

# **(Re)contextualization, Embodiment, and Subjectivity: A View from Musical Multimedia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

(Re)contextualization is a process by which one context makes another strangely odd or familiar. It is a particular kind of cognitive 'disjunction' focal to the perception of repetition. In the process one context defamiliarizes another--each instills some of its qualities in the other. In this study, I consider perceptual aspects of musical (re)contextualization in temporal and material contexts (mediums/performances) of musical multimedia.

Recent theoretical work has emphasized particular 'spaces' of musical configuration (e.g., pitch space, contour space) and investigated musical perceptions as pathways through those spaces. Drawing from perceptual-cognitive studies of music and film by researchers such as M. Boltz, A.J. Cohen, N. Cook, S. Lipscomb, and J. Smith, and from work on embodiment and subjectivity by writers such as C. Abbate, N. Cumming, L. Kramer, and S. McClary, I offer ideas toward a framework of meaning in music that interrelate the perceptions and cognitive 'spaces' of medium and context with those of embodiment and subjectivity. Crucial here are processes of selectivity (choice, identification), framing (distance, exclusion), and sensing depth (filling-in what isn't seen/heard, redoubling). I compare situations of temporal and material (re)contextualization (disjunctions of time and place) with those of activity (subjectivity and embodiment), and in the process highlight the characterizing, regulating, and relational functions of music's so-called nomadic attachments.

## **BACKGROUND AND AIMS**

(Re)contextualization is a process by which one context makes another strangely odd or familiar. It is a particular kind of cognitive 'disjunction' focal to the perception of repetition. In the process one context defamiliarizes another--each instills some of its qualities in the other. In this study, I consider perceptual aspects of musical (re)contextualization in temporal and material contexts (mediums/performances): (1) *temporal*, situating music in disjunct historical contexts, e.g., setting period music in a 'contemporary' context, as in Peter Sellers' setting of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the South Bronx; or situating 'contemporary' music in a period setting, as in the rendition of a more recent song, such as Madonna's "Material Girl", within an older/historical context, such as in the film *Moulin Rouge*, and (2) *material*, experiencing perceptions of vocality and physicality, e.g., sensing Orpheus's voice activating the instrumental 'winds' in his aria "Possente Spirto" in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (Abbate, 2001).

I inquire into the roles of perceptual-cognitive aspects that are associated with embodiment and subjectivity in music: (1) the *agency* or intentional potential of the material, (2) the qualities of *depth* that motivate listeners to fill-in values, and (3) the role of *temporal* and *textural* configurations in projecting figure-ground *interactions*. These aspects are linked with (re)contextualization and convey a sensitivity to music as physical, as 'sensed' or 'literal', in relation to aspects 'conceptual' or 'symbolic'. The process of vivifying experience has to do with bringing the aesthetic and material together in a spark of unfamiliarity that underlies their fragile/uneasy connection, and in particular, with perceiving the capacity of the material to nuance and direct the aesthetic, to make it 'real'.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Recent theoretical work has emphasized particular 'spaces' of musical configuration (e.g., pitch space, contour space) and investigated musical perceptions as pathways through those spaces. Drawing from perceptual-cognitive studies of music and film by researchers such as M. Boltz, M. Chion, A.J. Cohen, N. Cook, and S. Lipscomb, and from work on embodiment and subjectivity by writers such as C. Abbate, N. Cumming, L. Kramer, and S. McClary, I offer ideas toward a framework of meaning in music that interrelates and juxtaposes aspects of medium and context with perceptions and cognitive 'spaces' of embodiment and subjectivity. Crucial here are processes of selectivity (choice, identification), framing (distance, exclusion), and sensing depth (filling-in what isn't seen/heard, redoubling).

## IMPLICATIONS

This study enriches current approaches in multimedia cognition by A.J. Cohen (1994, 2000, a congruence-associationist (additive) framework for meaning in film), N. Cook (1998, emergent meaning and metaphoric consistency or coherence between components of musical multimedia), S. Lipscomb/Kendall (1994, effects of synchrony of music and visual accent structures in film), and Smith (2001, music applications of A. Koestler's bisociation and N. Carroll's taxonomy of sight gags in film comedy). The notion -- that material contexts (of medium/media and performance) interact with the events and temporal qualities of music experience -- offers one way to construe music's (re)contextualizations, the relationality of its so-called nomadic material attachments, and its transgressive values and openness to subjective meanings.

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## **TOPIC AREAS**

Music, meaning, and language

Music and multimedia