopedic approach of Cobley 2009 to that little graphic guide gem that is Cobley and Jansz 1997.

Plus, there is another aspect that is almost a red line throughout Cobley's career, which, however, seldom materialized into actual research (Cobley 1999 and Cobley and Briggs 1999 only, as far as I know): his passion and knowledge about popular music. One can quickly notice them from private conversations, of course, but, more intriguingly, references and arguments based on that passion and that knowledge pop up quite regularly in his writings, making popular music one of Paul's favorite rhetoric tools:

This ruse to reintroduce 'breeding' and do away with the study of narrative as anything other than a component of a biologically necessary Literature resembles nothing so much as the advocating of 'proper' music, characterized by training and decorum, after those nasty punk rockers had overturned the applecart with their 3-chord revolution (Cobley 2013: 228–229)

Or:

Since the early nineties it has become fashionable to make reference in a number of spheres, and in a way unthinkable in the 1980s, to the decade of the 1970s. A 'glam' revival – or a 'Glam Racket' as the Fall would have it – recruited, in some measure, the likes of Suede, Pulp, Morrissey in pop music. The Sex Pistols re-formed in 1996; disco returned with a vengeance: even prog. rock got another outing. (Cobley 2000: 1)

Let my "toy of choice" be the connection of some dots between Cobley's work on narrativity and this semi-secret musical competence. The goal is to develop what he himself admits and anticipates, particularly by referencing McClary 1998, that is, that music, too, "might embody stories" (Cobley 2013: 2), where by "music," we

mean “music” and not the words that go with it in pop songs (though I will emphasize the strict cooperation between the two dimensions). More specifically, I will attempt to elaborate on the historical tripartition of narrative styles into realism, modernism, and postmodernism (Cobley 2013: 80–181), the heteroglossic characteristics of the (popular) musical language (Cobley 2013: 118), the existence of meta-levels (Cobley 2013: 158–161), and on other aspects that perhaps were less central in Cobley’s analysis, and nevertheless – I maintain – important (a.k.a. “pretend to write about the scholar you are celebrating, but in fact write about your own stuff” – an absolute classic of the *Festschrift* genre).

2 Song formats and narrativity

One of the key-factors that determine the narrative potentials of a text is its format, and within it, the distribution of its parts. By format, I mean the typology of text, as displayed mostly by its structural components, regardless of the media employed, of which formats are a sub-category, or its genre, of which formats are a super-category, although on occasion these two are confused (e.g. the expression “epistolary *genre*” is misleading. An epistolary novel can be of totally different genres, from the gothic of *Dracula* to the comedy of *Inconceivable*). In popular music, thus, a format informs us of how the different song parts are sequenced to form a particular structure that can be indifferently used in any genre. Loosely put, the most recurrent parts are the following (all British examples, in homage to the birthday boy):

1. *Intro*: the initial part of a song that, literally, introduces it, either through a brief phrase (e.g. the initial orchestral part in XTC’s “Easter Theatre”) or in a more elaborate form, almost as a “prologue” (e.g. the extensive choral introduction in The Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”).
2. *Riff*: an ostinato instrumental phrase repeated several times during the song, that often opens it but differently from an intro, even if it may serve as such. Usually, the riff is composed on a different melody than any other part of the song (e.g. the guitar ostinato in Deep Purple’s “Smoke on the Water”), but sometimes it can echo one part (e.g. The Kinks’ “All Day and All of the Night”).
3. *Strophe*: usually, the first part of the song format I shall call “Strophe–Refrain” (see next paragraph). It has an intrinsic storytelling nature that develops both the lyrical and musical themes of the song, leading naturally to a refrain (e.g. the “I’ve got an aching in my bones, I’ve been exposed to what I want to see ...” part in Dodgy’s “Good Enough”).
4. *Refrain*: the second part that naturally follows the strophe in the “Strophe–Refrain” format (often through the transition of a bridge, as we will soon see). It has normally a very catchy but less narrative quality. Instead of “developing,” the themes reach a culmination/catharsis and the lyrics have

more a slogan/tagline quality (e.g. the “If it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me ...” part in “Good Enough”).

5. *Chorus*: a catchy, but more elaborate melody/lyric that serves as first part in another format, the “Chorus–Bridge” (see next paragraph). Unlike the Strophe–Refrain format (SR, from now on), where the catchy part (R) is placed as a consequence of S, the Chorus–Bridge (CB, from now on) places the catchy part at the start (C) and then is followed by a more meditative, narrative section (B). An example is Status Quo’s “Whatever You Want” where the “Whatever you want, whatever you like ...” part is a C and not a R or a S.
6. *Bridge*: a transitional part that connects two sections. It can be used both in the CB format (evidently) and in the SR one. In the former case, it has a more prominent role, interacting with C and connecting one C with the next (e.g. the “I could take you home on the midnight train” part in “Whatever You Want”). In the SR format, the role is more secondary, but the transitional quality emerges more prominently. It is neither a first nor a second part, but a kind of *n* that can be placed either between S and R (“pre-R” B) or between R and S (“post-R” B). An example of pre-R B is the “What could he do? Should have been a rock star ...” part in Kate Bush’s “Army Dreamers,” placed between S (“Our little army boy is coming home from B.F.P.O”) and R (“What a waste, army dreamers ...”). A post-R B can be found in XTC’s “The Mayor of Simpleton”: “When their logic grows cold and all thinking gets done ...,” placed indeed after the first R (“Well I don’t know how to tell the weight of the sun ...”) and allowing the return to S (“I can’t have been there when brains were handed round ...”).
7. *Special*: a particular (special!) case of B, the special is a third (or even fourth) theme that occurs only once in the whole song, as a moment of particular emphasis/pathos. An example is the “Since you’ve gone I’ve been lost ...” part in Police’s “Every Breath You Take.”
8. *Turnaround*: a short segment (usually, one or two bars) that connects a “second” part (R or B) to a “first” (S or C). For example, the “See how they run” part in The Beatles’ “Lady Madonna.” Depending on the length, or also on the arrangement, turnaround and post-R B may be the same thing. Usually, the turnaround is not only very short, but is often in form of break (e.g. the instruments stop, or the vocals are left alone, or other).
9. *Solo*: An instrumental part that could either be based on a chord progression already exhibited in the song (e.g. Eric Clapton’s “Cocaine”), or, more rarely, on a different one (e.g. Suede’s “Can’t Get Enough”). It normally appears just once in the song, but on occasions there can be more solos (e.g. Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb”).

10. *Outro*: the concluding part of a song. Traditionally it can be a fade out (a part is repeated several times while the volume decreases, as in Peter Gabriel's "Biko"), a cadence (a sequence of chords that wrap up the song, as in the I-IV-V-IV-I cadence that concludes Supertramp's "Give a Little Bit") or a hard out (a more sudden stop than the cadence, usually on one chord only, that often coincides with the natural conclusion of a phrase already contained in the song, as in The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go?").

Other parts more difficult to map can be simply named numerically, depending on their position in the song. For instance, if the song has a "suite" structure, like Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody," we shall name 1 the first theme ("Is this the real life ..." – of course this one is easily identifiable as an intro, as well), 2 the second ("Mama, just killed a man ..."), 3 the third ("Mama, oooh, didn't mean to make you cry ..."), and so forth.

It is germane to the thesis I am defending to underline that these song parts (and consequently their interrelation within the song, in the manner they are sequenced) must not be treated as mere structural and diachronic segments, but as actual synchronic "functions": e.g. an "intro" is not just an "intro" because it occurs at the beginning of the song, but also because it plays a certain role within the dynamics of the song's musical and lyrical purposes. This is why the occasional use of numbers to name the song parts in this article is just meant for clarity, but I do not consider this evidently diachronic terminological system as suitable as the actual denominations (strophe, bridge, special ...).

2.1 Build the pathos...

It is around the late 1830s that we begin to find musical acts and pieces that we can ascribe to the area of "popular music" in a modern sense. As Western Europe and North America were possibly the quickest to establish important socioeconomic conditions for an actual music industry to develop (an industry that was initially based on the business of sheet music and of course performances, and that later was fueled by the invention of mechanical reproduction devices such as the phonograph and the gramophone), it is no wonder that it is from those geographical areas that we find the earliest examples of "proper" popular music (visibly less derivative, that is, from both "art" music, like the *lieder*, or the folk ones, with which they can easily be confused). Events like the Piedigrotta Festival in Italy or composers like Stephen Foster in United States paved the way to future generations with songs whose modernity continues to astonish, even by today's standards (a song like "Te voglio bene assaje," written in 1839 for the Piedigrotta

Festival, follows from every point of view – melody, harmony, structure... – the pop ballad canon still operating nowadays). To find at least the embryos for convincingly *popular* forms of music in other parts of the world, we need to wait for the end of the century, or the beginning of the 20th: the bases for the Shirei Eretz Yisrael, the Algerian Raï, the Jamaican Mento, and the Taraab from the Swahili area (Tanzania and Kenya in particular) were set in the 1880s, but will properly develop only in the early 20th century.

Browsing through these early schools and repertoires, and starting already from the very beginning (“Te voglio bene assaje” itself, but also many of Foster’s compositions, such as the famous “Oh Susanna,” written in 1847), it is soon clear that the basic format for a song consists of two melodic parts alternated in more or less regular ways, and with the occasional (and increasingly frequent, as time goes by) inclusion of additional parts, often meant to connect the two main ones. Popular music learns this structure from the traditional folk ballad, which is a rigid 1-2-1-2-1-2 structure, where 2 is lyrically identical at every repetition, while 1 “progresses” with some kind of story/description.

This is certainly what happens in “Oh Susanna,” where each and every part 2 goes “Oh! Susanna, oh don’t you cry for me, cos’ I’ve come from Alabama wid my banjo on my knee” with identical melody, while each part 1 is a different segment (lyric-wise, while the melody is mostly unchanged, save small nuances) of the full story of an Afro-American (meant to be racistically portrayed by a “blackface” actor in Minstrel Shows) addressing his beloved one as he heads from Alabama to Louisiana to see her (other interpretations of this song were offered, but we shall discuss them another time).

While the stubborn 1–2 alternation has been in time replaced and implemented by more imaginative structures, we certainly must assign to these two parts (whichever way they are sequenced) the role of primary format in popular music. We call it “Strophe–Refrain” (SR), where S is the described part 1 and R is 2. It is an inherently narrative form. It tells a story in S, and, during R, it presents the listener with a usually catchy musical statement (rescue, catharsis, or other) that does not “add” to the story, but presents a point of view, an answer, a proposition, or anything else that could possibly qualify it as a *discours* contraposed to the *histoire* of S. And, because of its cathartic nature, R is often a “pleasure that comes after hard work,” and that hard work (S, the building of pathos) may actually last quite a while – with such sadistic extremes as Elton John’s “Tiny Dancer,” where R arrives only after 2 min and a half. Less teasing time-wise, but even more efficient in this capacity of increasing and then releasing the tension is Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone.” The various S (which are of two types, S1 and S2, plus a B, but for the moment this detail is not important) tell us the story of this “Miss Lonely,” a woman fallen from wealth and spoiledness into poverty, describing the differences

between her previous condition and the new one. After exactly 1 min, with the help of a perfectly fitting musical part that, among other things, insists on dominant chords almost at the end of each verse (dominants being the “tense” harmonic function *par excellence*), the catharsis arrives in form of a bitterly sarcastic “How does it feel?,” pronounced from the song’s narrator who is evidently not supportive of Miss Lonely (for whatever reason: a resentful working-class man? A revengeful dumped ex-lover? Other? We are not given specific clues).

With that in mind, one could argue that the SR is the closest format to the realist representation so common in 19th century literature (Cobley 2013: 80–131).

2.2 ... or be direct

By contrast, a songwriting equivalent of modernism (Cobley 2013: 132–154) might be identified in a format that emerged quite distinctively during the period of the “Great American Songbook” (1920s to late 1950s, roughly) and that evolved further in the 1960s, particularly thanks to the British Invasion. After Fabbri (2002: 108–131), we shall call this format “Chorus–Bridge” (CB). It is a more exclamatory, dialogue/direct addressing type of format which starts right away with the catchy passage, which we indeed call C, and which is virtually as catchy as an R but more articulate, especially in lyrics. C is followed by a more meditative passage (B, the bridge, which also bears that “transitional” function we mentioned in relation to SR).

We find repeated examples in Tin Pan Alley classics like “Blue Moon,” “Cheek to Cheek,” and “Night and Day,” as well as in doo-wop ballads (which, to many extents, are a continuation of the American Songbook) like “The Great Pretender,” “Sixteen Candles,” or “Since I Don’t Have You.” In contrast with SR, the tendency is to reduce the development stage of storytelling and go straight to the point (C): “Blue moon, you saw me standing alone, without a dream in my heart, without a love of my own ...” or, even more significantly, “Oh yes, I’m the great pretender, pretending that I’m doing well ...” with that “oh yes” sounding like a confirmation of a condition that a SR song would have explained, but which the CB takes for granted. When we move to B, instead, we may find a slight elaboration of the topic, almost as if the song’s protagonist is reflecting, clarifying, or even making progress: “And then they suddenly appeared before me, the only one my arms will ever hold ...” (the protagonist was lonely in C while someone appears in B) or “Too real is this feeling of make-believe, too real when I feel what my heart can’t conceal ...” (the protagonist explains why he’s the great pretender).

One may understand how a format like this, which presents its musical hooks already at the beginning, has a quality of immediacy and catchiness that SR did not

possess: as much as R, in this respect, is the “cake” for the listener’s patience during S, one still has to wait. Without wanting to stretch the analysis too far in a sociological sense, one may wonder if by the late 1950s, when finally youngsters had become the main musical market (for various reasons, primarily related to the achieved cultural and financial emancipation following the difficult aftermath of WWII), a relation exists between this “pleasure at the beginning”/“cut the c**p” new format and the enormous success that the acts of the late 1950s to early 1960s had among the younger generations, including teenagers. Not incidentally, The Beatles made a sheer “cash cow” formula out of this format: most of their early hits, indeed (“I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “From Me to You,” “A Hard Day’s Night”...), but also many of their most celebrated (and often Tin Pan Alley-aware) ballads (“Michelle,” “The Long and Winding Road,” “Yesterday”...), were built according to this structure. By reading the lyrics of these songs, we understand how these narrative dynamics operate: in “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” C is a repeated love declaration and a request to hold hands (exclamatory, indeed: “I wanna hold your hand!,” “now let me hold your hand!”), while B elaborates a bit on the reasons for such request (“When I touch you I feel happy inside ...”). Same with more profound lyrics like “Yesterday”: C displays the protagonist’s feelings (that is, the fact that he misses his past as the time when all his troubles “seemed so far away” or when “love was such an easy game to play”), while B uncovers the reasons for his sadness (a “she” who left him without explanations). Back to modernist literature, one cannot help relating this strategy not only to the progressive abandonment of conventional storytelling, but also to the increasing inclination to throw the reader in the thick of a story already from the first lines (the incipit of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* remains the antonomasia, but one may also think of Svevo’s *The Confessions of Zeno*, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and others).

2.3 Implementing A and B

As I mentioned, although a binary structure remains the main foundation of the traditional pop song, 1 and 2 are not the sole parts that may appear in it. Different types of “extensions” can be added – I shall list a couple of the most relevant ones. In a first case, typical of SR, the extension consists of a transitional melody that connects either S to R or R back to S. This transitional melody has been called many ways, particularly “bridge,” “release,” and “middle eight.” I definitely prefer the term “bridge” (specifically, “pre-R B” and “post-R B”, depending indeed on the position) exactly because the word conveys the transitional function of “connecting” two points, like a real bridge. The alternatives are less convincing. “Release” is less comprehensive in meaning: it applies to pre-R parts but not to

post-R ones, which simply bring the song back to S, in a context where the song may also manage to do it without that part (and indeed, in the previously mentioned example of “Ob-la-dì Ob-la-dà,” that is what happens after the first R, where McCartney goes straight to the second S “Desmond takes a trolley to the jeweler’s store ...”). As for “middle eight,” the expression is by now anachronistic. It used to refer to a section appearing approximately in the “middle” of the song (that is, neither at the beginning nor at the end) and lasting eight bars. While the rule was applied quite rigorously during the first half of the 20th century, it later developed into a freer form that could be placed anywhere and last a variable number of bars. Moreover, besides this greater effectiveness, the term “bridge” appears again in the other relevant format discussed here, the CB, and thus one must realize that in that case, too, B possesses that transitional function. On a side note: I considered using different terms in order not to confuse the B that appears in SR (before or after R) with the B of the CB format. However, that would be more deceiving, because they are exactly the same part, except that they are differently contextualized. A carrot is a carrot both in a savory vegetable stew and in a sweet carrot cake, even if the contexts, as well as the importance and role played by the orange root, are different.

So: what does B do, narratively speaking? As we have seen already with the CB format, it presents a “development” of the story, in different ways. It can be an action taken after a previous action or after a situation of non-action (e.g. S is often *descriptive* of a situation, while B tends to *make things move*, somehow); it can be some kind of assessment (e.g. an emotion, an opinion ...) on the protagonist’s part toward what was presented in S more narratively or in C more affirmatively; it can display someone else’s point of view, and so forth.

Let us take another very famous song, Queen’s “We Are the Champions.” S, in minor key, tells us of a man marked by traumatic life events, for which he suffered the consequences even when it was unfair (“I’ve done my sentence, but committed no crime”). As B starts, music (which turns from minor to major, and from a lower to a higher melodic area) and lyrics (“And bad mistakes I’ve made a few ...”) cooperate in presenting another aspect of the protagonist: yes, he unfairly suffered, but now we learn that he is not surrendering, and despite having had his “share of sand kicked in [his] face,” he has “come through,” and he needs “to go on and on and on” (and note that the epizeuxis “on and on and on” is mirrored by a melodic epizeuxis of identical notes). It is this development that connects the man who has paid his dues to the one who is “a champion,” as R presents him, and that gives meaning to that (obviously, and despite almost any sport competition’s exploitation of the song, being “champions” here means to go through life’s trials, not particularly to win a world cup). Clever is also the switch from “I” to “we” in R, which, besides its evident crowd-pleasing effect (something Mercury and co. were

often going after, as we know), also conveys the idea that the protagonist's challenges are pretty much everybody's challenges.

In a second case, we have the so-called "special," that is, an additional segment with different melody and harmony (not rarely a different key), usually appearing only once, that often brings an additional statement and expands the narrative material exposed in the song. In the example I offered before ("Every Breath You Take"), the special introduces us to a new segment in the story of this possessive lover who intends to watch the addressee whatever she does and everywhere she goes: "Since you've gone I've been lost without a trace ..." After the special, we basically realize that this possessiveness is in fact stalking. The woman *dumped* the protagonist: now we understand better why his "poor heart aches with every step [she takes]." He follows her, he watches her, but he is *not*, and cannot be, with her. This is all information coming from the special.

Along with B and special, one should of course mention intros and outros, whose functions are more predictable and suggested by their names. Intros are often the equivalent of "prequels," or phase 0 in Propp's motives, or establishing shots in films: they open a story, announce its topics, set its tones. Once more, they do so not only from the lyrical point of view, but also from the strictly musical one: they may be milder in pace and/or arrangement in a "quiet before the storm" kind of way (e.g. The Who's "Will not Get Fooled Again"), they may expose some of the melodic material of the whole song (typically through a riff, but not only), they may create a sense of anticipation through any of the available tools (e.g. the opening based on the dominant chord, in "Twist and Shout" mode, that we hear in David Bowie's "Let's Dance"), they may be more sudden and exclamatory (e.g. *that* chord in "A Hard Day's Night") and so forth. Occasionally, they may also foreshadow other parts (usually a special, or a B), by presenting it "in disguise" (different arrangement, different harmony, or other – e.g. XTC's "Respectable Street").

Similarly, outros take care of how a story ends, or does not really end, or ends in a "weak" way (as in Casetti and Di Chio's idea of "strong" and "weak" narration – 1990: 206). Traditionally, endings in songs tended to be a hard out, a cadence, or a fade out – practically the equivalents of full stop, exclamation mark, and suspension points in grammar. In the first case, the song would stop in a sudden manner, much to a theatrical effect. In the second case, a certain mannerism, imported from classical music, would make the outro emphatic, usually relying on the tonic, and – so to speak – unmistakable, a clear "The end" inscription. In the third case, the song would fade out after a couple of repetitions of R or C, in a rather simple manner, as if to convey that this catchy part could go on and on, but, hey, we got the point. As popular music progressed into what is usually defined as "art rock," around the mid-1960s (again: The Beatles and the British Invasion in general are central, here), musical orthography turned into a

more colorful landscape, which would include not only full stops, exclamation marks, and suspension points, but also question marks (in other words, ending on the dominant or other non-resolved chords, e.g. The Rolling Stones' "She Smiled Sweetly"), extended suspension points (e.g. Supertramp's "Crime of the Century"), unfinished, abruptly interrupted sentences (e.g. Pink Floyd's "Corporal Clegg"), a capos (that is, reprises or codas unrelated to the song, as in The Beach Boys "Caroline, No"), and even commas (when the outro is a direct transition to the next song, as in The Who's "Amazing Journey" and "Sparks") and columns (when one song finale literally introduces the next song, as in The Beatles' "Billy Shears" cadence at the end of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," which leaves the floor to "With a Little Help from My Friends"). Similarly to what was happening in literature but also in cinema (the 1960s being the decade that challenged traditional filmic conventions, especially through genres and movements like *Nouvelle Vague*, spaghetti western, American new wave, etc.), close and clear ("strong") endings became less and less satisfying, replaced by elements of openness, vagueness, even a touch of eeriness. Anti-climactic endings, sheer "shaggy dog stories," began appearing too (The Beatles' "Piggies," with the pigs' noises following the manneristic epic finale, The Stones' "Cool, Calm and Collected" with the laughs following the final crescendo, etc.).

We entered – you may have guessed it – the (in)famous world of postmodern narration (Cobley 2013: 155–181).

3 Unusual formats, conceptual space and postmodernism

Postmodernism's main features (e.g. Sim 2001) include a general refusal to acknowledge the authority of any single style or definition of art; a blurred distinction between high and mass culture, and between art and everyday life (including "blurring of the common-sense distinction of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction'" – Cobley 2013: 162); and also, quite often, the deliberate employment of earlier styles and conventions (up to – personal opinion – selling as "original ideas" sheer forms of copy-and-paste from the past), and an eclectic, often syncretistic, mixing of different styles and media.

A whole debate can be – and has been – opened on when exactly popular music delved into postmodernism. Albright (2004: 12) suggests considering the second half of the 1960s, specifically psychedelic rock (or, by extension, art rock), and while it could be argued that early symptoms were manifest already 10 years earlier (e.g. the country + blues and therefore white + Afro-American synthesis that

brought rock and roll, so well epitomized by Elvis Presley's first single, is a postmodern event in many ways), we can agree that by the time Timothy Leary became every musician's favorite reading, postmodernism was *definitely* inhabiting many songs and albums.

By then, for instance, the standard song formats had ceased to be an unavoidable "authority," and they could be heavily manipulated or straightaway replaced. A case of manipulation, and again one that may generate confusion with the already-described CB structure, consists of those few SR songs that, as structural choice, opt to place R at the beginning (e.g. Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day," The Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia"...) rather than letting the listener wait for the story to develop first. In order not to confuse this format with CB, we need to pay attention to the narrative construction of the piece, and exactly realize that the other parts are devoted to the actual storytelling ("Living is easy with eyes closed ..."), even though, on these occasions, they happen to be placed *after* the more assertive sections ("Let me take you down ...").

The refusal of authority is also accompanied by a recovery of earlier styles and blurring of high and mass culture when we witness the appearance of "revised and updated" formats imported by classical music, folk traditions, or "exotic" (from a Western point of view) repertoires. For example, the suite, a number of different pieces sequenced one after another in unconventional order, sometimes even without repetition, which is a format existing since the 14th century, became a fashionable format from the art rock era onwards ("Good Vibrations," "Happiness Is a Warm Gun," "Stairway to Heaven," "Bohemian Rhapsody"), as well as the single-section and single-chord song, consisting of repeated A parts set on one chord, joining the folk traditions of early blues and Indian raga ("Tomorrow Never Knows," "Coconut," "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun").

3.1 Mina sings Morricone

An intriguing example of unusual format employed to serve specific narrative purposes is one song composed by the late Ennio Morricone. Morricone's work in film music is well known to most, some of his themes having become sheer "canon" within genres like western or auteur movies, but not too many people know that he was also an accomplished songwriter, especially at the beginning of his career, and that – unsurprisingly – he was able to apply his "cinematic" vision of music in this capacity as well.

In 1966, he was asked to write a tune for the Italian popstar Mina, already by then the best-known (and arguably the best) Italian female pop singer. Morricone

was given a ready set of lyrics to work on: nothing really special, a typical “silly love song,” as there are many. The title was “Se telefonando ...” (“If, talking on the phone ...”), and the lyrics describe a couple who basically had a one-night stand by the sea, narrated from the woman’s point of view. Somehow, they are both taken by surprise by the suddenness of this passion (“The marvel of the night, open towards the sea, caught us by surprise, as we were unknown to each other. Then, all of a sudden, your hands on my hands ...” – my translation). Except that he falls in love with her, while she does not (“This love of ours has gone too far ...” – m.t.), so she is now trying to find the courage to call it quits: “If, talking on the phone, I was able to tell you goodbye, then I would call you... If, meeting you again, I was sure you would not suffer, then I would meet you... If, looking into your eyes, I was able to tell you that it’s over, then I would look into them... But in fact, I can’t explain why our new-born love is already over ...” – m.t.). And that is it. This last part is repeated once more, and then the song fades out after less than 3 min, and I guess we can all agree that the lyrics are not exactly of the Leonard Cohen level (for the record, they had been co-written by a lyricist named Ghigo Di Chiara and a journalist named Maurizio Costanzo).

On the other hand, as anticipated, we have a quite uncommon structure for a pop song that testifies to how even the musically conservative Italy was emancipating from traditional formats like SR and CB. In “Se telefonando,” indeed, we have something like an intro-C-C structure, where each C is also offered in two different keys. The intro serves the purpose of describing the “sudden passion” part, while C displays the sense of guilt, sung twice, of the narrating character.

Now, how did Morricone approach the song, in terms of compositional problem-solving? At that time, he had been in film music for five years already, so it is not to be excluded that he was in that kind of mindset already, since his musical solution turned out to be remarkably cinematographic. Needless to say, from now on, nothing of what I write will make sense if the reader has not heard the song at least a couple of times: it can be easily found on Spotify, YouTube, or any other music or OV platform under its title and performer.

A strophic type of melody, with a distinctive attitude of “preparation,” characterizes the intro part: the melodic arc is rather restricted (the whole part plays around four contiguous notes) and, on purpose, not immediately catchy. The harmonic progression is simple and stable, yet perfectly meant for each unit of the section: a mixed cadence performed twice, on the descriptive part (“The marvel of the night, open towards the sea, caught us by surprise, as we were unknown to each other ...”). The second verse, however, does not resolve on the tonic, but on the minor chord of the 3rd degree, practically creating a dominant minor that is nothing else but expectation for something not-openly-positive to happen. Things then turn slightly dramatic “all of a sudden” (“Then, all of a sudden, your hands on

my hands ...”), so the focus is on the 6th minor (the obvious “sad” alternative to the tonic, but again, “slightly” sad, as turning to the tonic minor would be much more dramatic – as in light-turns-to-dark dramatic), and a change in melody (a bit more pathos) appears. Then, finally, the verse “This love of ours has gone too far” is performed with the same melody as the opening, but following a different progression: not the full-circle regularity of the I-IV-V-I cadence, but rather a waiting-for-something-to-happen type: I-IV-II-V. The ending of the verse is on the dominant, and thus the doors are open: the intro comes to an end and qualifies itself as a clear prologue. The intro is the past, C will be the present. The intro tells us why the woman is feeling so desperately guilty in C, and it does that – we shall see – with a totally different rhythm and atmosphere than the latter. A hint of Hitchcockian McGuffin may be detected here: the song initially presents a focus on the “sudden passion,” and arguably the listener expects the song to be entirely about that (an expectation also suggested by the redundant tradition of love songs of that sort). Instead, just as with Janet Leigh’s stolen money or Tippi Hedren’s attraction to Rod Taylor, we realize that this aspect was important only for the protagonist, not for the plot, which instead focuses on her sense of guilt (a less-explored theme in love songs).

So, the two Cs start, and it is a totally different matter. The melody is wider, more contiguous, more in legato, and very catchy, but at the same time it is set on a syncopated rhythm (one of Morricone’s trademarks): it is a cry installed on uncertainty. She knows how she feels, but she does not know how to say it. The lyrics are repetitive, and once again not particularly brilliant, as they revolve around the same concept through three different (but in principle similar) actions: whatever she says, the point is, “I would love to call it quits, but I cannot bear to see you suffering.” Consequently, Morricone has a second problem here: giving a bit of freshness to a repetitive set of lyrics. To a good half of the Italian (and Eurovision) popular song tradition, that would have meant one single procedure: change of key. And changes of key, in Sanremo or in Eurovision, are done in two ways: either half or one tone up.

Too easy for Morricone: he has three verses to work on, three “if” propositions, talking on the phone with the guy, meeting him, and looking into his eyes (plus the final explanation that she will not perform these actions, as she does not have the courage to face her lover’s desperation). The first “if” starts in the same key as the intro (G flat major, for the record: another of Morricone’s trademarks – working in keys that are not pop-friendly like C, A, or G), and melodically-wise, begins with and relies on the tonic. The second “if” insists on the G flat but now begins with and relies on the 2nd grade (A flat), no longer on the tonic. Harmonically, we get an idea of repetition, but we have lifted the melody a bit, as if the character is increasingly doubtful about her abilities to leave her lover. Third “if,” and the protagonist

collapses emotionally: the long-awaited modulation happens, but not in the typical Italian way: Morricone takes the song no less than two tones up, to B flat, and the melody begins with and relies on B flat, in a similar fashion to the first “if.” The sense of the modulation here is totally different from the traditional one: not a simple refreshment of the same musical ambience, but simply a “new” ambience, despite the same melodic shape. Not painting the same room with a new color, but straightaway moving to another room. Morricone works here on two levels: melody and harmony (plus arrangement, but that is outside of our scopes here), letting the former suggest repetition and doubtfulness and the latter take care of increasing desperation.

The whole procedure is repeated a second time, as if to underline that the protagonist is constantly tormenting herself. Will she find the courage? Will she tell him? The ending, in fade out, is open: we just get to know of her inside struggles, as close to real life as it can be, where so much in our feelings is unfinished and unresolved. As another great Italian songwriter, Sergio Caputo, wrote: “per le cose che forse, per le cose che ormai ...” (“for all the things that ‘maybe,’ for all the things that ‘by now’...” – m.t.).

3.2 Diegesis and non-diegesis

The last case study of this article screams “pop music postmodernism” more than anything else: the conceptual space of a song, as again introduced by art rock during the fatal 1960s. What does it mean? In pretty much every field of art, but particularly in film and theater, there is a well-known expression “fourth wall,” which designates the ideal separation between audience and fictional text: the wall is “broken” when an interaction between the two sides occurs (my favorite example is the *Annie Hall* sequence when Woody Allen invokes Prof. McLuhan’s help to get rid of his annoying interlocutor and then looks *at us* sighing “Boy, if life were only like this!”). This violation implies one of the postmodern favorite actions, that is, mixing reality and fiction: albeit less visibly, the musical art too can move beyond, between, and to and fro its own fourth wall. Music, too, operates with three forms of conceptual space: the diegetic, the non-diegetic, and the “real” space (the one inhabited by the public). In other words: the fictional space (where the actual representation takes place), the space in between the latter and us (for instance, in a film, the space occupied by the soundtrack, by the head and end titles, by certain camera work like the crane or the dolly shots, etc.), and – indeed – us, the spectators, the readers, the listeners.

Now, when we translate everything into the musical field, and in particular into a song, the presence of a diegetic space appears obvious to us. It is the song

itself, with its lyrics, that is diegetic. It is that space inhabited by travelers checking into premises like the “Hotel California” or a roadhouse on a motorway, by guitarists jamming with Weird, Gilly, and the Spiders from Mars, by serial killers using a silver hammer as a weapon, and so on. Problems arise when we try to identify non-diegetic elements. In a general and conceptual sense, forms of disengagement from the diegetic space are not particularly difficult to spot: in principle, every song addressing a “you” have a “fourth wall violation” component, but if we want to be more refined, we could look, for examples, at the histrionic protagonist of “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” who introduces us to the act we have “known for all these years” and hopes we “will enjoy the show.” In this sense, a song, as a whole, can move from a strictly diegetic plane to one that explicitly addresses the audience. However, this kind of violation is rather an attempt to end up directly in reality – maybe not necessarily to “us,” as identifiable subjects with a name and a face, but at least to a model reader.

Less explored, on the other hand, is the territory of those musical and textual features that are positioned *exactly* on the non-diegetic space, remaining there, and not breaking anything. To identify these features, I suggest introducing, alongside the concepts of diegetic and non-diegetic, two more contradictory terms, and constructing a classic Greimasian square (Greimas 1966): formal and non-formal. By formal space I mean everything that is designated “officially” and “conventionally” to the song – everything that has been decided to be done, that is convenient to do, and that is useful to do. For example, formal are the lyrics of the songs we find in a CD booklet (remember CDs?). Nonformal instead refers to all those parts of the text (often simple exclamations like “Yeah,” “Hey,” “Alright” – but not only) that we often see appearing in a song, especially in live versions, but which in general we will not find in the official transcripts of the text. To make it clear, if the “yeh yeh!” we hear in the eponymous song by Georgie Fame and The Blue Flames is surely meant to be there, and thus formal, the many we hear at the end of The Doors’ “Break on Through” are all part of Jim Morrison’s improvisations and are thus informal.

Formal are also all the recording procedures that a band agrees to perform to the purpose of the best possible result, regardless of which such procedures will be heard in the final product. For example, it is formal that at the beginning of the piece there is a count-off to coordinate the BPM among the various musicians, but that counting, even if recorded, is not necessarily included in the final product. Indeed, except for few cases, most of the released tracks edit out that bit. Staying in the same example, we will instead consider nonformal instances like a wrong counting, intentionally or unintentionally, as for instance we hear in Todd Rundgren’s “Hello, it’s me” (album version: the single, too, edits that out).

That said, let us now see the actual four combinations that emerge from the interaction of the four terms, according to relations of opposition, sub-opposition, and complementarity (in accordance with Greimas' precepts). The following types derive:

- *Formal/Diegetic*. It is the most obvious configuration and is the only indispensable part of this square, in the sense that it is always there and that it constitutes the actual song, in its released form. It is a “formal” dimension because precisely these are the official features – words and music – of a piece. And it is “diegetic” because it occupies the inside semiotic space of musical fiction. The text, ideally, can also be faithful to reality (as, for example, in autobiographical songs), but, as we explained already, this does not mean that it overlaps with reality: it remains a form of representation.
- *Nonformal/Diegetic*. We enter now a more intriguing and, in general, peculiar context of popular music. Those additional traits that are not in the official version of a song (as we said, the lyrics that may be printed in an album booklet or on the back-cover), but which unofficially reinforce its meaning, are to be considered “nonformal and diegetic.” Those “yeahs” and “alrights” and “oohs” and so forth that we have mentioned before are still “diegetic” episodes, because they still belong to the semiotic space inside the song. Ideally, it is always the fictional protagonist of the text (and not the singer as such) who speaks, as if they had a script to play (the official text), but they do not disdain to vary on the theme in order to appear more sincere and persuasive.
- *Formal/Non-diegetic*. With this category we now venture into the less explored area of non-diegesis. To do this, we need to be in the same mindset as a film's musical soundtrack – let us say, *Psycho*. Something, that is, that we, the audience, perceive, but that is not with us, and, at the same time, something that comes from the film, but that is not in it (luckily Janet Leigh “does not hear” Hermann's violin *marcato* hits, while she is being stabbed by Anthony Perkins, otherwise she would be even more terrified than she already is). In order to identify this dimension in songs, the example of the count-off before a track begins comes again at hand, along with other studio amenities, like the announcement of a take, a quick dialogue before or during the piece that serves the purpose of instructing a musician, or other. All these are actions that take place *outside* the diegetic space of a song. They are not, that is, words or sounds belonging to the (more or less fictional) representation displayed in the text. And at the same time, as already said, they are “formal” because they adhere to specific needs and conventions of making music. When, therefore, these elements appear in the song, they must necessarily be included in this category.

- *Nonformal/Non-diegetic*. The last combination of the semiotic square takes us to an area I have often dealt with, called “error aesthetics” (e.g. Martinelli 2010). Briefly, in order to qualify as “nonformal and non-diegetic,” a song’s item must be outside the fictional representation, but also outside any conventional studio practice. This is why accidents, errors, inaccuracies, but also informal talks, cursing even (like the famous “My doughnuts, God damn!” dropped by Ronnie Van Zant in “Sweet Home Alabama”), can all be filed under this label, if of course they end up in the released version of a song, for whatever reason (including the fact, inherent to the concept of error aesthetics, that they are considered good accidents that ended up embellishing the song). During the second half of the sixties, various acts indulged in this whim more than once, mostly to underline a certain authenticity, a “cinema vérité”-type of quality of their music, and since then the practice was never really abandoned (e.g. XTC in “The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead,” Oasis in “Cigarettes and Alcohol,” Giuliordorme in “Ti lascio stare,” the latter also including a swearword).

Somewhere in the vicinity of the square, we can also find hybrid and/or ambiguous forms of conceptual space, on a more or less symbolic level. If we again take the example of film music, we know, especially from musicals, that certain diegetic musical episodes can easily coexist with non-diegetic ones. Gene Kelly has just accompanied Debbie Reynolds back to her place, and, all dreamy and loved-up, walks home despite the pouring rain. In the middle of the street he starts singing the famous “Singing in the Rain.” At the diegetic level, we only see him (moreover, on a street – not on a stage or in a recording studio), but, miraculously enough, there is an entire orchestra backing him, which evidently operates at non-diegetic level. The two dimensions cooperate, and the magic of musicals is served.

A good corresponding example of ambiguity in pop songs comes again from the magical mystery world of “count-offs.” Once again, help comes from Liverpool. It makes a certain effect to notice how the two main phases of The Beatles’ career (the live years and the studio years) are, among other things, underlined by two famous count-offs that inaugurate not only their respective songs, but also their respective albums. The first LP, *Please Please Me*, begins with the count-off of “I Saw Her Standing There,” and it is an energetic count, typically rock and roll, which opens the album on an excited note. Conversely, the album that most of all presents the “new” Beatles to the world is *Revolver* (1966), and that, too, begins with a count-off – in “Taxman.” However, symbolically of the new phase of the band’s career, more focused on the artistic side of music-making than on pleasing the audience, that count-off is anomalous, indolent, and a bit eerie, accompanied by sound effects and even a cough. And, more intriguingly, the count-off (uttered

by George Harrison) is not even in the right tempo of the piece: the real count-off is heard more in the background and begins “off-mike” (we barely hear the “three” and more clearly the “four”), uttered by McCartney. Now, there is no doubt that the counting in “I Saw Her Standing There” has nothing to do with dancing and falling in love with a seventeen-year-old. The action is paradigmatically non-diegetic and has the explicit purpose of “energizing” a danceable rock piece.

What about “Taxman”’s disquieting count-off, instead? Could it have any-thing to do with a cruel taxman who will also “tax your feet” when you walk? I suspect that, yes, the count-off is already a characterization of the character. The taxman “counts” the money he has collected from the taxpayers and does it with a voice and a pace that reveals the pettiness and the unpleasantness by which he is depicted. A cough escapes him in the process, possibly revealing an advanced age that adds to the characterization. Being placed at the beginning of the song, and put against an existing convention in studio practices, that count-off is evidently non-diegetic. But in its being deliberately out of tempo (thus not fulfilling the function that also makes it a formal element), and adapting, in tone, timbre, and thematic connotation, to the figure of the mean taxman represented in the piece, it is also an item of diegetic nature.

In addition to this, we should also mention a particular case of conceptual space called metadiegesis, which consists in the opening of one or more diegetic “bubbles” within the diegetic space itself. In both audiovisual and literary arts, these bubbles are usually flashbacks, dreams, flashforwards, representations of the protagonists’ thoughts, and so on. A typical case is that of the so-called “frame narrative,” a technique where a main story is structured in order to contain a set of shorter stories, as in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* or Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (two very old examples that prove once more how postmodernism has a bigger debt to the past than it ever cared to admit).

In songs, and once more especially those from the art rock era onwards, the levels of referentiality, self-referentiality, and meta-referentiality have progressively increased, thus allowing different types of such bubbles. Nowadays, metadiegesis has been standardized through the practice of sampling, so we have the chance to contextualize a piece on two levels (the actual song and the one it samples) also creating semiotic connections of the “meta-level” type, such as, for instance, the case of Robbie Williams’ “A Love Supreme” sampling the string solo of “I Will Survive” in a context of a song bearing a late 1970s disco feel anyway and a very similar chord progression as Gloria Gaynor’s signature song. Prior to that, great examples include the “meeting among friends” voices at the beginning of Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?” (bringing the song’s title on the two levels of a

simple “How are you?” type of friendly conversation and the much more dramatic and socially-aware statement of the song’s lyrics), the short laughter in Pink Floyd’s “Shine on You Crazy Diamond” after the verse “Remember when you were young” (playing again on two levels: the well-known reference to Syd Barrett and the nostalgic bittersweet attitude towards the good old days), and the street band phrase in The Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine,” following the verse “And the band begins to play” (a classic “bubble” of metadiegesis).

4 Conclusions

Summing up the contents of the present article, an attempt was made to elaborate on Paul Cobley’s work on narrativity in film and literature in a direction that would involve a field, popular music, that has often been present in Cobley’s writings, but very seldom in the role of an actual research topic. The article explored the way pop songs convey narrative elements via their diverse formats, as overall structure and as single components. The SR format, with its traditional “increasing pathos leading to catharsis” approach was equated to realist narratives; the more immediate and less conventional nature of the more recent, but still “classic,” CB format was equated to modernism, while more unusual formats as well as revisions of the classical ones (e.g. the reversed RS) were identified as postmodernist strategies. Still within the framework of postmodernism, some notes about the “conceptual space” in popular music (diegesis, non-diegesis, fourth wall, etc.) were also proposed.

Concluding: in the introduction, I mentioned that Paul’s competence on popular music is “semi-secret,” in that he has displayed it very often without really making it central (save the exceptions mentioned towards the beginning of this article). Well, my own semi-secret goal, through this article, was that of encouraging Paul to share more of his knowledge in the field of popular music – and I say this from the point of view of the musical semiotician that I ultimately am. Paul’s insights on popular music would be of great benefit for the field – plus, he is British, for Jagger’s sake: lots of the best pop music comes from there!

There are many ways to wish someone a happy birthday, and since the editors of this journal were so gracious to invite me to this celebration, my wishes will be thus for “new beginnings” and “new challenges” for a scholar who has repeatedly proven his academic worth and his eclecticism.

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Bionote

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