"AND ALL I GOTTA DO IS ACT NATURALLY": TRANSMEDIA POP STARS, MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, AND METAREFERENCE IN NARRATIVE CINEMA

PASCAL RUDOLPH
UNIVERSITY OF COLOGNE, UNIVERSITY OF POTSDAM & NUREMBERG UNIVERSITY OF MUSIC

ABSTRACT

This article analyses musicians' performances on film, using the iconic Beatles film Help! *(Richard Lester 1965) as a foundational case study. The study investigates distinctions between film acting and musical performance while exploring the defining characteristics of musicians' performances within the context of cinema. Building upon established concepts of persona (Auslander 2021), metafiction and metareference (Waugh 1984; Wolf 2009), the author introduces novel conceptual frameworks of "metaperformance" and "intramedial transmediality". "Metaperformance" refers to the doubling of the act of performance, whereas "intramedial transmediality" describes the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text. Due to their off-screen musical persona, musical stars in films often provoke a pronounced transtextual and transmedial network and convey an implicit claim to reality. Compared to film actors, musical stars on film frequently provide metaperformances, embodying not only (fictional) characters but also performing their ("real") musical persona within them. Additional case studies of Ed Sheeran's performance in Danny Boyle's* Yesterday *(2019) and the Spice Girls' performance in Bob Spiers's* Spice World *(1997) further clarify these theoretical insights. Working deductively, these films serve as contemporary illustrations of the theoretical concepts under examination. The findings of this essay contribute to an enriched understanding of the intricacies in musicians' performances on film and shed light on the interplay between music, cinema, and artists' on-screen personas.*

KEY WORDS

Transmediality; Intermedia; Identity Construction; Screen Fiction; Popular Culture

INTRODUCTION

In 1965, The Beatles released their second film, *Help!*, following the success of the previous year's *A Hard Day's Night*, both directed by Richard Lester.[1] *Help!* features seven songs from their eponymous album and revolves around the band's struggles with their new studio recording. In the film *Help!*, The Beatles produce the album *Help!*, with its songs forming the film's soundtrack, each text thereby promoting the other.[2] Additionally, in the film, the musicians must protect their drummer Ringo Starr from a sinister cult and two crazy scientists who all have their eyes set on a sacrificial ring gifted to Starr by a fan.[3] The plot travels from the Alps to the Bahamas, and features everything from Paul McCartney shrinking to a fight between Ringo Starr and a tiger who can only be calmed by whistling Beethoven's *9th Symphony*. In the documentary *The Beatles in Help!* (Ferguson 2007), Lester described the approach to throwing The Beatles into this absurd plot:

> We didn't want The Beatles to just make a colour version of *A Hard Day's Night*. Not another fictionalised documentary. We couldn't show their private life, which would be the next thing, because that was, by then, certainly X-rated. Or at least what X-ratings were in those days! So if we can't show their working life, or private life, they have to become, if you like, passive recipients of an outside plot or an outside threat, brought on by a weakness within themselves. That led to the idea of *Help!* (Lester in Ferguson 2007, from 01:30)[4]

Elsewhere, Lester emphasised that he and the production team "had to make certain that they [The Beatles] still played themselves" (in Carr 1996, p. 61). "While the movie still retains the notion of The Beatles being themselves," according to Reiter (2008, p. 66), "the makers of *Help!* had no intention of attempting to construct an illusion of reality." The interplay between absurdity and authenticity becomes palpable at the beginning of the film (from 0:04:10).[5] The four musicians drive up in a car outside their home. It appears as though each member owns their own townhouse, with all four situated side by side. Across the street, two elderly women observe them. The woman on the right remarks, "Lovely lads, and so natural. Adoration hasn't gone to their heads. You know what I mean, success." The four Beatles then simultaneously walk towards their own individually coloured front doors. Meanwhile, the woman on the left agrees: "So natural," then adds, "and still the same as they was before they was." The next scene reveals that the four townhouses are in reality one luxurious, eccentrically furnished space where the four Beatles live together. Their absurd residence includes an organ that rises out of the floor with comic books on the music stand, drink and snack dispensers built into the walls, and an indoor lawn manicured by a man with chattering teeth. Rather than pretending to show the "real" private lives of the musicians, the film presents an overtly fictionalized version:

> The relationship of the working-class boys making it was something that we wanted to have some fun with, so we invented "the house", which was a group of ordinary terraced houses from the outside, and inside was total lunacy – one room with grass in it, one with a pit for a bed. We wanted that sense of the public thinking, "Are they just these good working-class Liverpool lads trying to earn a living?" (Lester in Ferguson 2007, from 07:50)

The musical album also evinces an ironic approach to the distinction between frontstage and backstage, as well as between public and private spheres: *Help!* includes a cover of "Act Naturally", written by Johnny Russell and originally recorded by Buck Owens (1963). The Beatles' cover appeared on the B-side of the original release, while in North America, they released their version as the B-side to *Yesterday* (1965). Here Ringo Starr sings about becoming a successful film actor, without understanding anything about acting, because he can simply play himself as a "sad and lonely" man:

> They're gonna put me in the movies
> They're gonna make a big star out of me
> We'll make a film about a man that's sad and lonely
> And all I gotta do is act naturally
>
> Well, I'll bet you I'm gonna be a big star
> Might win an Oscar you can never tell
> The movie's gonna make me a big star,
> 'Cause I can play the part so well
>
> Well I hope you come and see me in the movies
> Then I know that you will plainly see

> The biggest fool that's ever hit the big time
> And all I gotta do is act naturally
>
> "Act Naturally", Capitol (US) & Parlophone (UK) 1965, Songwriter: Johnny Russel

On the one hand, the film is about The Beatles, supposedly playing themselves. On the other, its infused absurdity serves to highlight the fictional nature of the events (see Figure 1). This article specifically analyses the performances of "real" pop musicians in fictional films by adopting a deductive and theoretically oriented approach.[6] In order to better understand these performances, I draw on the music-related performance theory of persona, along with the concepts of metafiction and metareference. This synthesis brings together key concepts in performance studies, media studies, literary studies, and film studies. Building on this synthesis and working in dialogue with performances by the Spice Girls in *Spice World* (Bob Spiers 1997) and Ed Sheeran in *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019), I develop the concepts of *metaperformance* (the doubling of the act of performance) and *intramedial transmediality* (the coexistence of different media texts within one media text), then return to The Beatles' example in the concluding summary. Table 2 (see below) provides a summary overview of the key concepts in this paper.

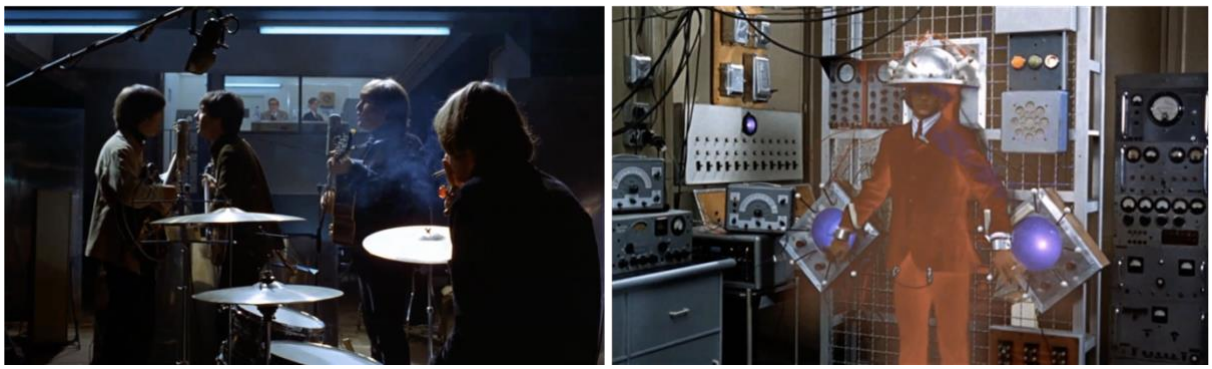

Figure 1. Stills from *Help!* (Richard Lester 1965).
The Beatles recording "You're Going to Lose That Girl" in the studio (left, 0:13:02);
two mad scientists attempting to snatch the ring off Ringo Starr's finger (right, 0:25:53).

Persona and Metareference

Two concepts, persona and metareference, prove helpful in better understanding the performance of musicians in film. These concepts are explored through three questions: What do musicians perform? How does film acting differ from musical performance? What characterises film performances by musicians?

Commotion at Shea Stadium: What do musicians perform?

In the same year as the release of the film *Help!*, a legendary Beatles concert took place at New York's Shea Stadium, marking the first major stadium concert in the history of popular music.[7] At the pinnacle of Beatlemania, with over 55,000 fans in attendance, their euphoria was so overwhelming and their screams so loud that it was nearly impossible to hold a musical performance. The live recordings mainly capture the audience's screaming, with the recording of "Act Naturally" of such poor quality that for the documentary *The Beatles at Shea Stadium*

(Robert Precht 1966) they utilised the studio recording, sped up slightly to attempt some synchronization between the sound and visuals. This example leads to the question of what musicians actually perform. The obvious answer seems like it should be music, but there is more to it. If those fans were solely interested in the music, then their behaviour, which nearly sabotaged the musical performance, would be completely incomprehensible. Instead, it appears more likely that the audience was more interested in attending the musicians themselves, and so, part of the impetus for screaming may have stemmed from attempts to gain their attention. For many audiences, musicians not only perform music, but also their identity as musicians.[8]

The identity performed by musicians is referred to as "persona" in music-related performance studies. The word's origins evoke a sense of role-playing, firstly because it can be linked to the masks of ancient Greek theatre (from the Greek, πρόσωπον "prosopon"). Secondly, the term is derived from the Latin "per-sonare", understood as "sounding through" the mask. Alongside Edward T. Cone (1974, pp. 20–40), Simon Frith (1996, p. 186, 212), and Allan F. Moore (2005), Philip Auslander stands out as a researcher who has significantly shaped the use of this concept.[9] His theory of musical persona represents one of the most influential in music-related performance studies, bringing together the two dimensions of theatre and vocal sound. His theory is not about music as performance (Cook 2014) but rather concerns musicians, centring their role as performers instead of focusing on musical texts. Drawing on Erving Goffman's sociological work, Auslander understands musical performance as a social interaction. In building on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), he sees persona as a form of self-presentation that contrasts with the portrayal of overtly fictional roles in acting, as will be discussed shortly.

Auslander's approach establishes the importance of three key concepts within his performer-centric theory: frame, genre, and persona. By frame, again following Goffman (1974), he means the fundamental contextualisation that enables social interaction and structures expectations (Auslander 2021, pp. 5–6); genre, then, is a categorisation, the most important frame for musical performances (ibid., pp. 9–10);[10] and persona, for Auslander, is the musical identity musicians perform (ibid., pp. 10–12). Musicians and audiences therefore understand and negotiate the persona in relation to frames and genres. Within this framework, two additional concepts prove crucial, serving to define, effectively *ex negativo*, what constitutes a persona: persona is neither the "real person", or the performer's offstage personality (ibid., p. 10), nor their "character", the performed entity that musicians portray through their lyrics (ibid., p. 11).

Persona	performed identity as a musician, often perceived as a form of self-presentation
Character	performed entity through the lyrics, often perceived as (overtly) fictional
Real Person	concept of the artist as a "real" human being (backstage personality), often constructed by audiences transtextually and transmedially

Table 1. Persona, Character, Real Person (Overview).

Earlier, I mentioned that the fans at Shea Stadium were not primarily focused on hearing the music. To avoid any misunderstandings, allow me to clarify: music was and is important. However, it formed *one* aspect of performance. "What musicians perform first and foremost is not music," states Auslander (2021, p. 88), "but their own identities as musicians, their musical

personae." Drawing on examples of physical co-presence, Auslander theorises that "both the musical work and its execution serve the musician's performance of a persona" (ibid., p. 88). Music, in turn, serves this persona.

This perspective emphasises the importance of further performative factors. What does the stage look like? Who is (not) visible, and what lighting effects are employed? What is the person wearing, and (how) do they deploy makeup? How do they move on stage? How is the body of the star presented, and through what gestures? Does the performer play an instrument? If so, what does it look like, and how do they appear to interact with it?

Given Auslander's understanding of musical performances as a form of self-presentation, he adopts Goffman's taxonomy to articulate the manner in which individuals perform their personas (see Auslander 2006, pp. 103–118). Goffman (1956, p. 13) employs the term "front" to denote "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance." He identifies three integral components to the front:

(1) *setting*, encompassing "furniture, décor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the space of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (ibid., p. 13);

(2) *appearance*, describing "stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses" (ibid., p. 15);

(3) and *manner*, referring to "those stimuli that function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the on-coming situation" (ibid., p. 15).

In the following scheme (see Figure 2), these aspects are subsumed under "Means of Expression".

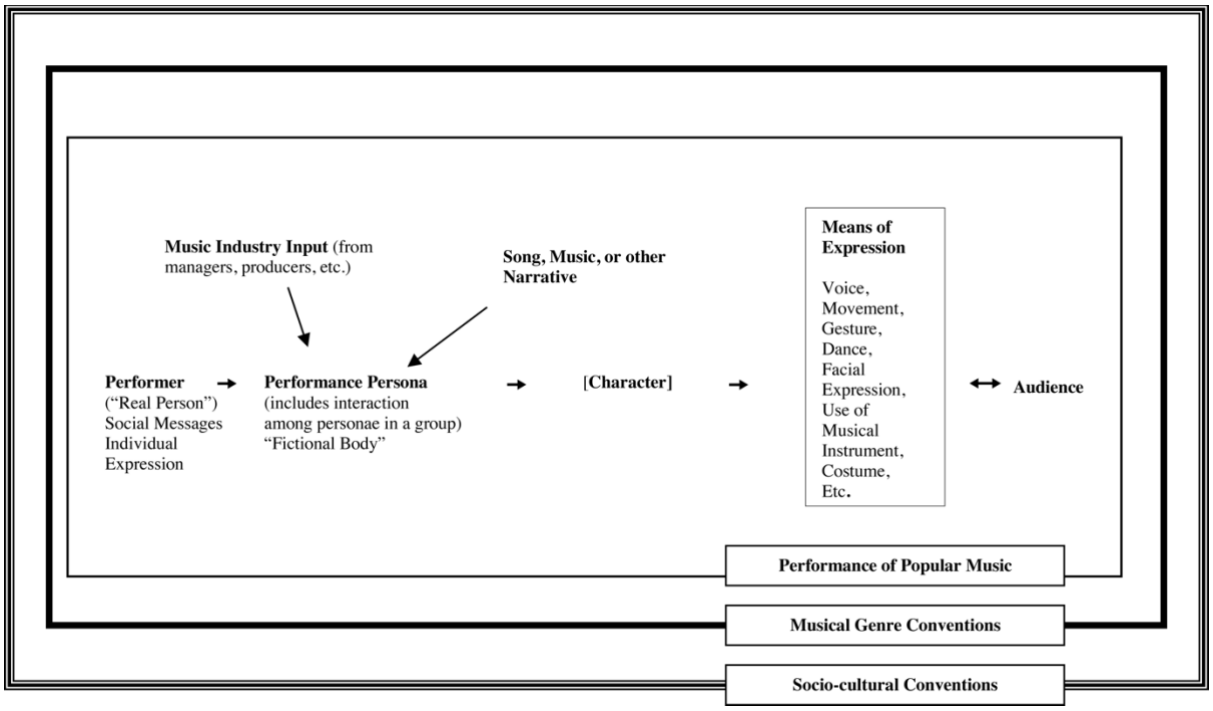

Figure 2. Auslander's Model of Popular Music Performance (Auslander 2021, p. 32).

The double arrow between "Means of Expression" and "Audience" in this illustration represents the mutual relationship between star and audience. Audiences also contribute to the performance of the persona by utilising similar means of expression. Phenomena such as Beatlemania require fans who utilise those very means. In other words, the enthusiastic, fainting audience at Shea Stadium actively participated in the communal process of creation for The Beatles' personas. This co-creative aspect of personas proves especially relevant in moments of physical co-presence, such as concerts, and in the contexts of social media.

The shortest possible answer to the question of what musicians perform can then be summarised as follows*: Musicians perform their personas, which means their identities as musicians; this is often perceived as a form of self-presentation*.

"We all play-act": What distinguishes film acting from musical performance?

The brackets surrounding the word "Character" in Auslander's model (see Figure 2) draw attention to the question of the relationship between film acting and musical performance. According to sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, pop music and film are the two most important arenas for establishing the modern star system. The significance of film actors and pop musicians as iconic embodiments of 20th-century stars stems from their aesthetics of presence; unlike authors, painters, or composers who remain "behind" their work, film actors and musicians are physically present for the audience during the enactment of their "work", albeit usually conveyed through media (see Reckwitz 2019, pp. 252–253).

Pop music and film acting share an aesthetic focal point in the body of the star. However, nominal actors do not portray themselves, but rather an overtly fictional role. The brackets in Auslander's illustration indicate this distinction. While the fictional character is central in acting, it is an optional element in performing music. Sometimes, the character is clearly present and unequivocally fictional, while at other times, it can be difficult to determine whether the character simply reflects the persona. In an earlier essay, Auslander (2015, p. 76) defines the persona as "a performed identity that is not a fictional character such as those portrayed by actors. It is presentational rather than representational (or at least is perceived that way) and often takes the form of a self-presentation on the part of the performer."

When Ringo Starr sings at Shea Stadium, "[I] might win an Oscar, you can't never tell", it is reasonable to interpret this statement in terms of a fictional character. On closer inspection, this distinction quickly turns problematic. What about pop stars like Lady Gaga or David Bowie who clearly portray fictional roles? What about actors who engage in "method acting", pretending to play themselves or immersing themselves fully in a role? Self-presentation and fiction do not exist as strict binary oppositions composed of categorically opposed terms, but rather represent poles on a spectrum, with numerous gradations existing between them. Pop music tends to lean more towards self-presentation, while film acting leans more towards fiction. Yet while Auslander relies on Goffmann's taxonomy, juxtaposition of fiction and self-presentation is not in line with Goffman's perspective. Goffman's central argument in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) is that we all perform ourselves in every social interaction (the German translation of the book's title is, fittingly, "Wir alle spielen Theater" ["We all play-act"]). According to Goffman, self-presentation can involve both genuine expressions of emotions as well as partial or completely false representations. For an illustration, consider how people commonly respond when someone asks how they are doing: their answers may vary greatly depending on the context. The response given to a therapist may be different than the one given to a supermarket cashier. However, if I tell a cashier that I am fine, even when that is not the case, that social interaction remains a form of self-presentation.

Auslander later revised his own distinction between persona as self-presentation and character as fiction:

> I arrived at detailed description of the musical persona as the performance of a social role. Over time, however, I came to realize two limitations to my formulation. The first is that it did not account for those instances in which musicians do perform fictional characters as their persona. […] The other limitation of my initial formulation of musical persona is closely related to the first. I found that I had placed too much emphasis on the self/other distinction in differentiating what musicians do from what actors do, resulting in a too-easy contrast between actors as purveyors of fiction and musicians as representing aspects of themselves in performance. I had lost sight of a crucially important point that is central to Goffman: actors and musicians are completely alike in the sense that both groups are engaged in performing a social identity. (Auslander 2021, p. 84–85)

In this way, Auslander integrates the concept of theatricality as a "histrionic mode of communication" (ibid., p. 96). Now the question is no longer whether my "yes" to the cashier is right or wrong. Instead, we can consider the degree of theatricality in my reaction and the expressive means utilised. Auslander's heuristic update is also more consistent with Goffman's concept of self-presentation (ibid., p. 95). This change provides space to analyse the construction of varied musical personas, ranging from "real", sincere or authentic, to completely fictitious identities.

The key difference between acting and musical performance can then be summarised as follows: *While the personas of musicians often lean towards self-presentation performed with a low degree of theatricality, film acting usually exhibits a higher degree of theatricality, as the characters portrayed are commonly perceived as (overtly) fictional.*

"La vache qui rit": What characterises film performances by musicians?

When looking at the justifications given by directors for why they wanted a musician to star in their films, two main categories emerge. Take the influential director Christopher Nolan for one example: when casting actors for his war drama *Dunkirk* (2017), Nolan caused a stir before its release, because he cast British singer Harry Styles for a leading role, driving speculation about how the former One Direction member would perform. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Nolan claimed that Styles went through the casting process like any other actor and prevailed against multiple competitors:

> When we put the cast together, we had some established names: Kenneth Branagh, Mark Rylance, Tom Hardy, Cillian Murphy. But for the guys on the beach, we really wanted young unknowns. He's not that unknown, but he'd never done anything as an actor before. So he auditioned. I auditioned literally thousands of young men with different combinations of young men. And he had it. (Nolan in Kaufman 2017)

According to another interview, Nolan was unaware of Styles's fame, or at least the extent of his fame, especially among younger people:

> I was new to Harry. I mean, I've heard his name from my kids, but I wasn't really familiar with him… What I was seeing [when he auditioned] was a very charismatic guy who clearly had a truthfulness and a subtlety in his ability to perform as a film actor. (Nolan in Seemayer 2017)

By stating that he was not familiar with Styles's fame, Nolan emphasizes further that he was interested in his acting abilities rather than his star image. Interestingly, Nolan's assessment of Styles's acting skills revolves around attributes such as "truthfulness" and "realness": "What I'm hoping for, when people see the film, is I'm hopeful that they won't miss what he's [Styles] done, because it's very subtle, very truthful and real" (Nolan in Seemayer 2017). Although Nolan underscores the insignificance of Styles's musical persona, self-presentation with a low degree of theatricality presents more commonly as a characteristic of musical personas, as previously observed.

For Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), the opposite argumentation emerged. In this film, inventor Nikola Tesla appears in a supporting role for about ten minutes. Nolan tried to cast superstar David Bowie for the role (see Glynn 2022, pp. 179–184). After Bowie initially declined, Nolan tried again and pleaded for his acceptance: "In total honesty, I told him [Bowie] if he didn't agree to do the part, I had no idea where I would go from there. I would say I begged him" (Nolan in Vain 2016). In an interview shortly after Bowie's death in 2016, Nolan recalls why this casting was so important to him:

> When we were casting *The Prestige*, we had gotten very stuck on the character of Nikola Tesla. Tesla was this other-worldly, ahead-of-his-time figure, and at some point it occurred to me he was the original Man Who Fell to Earth. As someone who was the biggest Bowie fan in the world, once I made that connection, he seemed to be the only actor capable of playing the part. He had that requisite iconic status, and he was a figure as mysterious as Tesla needed to be. (Nolan in Vain 2016)

According to Nolan, only a world-famous rock star like David Bowie could do justice to the uniquely fantastical aura of Nikola Tesla. "As indicated by Bowie's supporting role in *The Prestige*," as stated by Landon Palmer (2020, p. 2), "rock stardom has influenced film casting and performance beyond the onscreen presence of rock music and has offered potential uses in film that are distinctive from conventional film stardom." In contrast to Styles in *Dunkirk*, Nolan did not emphasise acting abilities here, but rather Bowie's extra-filmic presence as an enigmatic star musician; Nolan wanted Bowie not in spite of his persona as a superstar, but because of it. Nolan's dramaturgical strategy for portraying Tesla sought to integrate Bowie's image and the resulting transmedial network of specific associations

These two films reveal dual particularities in the phenomenon of musical stars on film. Firstly, their film performances, in line with their off-screen musical personas, can create an impression of reality and authenticity, but equally, the musical persona can evoke a multitude of associations that imbue the character portrayed with meaning (and vice versa). However, a third particularity also exists from beyond these two examples: often, along with musical stars in films, there comes not only an illusion of reality and a transmedial network, but also, as in *Help!*, musical performance within the film itself.

In his book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, Ben Winters describes the peculiarity of "classical" musicians in narrative cinema as follows:

> more often than not, the on-screen musical performer [i.e., the classical musician in a narrative film] is functioning differently from his/her fellow actors. Unlike them, s/he may not even be playing a fictional character, but a version of themselves […] and, as such, s/he is often engaging in the very activity that defines their "star" quality, namely musical performance. (Winters 2014, p. 18)

Winters's phrase, "version of themselves", appears remarkably compatible with Auslander's definition of the musical persona. Following Auslander's framework, one could also argue that, unlike actors, on-screen musical performers are not playing fictional characters, but their musical personas. Any screen presence of a star (whether music or film) undoubtedly triggers a wave of transtextual activities. But as Winters notes, "actors rarely perform *as actors* in an [sic] metafictional way in the same way as musicians or musical stars" (ibid., p. 34; emphasis Winters's). The term metafiction highlights perhaps the most significant characteristic of musical stars in film.

Literary scholar Patricia Waugh established the term "metafiction" in the 1980s. In her comprehensive work, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, she defines the term as "the construction of a fictional illusion [...] and the laying bare of that illusion" (Waugh 1984, p. 6). A case in point is the packaging for the famous cheese brand "La vache qui rit", which depicts a laughing cow wearing earrings with the same packaging design (see Figure 3). The inclusion of an image's miniature within the image itself exemplifies the metafictional technique known as *mise en abyme*. As per Werner Wolf (2009, p. 56), the *mise en abyme* "designates a special relationship within an embedding structure, namely – with reference to the media – the 'mirroring' of parts or the totality of a framing or embedding higher level of a semiotic complex (text, work, performance) in a discernible unit located on an embedded, lower level." Such metafictional techniques, like the picture-within-a-picture structure, can emphasise the constructed nature or artificiality of an object. The broader principle of self-referentiality is as old as literature itself. This *mise en abyme* structure is already present in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus recounts his own wanderings in the epic's central section (Books 9–12), thus reflecting the act of storytelling within the narrative (see Hutcheon 1984, p. 40).

Figure 3. The Packaging of the "La vache qui rit" cheese, <http://www.lavachequirit.ch/fr/produits/la-vache-qui-rit>.

Metafictional art raises questions about the relationships between fiction and reality by highlighting its own status as a crafted artwork and the process of its creation. Metafictional techniques construct and deconstruct illusion (and reality) simultaneously:

> What [metafiction] does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. […] [M]etafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, simply "written". (Waugh 1984, p. 18)

Along with Waugh, Werner Wolf also shaped the concept significantly. Wolf (2009) uses the term "metareference" as an umbrella term in his conception of metafiction in order to replace the focus on literature with a transmedial perspective:

> [Metareference] *is a special, transmedial form of usually nonaccidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a "metalevel", within an artefact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. Where metareference is properly understood, an at least minimal corresponding "meta-awareness" is elicited in the recipient*, who thus becomes conscious of both the medial (or "fictional" in the sense of artificial and, sometimes in addition, "invented") status of the work under discussion and the fact that media-related phenomena are at issue, rather than (hetero-)references to the world outside the media. (Wolf 2009, p. 31; emphasis Wolf's)

According to Wolf, metareference describes a form of self-reference in combination with a meta level, from which artworks comment explicitly or implicitly on the medial nature of the work in question. He distinguishes between intracompositional and extracompositional metareference:

> *intracompositional* metareference operates within the work under discussion as the "system" in the narrow sense within which this special form of self-reference occurs, while *extracompositional* metareference denotes all other forms of metareference that go beyond the confines of this work (without, however, leaving the media as the self-referential system in the broad sense), be it by referring to a specific other work, or group of works, be it by making a general aesthetic comment on one or more media. (ibid., p. 38; emphasis Wolf's)

While the *mise en abyme* is a form of intracompositional self-reference, because it "is based on a similarity within a work" (ibid., p. 57), intermedial reference to media texts that exist outside of the film would constitute a form of extracompositional metareference.

By combining the concept of metafictionality or metareference with the preceding theoretical considerations, we can attribute the term "metaperformance" to musical stars in film. I contend that this concept allows for a better understanding of pop stars' doubling of the act of performance in narrative cinema. By metaperformance, I refer here to a frequently observed peculiarity of musical stars in film, namely, the dual nature of their performance when a musical star takes on the role of a filmic character who, in turn, performs music, thereby embodying both the filmic (fictional) character and the star's ("real") musical persona.[11] This configuration functions both as a form of intracompositional self-reference and extracompositional metareference. On the one hand, their musical performance corresponds to the structure of a *mise en abyme*, as a performance within a performance (intracompositional self-reference). On the other hand, this performance within a performance refers to the extra-

filmic musical persona of the star and their pre-existing music (extracompositional metareference).

The shortest possible answer to our final question could thereby be summarised as follows: *Due to their off-screen musical persona, musical stars in film often provoke a pronounced transmedial network and convey an implicit claim to reality. Compared to film actors, musical stars in films frequently engage in metaperformances, embodying not only (fictional) characters but also performing their ("real") musical persona within them. This performative configuration mirrors the structure of a* mise en abyme *(intracompositional self-reference). Simultaneously, this performance within the performance often alludes to the musician's off-screen musical persona (extracompositional metareference).*

IDENTITY	**Persona**	performed identity as a musician, often perceived as a form of self-presentation	
	Character	performed entity through the lyrics, often perceived as (overtly) fictional	
	Real Person	concept of the artist as a "real" human being (backstage personality), often constructed by audiences transtextually and transmedially	
	Front	**Setting**	environment and arrangement that forms the backdrop for the performance
		Appearance	stimuli that convey information about the performer's social status
		Manner	stimuli that convey information about the interaction role of the performer
TRANSMEDIA	**Metareference**	a form of self-reference in combination with a meta level from which the artwork comments explicitly or implicitly on the medial nature of the work in question	
		Explicit	involves explicit metareferential devices that reflect on the media text as a composed product
		Implicit	involves more implicit metareferential devices that highlight the medium and status of the media text as a composed product
	Intracompositional Self-reference	self-reference within the media text such as a *mise en abyme* structure	
	Extracompositional Metareference	reference that extends beyond the boundaries of the media text such as references to specific other media texts or personas	
	Metaperformance	doubling of the act of performance such as a music star who performs both a fictional character and their "real" musical persona	
	Intramedial Transmediality	simulation of another medium within a media text that gives the impression of the coexistence of diverse media texts within a single media text	

Table 2. Analytical Toolkit (Overview).

The table summarizes the key concepts for analysing musical performances by pop stars in narrative cinema. Having established these categories, the subsequent sections of this article refine this approach by delineating "explicit" and "implicit" metareference, along with "intramedial transmediality". With these in hand, we may proceed with two concise illustrative analyses that offer additional insights into these theoretical concepts.

ED SHEERAN IN DANNY BOYLE'S *YESTERDAY* (2019)

What if The Beatles were suddenly erased from cultural memory? That's exactly what happens in *Yesterday* (2019). After a mysterious global blackout, struggling musician Jack Malik (Himesh Patel) realizes that everyone seems to have forgotten the Fab Four. There's no trace of the band and their songs anywhere, not even on the internet. Malik sees his chance, re-records the songs, and becomes famous. Ed Sheeran, playing pop star Ed Sheeran, invites Malik to perform as his opening act at a concert in Moscow. After the concert, the musicians gather in a bar. Sheeran suggests they hold a spontaneous songwriting competition to determine who the better songwriter is: "So here's the plan: I'm gonna go out that door, Jack's gonna go out this door, and whoever writes the best song in 10 minutes wins."[12] Malik reluctantly agrees. Soon after, Sheeran performs his song in front of the audience, singing a love song while accompanying himself with fingerpicking-style guitar. Then, Malik takes the stage, sits at the piano, and plays Paul McCartney's song "The Long and Winding Road", visibly moving the audience. When Malik's friend calls for a vote, Sheeran interrupts him. He refuses to vote because Malik's ostensibly spontaneous composition is one of the best songs Sheeran has ever heard in his life. "You're definitely Mozart, mate," Sheeran says, "and I'm definitely Salieri."

Two years later, Sheeran releases his song under the title "Penguins" (2021). This film's exceptional performative constellation combines an actor (Patel) playing the fictional role of Malik and a pop star (Sheeran) playing himself, in a songwriting contest with both pre-existing ("The Long and Winding Road") and allegedly spontaneous music ("Penguins"), highlighting the specific tension between reality and fiction that runs throughout this entire study. While Ed Sheeran can be described as a "real" musician performing in a fictional universe, Jack Malik is a fictional musician playing "real" music, namely the pre-existing music of The Beatles.[13]

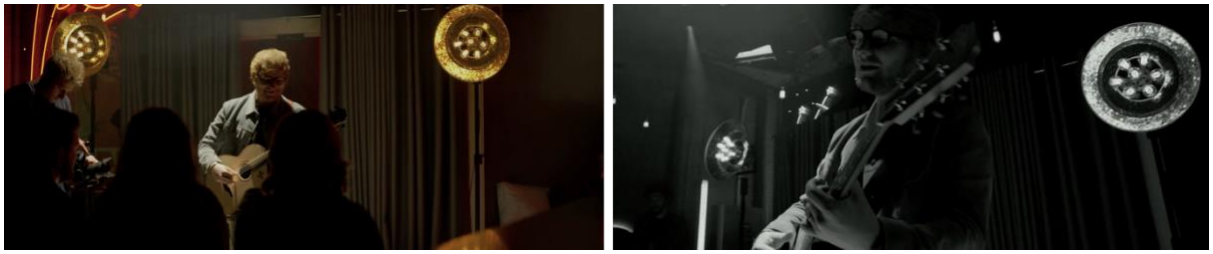

Figure 4. Stills from *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019).
Ed Sheeran performs "Penguins" (03:07 & 03:11).[14]

Sheeran's song performance in *Yesterday* lasts only a few seconds, while Malik's performance extends considerably longer. Multiple reaction shots to Malik's performance expose Sheeran's captivated listening. However, unlike during Malik's song, there is a man on stage with a camera during Sheeran's performance, evidently filming him. Shortly thereafter, the film transitions to a black-and-white handheld camera shot, suggesting that the current shot depicts the footage being simultaneously recorded by the onstage cameraman (see Figure 4).

Many of Ed Sheeran's music videos feature this same aesthetic. In addition to "I See Fire" (2013) and "I Don't Care (Live At Abbey Road)" (2019), the music video for "One" (2014) offers especially noticeable similarities to *Yesterday*'s performance. "One" features Sheeran on stage at Wembley Arena without an audience, and continues with the following similar aspects: his *appearance*, with a tousled hairstyle and casual streetwear; Sheeran's *manner*, largely ignoring the camera and avoiding eye contact, creating the impression that he is performing for himself and not for an audience, quite literally absent in the Wembley Arena of the music video; furthermore, he sings alone and accompanies himself on the guitar, resulting in a song consisting solely of his vocals and a fingerpicking guitar-driven sound. Both the music video and the performance video within the film clearly emphasize Sheeran and his guitar. However, the *setting* differs significantly in scope, an empty Wembley Arena versus a small bar. Nevertheless, the suggestion of a live recording in *Yesterday* and the music video share filmic aesthetics in that both "One" and the film's pseudo-video play in black and white with anthropomorphic camera movements that suggest a handheld camera.

In the musical performances of Sheeran and Malik, we can observe intracompositional self-reference in the form of *mise en abyme* structures, as well as extracompositional metareferences. Both performances involve a performance within a performance, and while Malik's song refers to the pre-existing Beatles song, Ed Sheeran performs his extra-filmic musical persona. As a result, both performances can be described as metaperformances, although the meta level is more overtly pronounced in Sheeran's musical performance when compared to the integration of a pre-existing Beatles track in Malik's.

The impression that Ed Sheeran appears in *Yesterday* as the "real" pop star Ed Sheeran (rather than as an actor or fictional character) arises not only from the fact that Ed Sheeran performs music, but also from the filmic language and use of expressive elements that simulate the aesthetics of Sheeran's music videos. In *Yesterday*, the audience witnesses not only a self-presentation of pop star Ed Sheeran in a fictional universe, but also a portrayal of how Sheeran's media texts are produced, or some staging thereof. This scenario of a media text (the music video) within a media text (the film) corresponds to the laughing cow packaging. The inclusion of the cameraman producing the music video shown further elevates the level of metareferentiality on display. I term this phenomenon *intramedial transmediality*. When transmediality is explored intramedially, it often creates the impression that *different* media texts coexist within a single media text. This is particularly explicit just before the songwriting competition, during Malik's concert in Moscow, when the film screen suddenly splits into three sections, each displaying various mobile phone screens that show Malik going viral on social media (see Figure 5). In this way, intramedial transmediality evokes the simulation of another medium altogether.

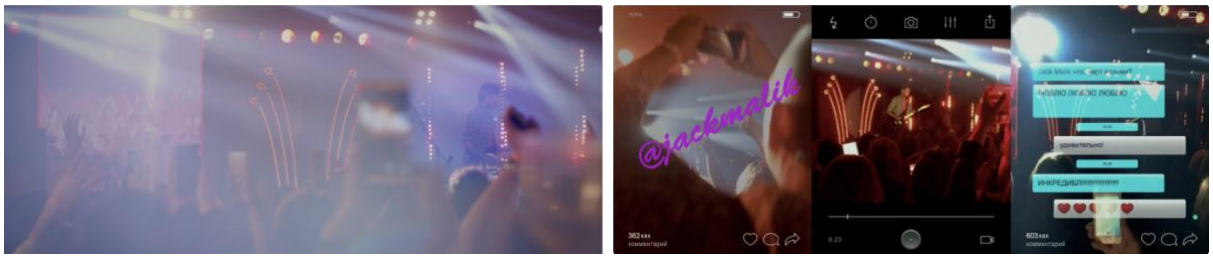

Figure 5. Stills from *Yesterday* (Danny Boyle 2019).
Jack Malik performs "Back in the USSR" (00:43 & 00:49).

THE SPICE GIRLS IN BOB SPIERS'S *SPICE WORLD* (1997)

An even more pronounced level of metareference appears in the film *Spice World*, released at the height of the Spice Girls' worldwide fame. Similar to *Help!*, the narrative in *Spice World* functions as part of a marketing strategy for the band, absorbing criticism by integrating it into their marketing machinery (see Fuchs 2002; Leach 2002, pp. 157–162). The film depicts a week in the life of the Spice Girls as they embark on a completely absurd adventure with their Union Jack-emblazoned double-decker tour bus. Right from the start, the film makes clear that it rejects realism, as seen in the unrealistic proportions between their bus's ordinary exterior and oversized interior. In a way, the film is also about the making of films. The Spice Girls are accompanied by a film crew producing a documentary about the band, aiming to showcase the "real" Spice Girls. Additionally, two overzealous Hollywood writers pitch film ideas to the (fictional) manager of the Spice Girls. In the end, the film's storyline and the screenwriters' storyline within the film converge into one narrative. During the screenwriters' pitch for a finale to the manager, the film simultaneously shows that same finale taking place; the film the audience is watching turns out to be the film written by the screenwriters within the film. Essentially, the audience is watching a film where the film itself is conceived within its fictional universe. In terms of metareference, the film highlights the process of creation and production, where the film within the film can be understood as "explicit metareference" (see Wolf 2009, pp. 35–49) because it is clearly situated on a meta level. *Spice World* demonstratively verbalizes and comments on media-related questions that, in turn, refer to the medium being consumed and remind the audience of that medium in itself. All of this underscores the constructed nature of the film and reinforces its status as fiction.

Spice World begins with a performance of the song "Too Much" in the Top of the Pops studios, a venue where the girl band had actually performed multiple times. This opening scene resembles a commonplace television performance by the Spice Girls. The singers seem to portray themselves, or versions of themselves, similar to how they performed in other media texts. They perform their musical personas, appearing as the Spice Girls in a performative context (Top of the Pops) already closely associated with the band. Various clothing and staged details likewise evoke their musical personas and their star image. The film not only uses the same nicknames (Sporty Spice, Ginger Spice, Baby Spice, Posh Spice, Scary Spice) created for them by the Top of the Pops that played a key role in their marketability, but also incorporates set designs and props referencing the members' musical personas. The performance of their musical personas, including the *setting*, *appearance*, and *manner*, constitutes extracompositional metareference in referring to the Spice Girls' extra-filmic live performances. It may not be surprising, then, that the musicians subsequently emphasized that their performances *are* self-presentations during interviews:

> If I'd been playing someone else, I suppose I would have done loads of research into how my character would walk or talk, but because I was playing myself, I just had to go into work and be me. (Emma – Baby Spice, DVD interview)
>
> The character I play is quite close to the real me. [...] A lot of the stories in the film were translated from events that actually happened to us. (Mel B – Scary Spice, DVD Interview)

However, at the same time, the film presents a manifestly fictional narrative. Apart from unrealistic aspects, such as encountering aliens who ask for concert tickets, photos, and autographs, the apparent clarity of the narrative's conspicuously fictitious quality derives from its extreme level of metareferentiality.

Already the film's opening at the Top of the Pops exhibits metareference. The camera switches between shots that one would expect from a television performance and shots demonstrating how this television performance is supposedly being produced. In comparison to the film's finale, this can be considered more of an "implicit metareference", which Wolf explains as follows:

> In contrast to this [explicit metareference], there are more covert devices which may also establish a meta-level and elicit reflections on the ontological status of the text as a medium or artefact without, however, using explicitly metareferential expressions or signs. Rather, they operate on the basis of a salient foregrounding of the medium as such and/or of aspects of given works as artefacts (their production, reception, function etc.). (Wolf 2009, p. 40)

In implicit metareference, the focus is not explicitly on commenting and discussing its own artificiality, but rather on highlighting the medium and the status of the media text as a composed product. One close-up shot of Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) offers a case in point. The presence of a moiré pattern over the image indicates that this shot captures not only the picture of the singer but also a screen displaying the image (see Figure 6, left). This recurring *mise en abyme* structure (image/screen within an image/screen) reemphasises the medium itself. Likewise, an additional shot captures the movement of a camera crane, while giving the impression that the shot itself is a result of a camera crane's motion. The scene transitions to a control room, filled with video monitors, and offering glimpses over the shoulders and heads of producers and sound mixers (see Figure 6, right). Indeed, the film sequence transcends a typical Top of the Pops broadcast, delving into the production process of just such a performance within the realm of mass media. Of course, this production itself is likewise staged. Similar to the famous laughing cow on the "La vache qui rit" packaging, the text foregrounds the medium and its status as a composed product, emphasizing its own constructed nature. In this regard, the media text evidences an intramedial transmediality comparable to the example furnished by Ed Sheeran's portrayal in *Yesterday*. The film simulates a TV performance by the band right at the beginning, while the simultaneous opening credits frame the metaperformance as part of a feature film. Along with intracompositional self-reference, there is once again extracompositional metareference at play, the performance within the performance alluding to the band's extra-filmic television appearances.

Figure 6. Stills from *Spice World* (Bob Spiers 1997).
The Spice Girls perform "Too Much" in the Top of the Pops studios (0:02:09 & 0:02:32).[15]

Conclusion

Now we can revisit the film *Help!* and bring things full circle. While *Help!* could not match the commercial success of its predecessor, *A Hard Day's Night*, it proved to be culturally significant in paving the way for subsequent aesthetic developments in music video productions (Coppa 2022, pp. 67–92). In one famous scene from the film, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr are seen skiing in the Austrian Alps while "Ticket to Ride" plays. Lester employs techniques from experimental cinema here, such as rapid cuts, blurriness, peculiarly juxtaposed images, and surreal settings. In contrast to prevalent performance videos of the time, this sequence is not about creating the impression of a believable musical performance. For instance, another shot depicts a grand piano on a snowy mountaintop, with John playing chords at random, while Ringo plays drums in the air (see Figure 7, left). Lester's innovative filmic language and departure from imitating realistic musical performances had such a significant impact on how pop music went on to be filmed that MTV dubbed him "the Father of Music Video". Lester responded with a request for a paternity test (Frenay 2008).

A conventional performance video, the aesthetics of which were also significantly influenced by Lester, appears as part of the opening credits. Here, The Beatles perform the titular song as a televised performance in black and white. The aesthetics resemble musical scenes in *A Hard Day's Night*, with the musical performance captured from multiple camera perspectives simultaneously, then shown in sequence. This performance was televised as a standalone promotional film on the ABC and BBC television networks (Palmer 2020, p. 72). The cinematic integration of an extratextual media text is revealed after a few seconds by colourful darts thrown at The Beatles, exposing the images as existing on a screen within the film (see Figure 7, right). A little later, the film showcases the screen and the projector displayed in the rooms of the antagonistic cult. In this way, the opening highlights the interplay between intracompositional self-reference and extracompositional metareference. Firstly, the performative configuration, as a form of *mise en abyme*, refers to itself (in intracompositional self-reference). If we were sitting in the cinema, we would see a screen on which a projector projects The Beatles' film, which shows a room in which people see a screen on which a projector projects The Beatles' performance. Secondly, The Beatles' musical performance in the film refers to the extratextual TV performances of the band and their musical personas (in extracompositional metareference). Furthermore, we can observe what I have referred to as intramedial transmediality. Initially, the film simulates a Beatles TV performance, only to signal the coexistence of different media texts through the use of colourful darts shortly thereafter.

Figure 7. Stills from *Help!* (Richard Lester 1965).
The performance of the song "Ticket to Ride" (left, 0:40:45);
the TV performance of the song "Help!" (right, 0:03:23).

In his book *Occult Aesthetics*, Kevin Donnelly asserts that sonic and visual synchronization is the essence of sound film – an artificial mechanism that guides the perception of reality:

> The illusion of cinema, and its fundamental perception as something closely related to the real world, has undoubtedly been one of the most fundamental characteristics of the medium. […] The overwhelming majority of films exploit the illusory characteristics of the medium to present a world that on some level is taken to be reality by its audience. The combination of sound and image is a mechanical operation that appears to render a perceptual reality. (Donnelly 2014, p. 4, 7)

By employing the term "occult" to describe the synchronization of sound and image, Donnelly underscores the concealed nature of this mechanical operation. Rick Altman has labelled this implication, that images generate sound, as "sound film's fundamental lie" (Altman 1980, p. 6). The on-screen musical performances by pop stars actively contribute to concealing this artifice, suggesting that the depiction of the human body generates the sounds we hear, akin to these stars' extra-filmic (and typically, well-established) stage performances. These presentations encourage the belief that what is shown relates closely to the "real" world. Simultaneously, they invite us to peer behind the illusionary veils of cinema and the music industry by claiming to reveal what is typically kept hidden – or, *occult*.

As this article demonstrates, the concepts of persona and metareference can be effectively applied within the context of musical performance and transmediality. The selected films serve as diverse examples, yet all exhibit constant oscillation between acknowledging their manufactured nature and asserting their authenticity. Through their setting, appearance, and manner, the musicians appear to perform versions of themselves – their musical personas – while the media presentation of their performances simultaneously and metafictionally (or "metafictitiously") showcase how this self is constructed. These metaperformances exist in a realm that is neither entirely authentic nor purely artificial. Instead, they convey an appearance of authenticity while exposing the artificiality and constructed nature inherent in the purportedly binary relationship between commercialism and authenticity. This complex interplay already presents itself in this study's initial musical example, "And All I Gotta Do Is Act Naturally", where the verbs "do" and "act" intertwine with the concept of "natural" (as opposed to simply "*being* natural"). Pop stars in narrative films captivate audiences in part because of this underlying tension between authentic artificiality and artificial authenticity. Their performances offer us glimpses into both the constructive and deconstructive processes behind illusion and identity. Unlike performances of conventional acting, pop musicians on film demonstrate that playing a role and being oneself do not reflect strictly discrete concepts.

END NOTES

[1] For a comparison of both films and their pop cultural relevance, see Donnelly (2015, pp. 19–30).

[2] See Palmer (2015, pp. 58–95) for the importance of United Artists and Apple Corps as transmedia production companies for The Beatles.

[3] The sinister cult is meant to be funny, but invokes a deeply racist portrayal of South Asians performed by white actors (c.f. Doyle 2019).

[4] The documentary can be found in the Blu-ray edition of *Help!* (Subafilms Ltd. 2007).

[5] The timestamps throughout this article refer to the Blu-ray edition (Subafilms Ltd. 2007).

[6] For a more historical perspective, see Forman (2014) and James (2013). My approach excludes short cameo appearances, e.g., per Palmer's (2023) economic and cultural logic of deliberately brief on-screen appearances by rock stars such as Iggy Pop.

[7] Journalist Dave Schwensen (2014) devotes an entire book to the discussion of this one concert; Philip Auslander also analysed the same (2021, pp. 169–182).

[8] For an analysis of the "screamscape" of Beatlemania in context of gender and cultural rebellion, see Rohr (2017).

[9] For a concise overview of how persona has been employed in music research, see Fairchild & Marshall (2019).

[10] For the concept of genre in popular music, see especially Holt (2007).

[11] By expanding upon this idea, we arrive at the concept of "metametaperformance", or, when a musical pop star acts as a filmic character involving the performance of a song that conveys their musical persona, wherein that song portrays a character through the lyrics. A case in point: in *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier 2000), Björk plays the fictional character of Selma, and within that filmic character, Björk performs her music and her musical persona while simultaneously embodying a fictional entity through song lyrics that refer to the fictional Selma (see Rudolph 2020).

[12] The sequence can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McP9HNGtfMw>.

[13] For more on pre-existing music in film, see Rudolph (2023; 2022).

[14] The time references in Figure 4 and 5 refer to the official clip on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McP9HNGtfMw>.

[15] The time references refer to the DVD edition by Universal Studios (2000).

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