

Staves, Space, and Verbalmobiles:  
Music and Romance in *When Harry Met Sally* and *Lost in Translation*

Yi Hong Sim

History of Film Music

1 December 2005

Professor McGuire

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Not being the kind of person who likes to read a book or watch a movie more than once, I have long been mystified by my intermittent, involuntary cravings for *When Harry Met Sally* and *Lost in Translation*. Yet even without racking one's grey matter too severely, it is evident that Rob Reiner and Sofia Coppola's respective sleepers, though seemingly miles apart, have several key ingredients in common. Both focus on the platonic aspects of an intimate opposite-sex relationship; both feature prominent male leads better known for their comedic roles opposite relatively obscure female leads; both are set in visually, aurally, culturally distinctive, internationally renowned metropolises; and finally, speaking in the broadest possible terms, both films pay great attention to romance and humour.

The latter observation is truly a no-brainer for *When Harry Met Sally*. By both popular and scholarly accounts, this former Castle Rock Entertainment mini-major has made it big as a romantic comedy classic. One of film criticism's leading experts in the genre, Frank Krutnik, calls it "an exemplary new romance",<sup>1</sup> canonizing it within a breed that surfaced in the mid-1980s and has been (I think) limping its way out since the mid-'90s—altogether much too prolonged an exit to be graceful. *Lost in Translation* did not have quite the same box office impact in the U.S., but it certainly won the critics' vote hands-down.<sup>2</sup> Its dual focus on romance and humour and its numerous similarities to *When Harry Met Sally* position it perfectly as a new

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Krutnik, "Love Lies: Romantic Fabrication in Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, ed. Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Lost in Translation* grossed \$44,585,453 at the U.S. box office and \$106,454,000 worldwide on a production budget of \$4 million. *WHMS*, with an estimated \$16 million production budget, raked in \$92,823,546 at the domestic box office, and at some unspecified point in time has also made \$41,790,000 in U.S. rentals (*The Numbers: Box Office Data, Movie Stars, Idle Speculation*, accessed online on 29 November 2005 at <<http://www.the-numbers.com>>).

class of romantic comedy for the 2000s, yet other elements within it (some obvious, some less so) deny it a comfortable identification with the genre.

As Brian Henderson asserts, sexual dialectic rules all in romantic comedy,<sup>3</sup> and in both these films, sexual dialectic (or the lack thereof) are mediated by the film soundtracks. Diegetic and non-diegetic music affect how we view the protagonists' interactions with urban space and the value of verbal expression, which in turn inform our perceptions of the protagonists' gender roles and their relationships with each other. Via a close analysis of these musical functions, this paper will attempt to explain the ways in which *Lost in Translation* figures as a romantic comedy, the ways in which it does not, as well as how *When Harry Met Sally* itself supports and subverts the genre's expectations.

### **Do You Like Being on the Inside or the Outside?**

The idea of indoor space as feminine and outdoor as masculine is firmly entrenched in Western society and art. From questing knights to Victorian chaperoning to rosy pictures of the home and hearth to Freudian notions of the internal womb and external phallus, it is clear that as far as conventions go, the safest and most nurturing place for women is within four walls, whereas men must prove their masculinity by roaming as they please.<sup>4</sup> This age-old dichotomy plays out over and over again in artistic representations, not least in film.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" *Film Quarterly* 31, 4 (Summer 1978): 19.

<sup>4</sup> Trying to find the original source for this idea has been like trying to unearth the original manuscript for the Bible. Its offspring have simply proliferated. I hope it will suffice to say that several articles I read about urban space in film refer to this prevailing gender dichotomy in order to illustrate the ways in which it is subverted. See David B. Clarke, "Introduction: Previewing the Cinematic City," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ben Highmore, "City of Attractions: Commodities, Shopping, and Consumer Choreography," Ch. 3 in *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Elisabeth Mahoney, "'The People in Parentheses': Space Under Pressure in the Post-Modern City," in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Most scenes in *When Harry Met Sally* show both the title characters on screen, and when Harry and Sally are together, there is no limit to where they can go. There are scenes of them walking down the street, dining in restaurants, strolling through parks, browsing in stores, visiting museums—in short, the world is wide open to them as a couple. When they are shown alone or with same-sex friends, however, the setting changes to reflect typically gendered inhabitations of urban space. What particularly highlights this contrast is the heavy reliance on parallel structures in the film, which present side-by-side the common experiences of both protagonists and thus suggest their “ultimate rightness”.<sup>5</sup>

After Harry and Sally’s miscalculated sexual encounter, we are shown parallel scenes of them sorting through their feelings. We first see Harry explaining to Jesse the awkwardness of the sexual experience as the two speedwalk through a park in fine weather and then hustle through the busy streets of Manhattan in pouring rain [1:16:29]. Next, we cut to a scene of Sally lounging on a couch, munching steadily through a bag of M&Ms and grilling Marie nonchalantly on Harry’s latest squeeze while watching her get fitted for her wedding dress [1:16:56]. Sally’s scene is set to complete silence, her barely suppressed hostility conveyed by the harsh crackling of the plastic M&M wrapper and her purposely loud chewing, which reverberate in the hushed, carpeted luxury of the bridal outfitter’s quarters. Harry’s scene, however, is overlaid not only with sounds of rain and traffic but also with an upbeat and highly improvisatory solo piano rendition of “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”. Besides reflecting the general hustle and bustle of New York, the title of the song and extensive deviation from the main melody respectively reinforce the unspoken thoughts underlying Harry’s barrage and his general confusion.<sup>6</sup> In both

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<sup>5</sup> Krutnik, 26.

<sup>6</sup> We also know from the choice of tune, however, that all will be well, because the same song accompanied Harry and Sally’s first parting of ways upon arriving in New York, which turned out not to be permanent after all.

cases, the soundtrack (or the absence of it) helps Harry and Sally's physical surroundings amplify their moods, therefore creating the impression that they are in their element.

Earlier in the film, we are given a similar dichotomy when Sally announces to Anne and Marie her break-up with Joe [23:20] and Harry describes at length to Jesse his impending divorce from Helen [25:50]. The former takes place at dinner on the roped-in patio of a fairly classy-looking restaurant, replete with wine, flowers, and ducks paddling about on a glowing lake at dusk; the latter, famously, at a football game. The women's conversation is heard over an inconspicuous, jazzy tune on solo piano, an original composition for the film by Marc Shaiman and presumably an instance of the off-screen diegetic. The men's is projected (remarkably) over several thousand roaring fans, who provide the same kind of neutral sonic background as the restaurant music. The latter conveys a recognizable style but not a recognizable tune, thus contributing to the genericism of the setting. As Kassabian points out, film has witnessed over the years an "evaporating segregation of sound, noise and music",<sup>7</sup> and both the roaring fans and the restaurant music function here as a "soundtrack". Specifically, both serve to establish the generic qualities of their physical settings: the intimate, effeminate bistro and the spectator-oriented, masculine football game. Once again, Harry and Sally seem utterly at ease in their respective outdoor and indoor, strikingly gendered and contrary locales.

To drive home the point, we also see at various junctures in the film the main characters out of their element. The role of the soundtrack in these cases is more explicit. In what I am calling the "Depression Bonding Montage" [35:26-36:58], we see contrasting scenes of Harry and Sally going about their days in the aftermath of their failed relationships. The entire sequence is accompanied by a melancholy and melodically faithful piano rendition of "But Not

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<sup>7</sup> Anahid Kassabian, "The Sound of a New Film Form," in *Popular Music and Film*, ed. Ian Inglis (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 92.

for Me”, as well as a voice-over of Harry and Sally talking on the phone about *Casablanca*, which they are watching separately on the same TV channel. As the conversation and the music jointly confirm, Harry is thoroughly depressed and missing Helen, his ex-wife. Sally, on the other hand, denies being depressed at all. Up to the point in the montage when we see Harry and Sally together, all the shots are of distinctly indoor locations. Whereas Sally seems invigorated and cheered by her indoor activities (office work, assembling a salad at the supermarket, jazzercise), Harry is clearly sluggish and not himself. We see him staring disconsolately at the dipping bird toy on his office desk, tossing cards into a bowl in his bare and cavernous new apartment, half-heartedly reading a book in an armchair by his apartment window. The montage leads up to the well-known split-screen shot of Harry and Sally watching *Casablanca* together. After they hang up the phone, Sally promptly goes about her routine of preparing to sleep, while Harry stays up, distinctly trussed up and ill at ease in his bedcovers, providing his own soundtrack of regular low-pitched moans. As I will demonstrate later, “But Not for Me” turns out somewhat in the film to be Harry’s song. The next time we hear it is during the scenes leading up to Harry and Sally’s awkward post-sex dinner date [1:15:06], where shots of Sally brushing on make-up alternate with shots of Harry looking like a forlornly trapped and half-drowned animal in the shower. Once again, it is clear that the lyrics of the song are an articulation of Harry’s feelings more than Sally’s, as he looks distinctly the more petrified of the two.

Later in the film, it is Sally’s turn to be a fish out of water. In contrast to the first Christmas that Harry and Sally spent together, where they happily but clumsily carried home a Christmas tree for Sally [47:28], the second Christmas opens with Sally morosely trying to fight the conifer home by herself [1:21:30]. Whereas the first Christmas plays out to Ray Charles’ “Winter Wonderland”, the second is accompanied by Bing Crosby on “Have Yourself a Merry

Little Christmas”. The two songs could not be more stylistically different. Ray Charles’ playfully sexy vocal rendition in his baritone-bordering-on-falsetto is swinging and carefree, backed up by a small jazz ensemble of synthesizer keyboard, drums, bass, trumpet, and saxophone. Bing Crosby’s version, with a lusciously jazzy pops-style orchestral accompaniment, is more traditional and rhythmically straight. His velvety bass-baritone is also conspicuously masculine as it croons down at the obviously anything-but-merry Sally, and one hears, in place of the male gaze, the male commentary on Sally’s prideful attempts to survive Christmas without Harry. It is hard not to hear the irony of the song title in this situation, where the phrase “have yourself” slips so easily from heart-warming slanginess into the mocking sense of “have (by) yourself a merry little Christmas”. And if one still harboured any doubt about the ironic intent of the song, the line “from now on our troubles will be out of sight” clinches the deal.

While Harry and Sally each have clearly separate and gendered urban spaces where they are most at ease, Charlotte and Bob in *Lost in Translation* possess no such comfort zone or day-to-day consistency. They are two lost souls struggling simultaneously to find their direction in Tokyo and in life, and their interactions with their physical surroundings reflect their respective soul-searching modus operandi. Specifically, Charlotte is a guarded seeker, while Bob is a defenseless absorber.

Charlotte, in stark contrast to Sally, is a regular loner and city wanderer. As I mentioned earlier, the masculine outdoors and feminine indoors are a typical construct of *Western* society. In *Lost in Translation*, however, what we have are two Westerners in a highly idiosyncratic Eastern culture that follows (to foreigners) impenetrable rules of its own. It becomes clear early in the movie that Charlotte thinks she can find the answers to her problems in her external environment. Speaking on the phone with her friend Lauren [13:06], she becomes visibly

distressed and chokes up as she confesses: “I don’t know. I went to this shrine today, and—um—there were these monks chanting, and—I didn’t feel anything, you know?” Thoroughly rattled and disturbed by the failure of her adventures to inspire, the next scene is a montage of Charlotte trying to stay indoors instead [14:22-15:13]. She puts on lipstick, lies around on the bed, then tries to feminize the room by putting up sprigs and pots of pink paper flowers. Accompanying the montage is a soothing synthesizer and acoustic guitar track by Sebastian Tellier called “Fantino”, which starts out in a melancholy but hopeful major key with an airy synthesizer melody, then abruptly shifts to a minor key with more menacing and insistent synthesizer chords when Charlotte bumps her shin painfully against some furniture and sits down on her bed discouraged, breaking the hopeful reverie that had been building up. Charlotte’s husband’s insensitivity to her pain is encapsulated by the cut to the next scene, where his nasal, high-strung voice—the first thing we perceive of the scene—abruptly cuts off the non-diegetic music. The ambient repetitive pulses are replaced mid-pulse by tense silence and John’s jarring rant about his work.

It is worth noting at this point that all the non-diegetic music in *Lost in Translation* accompanies scenes of Charlotte by herself, with only two exceptions. The first is the scene after the title screen where Bob is riding in a taxi towards the hotel, and the second is the last scene in the film, shared by both Charlotte and Bob. In between, non-diegetic music is the proxy through which Charlotte experiences the external world. Even as she walks through the crowded streets of Tokyo [18:57-19:30], buffeted by sounds of advertisements and crowds from every direction, blended into and emerging out of this mish-mash of urban noise is the F minor melody of “Shibuya”, one of several original compositions for this film. The resonant synthesizer notes grow out of the noise like ripples on a pond, providing a focus in the urban soundscape parallel



to our visual focus on Charlotte as she wends her way through the masses of people. Like the transparent umbrella she holds, “Shibuya” forms the psychological and emotional counterpart to the glass barrier that Charlotte keeps between herself and her experience of the world. Instead of hearing the sounds around her unalloyed, we get the impression that she only hears them filtered through the music in her mind.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Charlotte, Bob’s chosen refuge is indoors, and he does not have the protection of his own musical buffer against the world. Numbed by his job obligations and marital stagnation, Bob tries to withdraw from worldly demands that require him to perform tasks he feels unsuited for: posing for whiskey commercials, picking out bookshelves and carpets. The indoors, however, does not turn out to be the nurturing sanctuary he expects. He shuttles from sauna to bar to hot tub, trying to find an inner peace of mind, but fails in all attempts. He is accosted in the bar by two male fans [4:00], called on his cellphone by his wife while in the hot tub [1:19:22], and situated beside two loudly conversing Germans while in the sauna [1:21:25]. Early in the movie, the outdoors even springs itself on him unawares when the automated hotel curtains roll open promptly at their designated time in the morning [6:26].

Bob’s indoor disorientation is best exemplified by two brief but memorable scenes. The first takes place on the night he arrives at the hotel. He has changed from his suit into a short striped bathrobe, and is sitting on the edge of his enormous bed with his back to the window [3:49-4:02]. Some innocuous string chamber music is playing in the room (a neo-classical “Minuetto” by a Dominic Sands), and Bob stares at the various objects on the nightstand, as if trying to figure out if one of them is the radio. Baffled, he turns to stare straight into the camera.

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<sup>8</sup> Other key scenes where music functions similarly show Charlotte taking the subway [11:58-12:47] and visiting a park in Kyoto [1:13:20-1:16:16]. The scene immediately following the subway scene takes place at a shrine [12:47-13:07], which is where Charlotte tries to feel something but fails. Tellingly, no non-diegetic music proxies her experience in this scene, suggesting that she was somehow unable to interpret the experience in her own terms.

We then cut to a shot of the television set, from which the music is clearly emanating. The screen shows a startlingly sharp image of tulips waving against a blue sky, a slice of digitally hyper-realistic outdoors invading the muted colours of the neutral hotel room. Bob's general confusion therefore is conveyed to us by his reaction to the music, a Western classical-style piece sounding distinctly out of place after hurtling through the streets of Tokyo, and playing out of the TV besides.

The other scene takes place at the hotel pool [34:51-35:28]. A harmless dip in the pristine ceramic lake is what Bob thinks he's in for until he faces the aqua-aerobics class with its entirely middle-aged Japanese female student body and its tan, built, caucasian male instructor counting out steps in a thick European accent to Rick James' "Love Gun" blaring out of a boombox. The cross-cultural confusion of the sight is expressed by the next event in the scene, when Bob begins to swim a lap and the camera and soundtrack follow his eyes and ears across the pool. Along with seeing alternate views of the pool from above and underwater, we hear the music as it sounds above and underwater too, respectively blaring and gurgling. Once again, Bob's perplexed reaction to diegetic music encapsulates for us his emotional discombobulation.

Bob's problem, as I have mentioned before, is that he lacks a non-diegetic musical proxy for his experiences. If non-diegetic music for Charlotte indicates a rich inner world and an attempt to interpret what is perceived, then the lack of it for Bob implies an emotional emptiness and inability to comprehend what he sees and hears. Two scenes in the film give evidence to Bob's "lack of music". As he sits in his room flipping channels [16:20-16:53], he is assaulted by a series of images accompanied by prominent and immediately distinctive music: a kinky aerobics show with high-register repetitive synthesizer vamp, a gangster flick with menacing timpani strokes and a repeated tritone melodic interval in a high woodwind instrument, then a

fast-talking VJ on MTV with a techno tune featuring a bass-register ostinato melody. And finally, the last thing Bob clicks to before he shuts off the television with a deadened expression: a film of his from the '70s or '80s, dubbed into Japanese and performed to no music at all. The silence in the soundtrack is a stark contrast to the overly saturated soundworlds of the previous three programs, the result of which is that Bob cannot even understand himself. His lack of music is even more literally played out when he watches himself on TV as a guest at a Japanese talk show [1:21:38-1:22:03]. When his talk show host presses his fingers in the shape of a heart up to the camera, the heart is digitally filled in with red, emanates radioactive pink rays, and pulsates to a bubbly electronic music lick. Bob, when he follows suit, does not get any music, and his heart remains empty.

While Bob kills time by staring into the virtual window of the television set, Charlotte gazes out at Tokyo through the expansive picture window in her hotel room. In fact, the first time we see her in the film, other than the opening credits which play out to her posterior in translucent peach underwear, she is sitting in the dark on the windowsill in her hotel room, looking out at the Tokyo nightscape [6:10]. We see Charlotte as windowsill-gazer on numerous other occasions throughout the film,<sup>9</sup> but the most dramatic instance is the scene following John's cheery departure on a business trip [40:32-41:26]. Charlotte smiles goodbye, the smile fades immediately when the door clicks shut behind John, and she looks dejectedly over to the window. We cut to the first shot in the scene, which is simply a view of Tokyo from Charlotte's hotel room window. The city is bathed in the gauzy, greyish-blue light that characterizes the moments after sundown, a slight shimmer of sunshine still visible on the horizon. The camera

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<sup>9</sup> We get a shot of Tokyo out Charlotte's hotel window when we cut away from her visit to the shrine and to her talking on the phone with Lauren [13:07]. When she returns from her visit to a video game arcade, she is shown gazing out the window in semi-darkness [36:44]. The first thing we see when she goes on a day trip to Kyoto is her staring out the bullet train window at the passing farmland [1:13:20].

pans slowly to the left in a slightly jerky, handheld style, does a 180-degree pan around Charlotte and continues moving to the left, then cuts at 41:05 to a downward-angled shot of a pile of magazines and Charlotte's feet on the window sill. The camera proceeds to pan upwards and to the right, doing a 90-degree around Charlotte before the scene ends. Throughout this entire meditative sequence, the windowsill is generally kept out of the frame, so that Charlotte looks as if she is literally perched at the edge of the world. We see her thoughtful but placid profile intermittently, and she rocks herself back and forth a little as she idles. All this is accompanied by a non-diegetic performance of Tom Jenkinson's "Tommib", a prime example of what Kassabian calls the "logic of endless iteration". The same wistful, ascending electric guitar melody is heard four times in this short scene with barely perceptible harmonic shifts, creating a sense of timelessness as the camera simply loiters around Charlotte with no apparent aim in mind.

Kassabian says of this soundtrack phenomenon of repetition:

One might be tempted to suggest that they are cyclical as opposed to linear, but the repetitions are different from standard strophic song forms; there is more emphasis on repeated fragments than on a shape and its returns. Overall, they share a break from more traditional Western musical patterns of goal-oriented motion.<sup>10</sup>

The ultimate effect of such repetition is therefore a break with linear narrative, a moment frozen in time. More than any of Charlotte's other windowsill-gazing scenes, this particular one becomes emblematic, the centerpiece of her Tokyo experience, because the non-diegetic music makes it all about existing in the moment—over, and over, and over again. Charlotte becomes eternally trapped on the threshold of experience, yearning always to make the outside world part of her and herself part of it, and the glass barrier remains between them to amplify the desire and simultaneously prevent its fulfillment.

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<sup>10</sup> Kassabian, 95.

Even though the film delineates respective indoor and outdoor spaces for Bob and Charlotte, neither character is fulfilled by where they have chosen to be. Neither manages to find themselves in their chosen space. That, more than the particular side of the threshold they are on, subverts gender conventions. To refer to Henderson again:

Romantic comedy posited men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic....What we begin to see now in films [i.e. in 1978] is a withdrawal of men and women from this ground (or of it from them). Or we see—in effect the same thing—false pretences in the sexual dialectic or divided ones (one realizes at the end that one did not want to play the game at all) or commitments for trivial stakes only. It seems that when the new self pulls itself together, it is away from the ground of full sexual dialectic. To argue this is to argue the death of romantic comedy.<sup>11</sup>

Is *Lost in Translation* then the long-foretold entombment of the romantic comedy? Even though Harry and Sally are just as spatially differentiated as Charlotte and Bob, this differentiation helps us see Harry and Sally's personalities and gender roles more clearly, thus allowing us to better judge their complementarity as a couple. The differentiation of Charlotte and Bob's characters, on the other hand, serves their individual soul-searching much more than it does their compatibility. More than that, seeing as their soul-searching is largely failed, spatial differentiation ultimately confuses rather than defines their gender roles. Nonetheless, seeing as we are only midway through this paper, you might guess that the answer is not so simple as to say that *Lost in Translation* is to romantic comedy as Schoenberg was to tonality. The other kicker in this discussion is the problem of language.

### **Any Way You Put It**

“Language in romantic comedy has a special status”, says the eminently quotable Henderson. “What stands between sexual desire and its fulfillment is language. In romantic comedy language is the medium in which all things occur, arise and are discharged or not”. At

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<sup>11</sup> Henderson, 19.

this point, it would seem that a movie titled *Lost in Translation* is doomed as a romantic comedy.

But read on:

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said nor referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown. We perceive the sublimation system and the thing itself at every point, a system of repression suffused with a libidinal glow.<sup>12</sup>

Suddenly, the phrase “lost in translation” has a whole new potency, a whole new “libidinal glow”, if you will. There are those who would dismiss the idea of sexual tension between Bob and Charlotte as anything serious, on account of their age gap. Indeed, if they had slept together, *Lost in Translation* would have been a mini-mini, not a mini-major. But as the entire genre of romantic comedy could attest to, flirtation does not have to be serious in order to be real and have potential consequences. If *Lost in Translation* lost points on unconventional spatial gendering, it certainly wins them back now for superior achievements in displacement, euphemism, and indirection.

Miscommunication between Charlotte and Bob and the Japanese is so rampant throughout the film that it deceives us into thinking that the two protagonists communicate very well indeed. And perhaps they do, but not without the aid of a translator called music. The film is highly typical of new romances in that it uses song to mediate sexual communication between Charlotte and Bob. It is not conventional, however, in its choice of repertoire. Standards of the 1930s and 40s are the more usual fare for romantic comedies, where they “are seen to possess a sense of confidence in their own romantic sentiments”. They are also supposed to function “as a type of counsel for the characters whose romantic adventures it soundtracks”.<sup>13</sup> In *Lost in*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Garwood, “Must You Remember This? Orchestrating the ‘Standard’ Pop Song in *Sleepless in Seattle*,” in *Movie Music: The Film Reader*, ed. Kay Dickinson (London: Routledge, 2003), 110.

*Translation*, however, the crooner of ballads is actually the running gag of the film, a point of connection between the protagonists only because they cannot stand her. And even though the fiery-haired lead singer of Sausalito sets herself up as a good old-fashioned lounge singer, her repertoire betrays her modern romantic sensibilities. Throughout the film, we hear her sing, in chronological order, the following songs: (1) “The Thrill Is Gone”, a song written in 1958 that mimics the sentiments of golden age standards but is just a tad too polished and slick to pass for the real thing; (2) “Scarborough Fair”, clearly the wrong era all together; and (3) “You Stepped Out of a Dream” from 1940, which *is* of the right era, but is de-romanticized as a result of being sung to Kelly the blonde bimbo’s monologue about how she is not anorexic but everyone thinks she is. She certainly stepped out of *some* kind of dream.

The songs that *do* communicate between Charlotte and Bob are songs of the ’70s and ’80s. The entire karaoke sequence [48:26-51:43] is comprised of songs from these decades, beginning on an upbeat note with Charlie’s hyper-gymnastic screaming of “God Save the Queen” (1977) and Bob’s goofily melodramatic rendition of “Peace, Love and Understanding” (1974). The latter, however, already shows traces of personal significance for Bob as he belts out the lines “As I walk through this wicked world / Searchin’ for light in the darkness of insanity. / I ask myself, Is all hope lost? / Is there only pain and hatred and misery?” Charlotte and Charlie are up next for a duet on The Pretenders’ “Brass in Pocket” (1980), though the film largely features Charlotte putting on a playfully flirtatious show for Bob as she sings. In spite of the obvious silliness at hand, the two maintain eye contact throughout the song, and the usually understated Charlotte, emboldened by her “frosting-pink wig”,<sup>14</sup> acts out the lyrics with gusto:

...I’m winking at you  
Gonna make you, make you, make you notice

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<sup>14</sup> Elvis Mitchell, “An American in Japan, Making a Connection,” *New York Times*, accessed online on 1 December 2005 at <<http://www.lost-in-translation.com>>.

Gonna use my arms  
 Gonna use my legs  
 Gonna use my style  
 Gonna use my sidestep  
 Gonna use my fingers  
 Gonna use my, my, my imagination

'cause I gonna make you see  
 There's nobody else here  
 No one like me  
 I'm special, so special  
 I gotta have some of your attention  
 Give it to me

Bob responds to the song jokily, echoing in a mock-derisive manner the words “special” as Charlotte croons them at him, but his passive gaze in the earlier verses betrays his physical attraction to her. Finally we get to Bob and Roxy Music’s “More Than This” (1982). Since I cannot beat Elvis Mitchell’s description of the performance, I will quote it here:

Certainly we anticipate Mr. Murray's trashy sarcasm when he steps in front of a microphone, but we cringe slightly; if he whips Bryan Ferry's doomed narcissism around his throat like a scarf, the kind of thing he did when he invented this routine in the late 1970's on "Saturday Night Live," he'll get his laugh and demolish the movie. Instead he renders the song with a goofy delicacy; his workingman's suavity and generosity carry the day.<sup>15</sup>

And so they do, with Bob gazing significantly at Charlotte as he intones with deadpan seriousness: “More than this—you know there’s nothing.” Charlotte’s smile fades a little as she realizes the potential message behind the lyric. A few scenes later, we see Bob carrying the dozing Charlotte to her hotel room [53:44]. He places her on the bed, takes off her shoes, tucks her in, and then at the doorway pauses just long enough for us to feel his regret before turning away.

Bob and Charlotte never “sleep together”, but they do *sleep* together. This displacement of desires carries great weight in the film. One Amazon.com reviewer called the soundtrack a

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell.



“tonic for jetlag”, and the film is indeed in large part about the protagonists’ inability to sleep. In fact, one might say that their friendship was founded upon the desire to sleep, and it is only when they are together that we ever see them asleep. The scene where they doze off in bed together is overwhelmingly touching [1:07:16]. This provides a stark contrast to Bob’s one-night stand with the jazz singer, which cuts straight from their less-than-subtle meeting in the bar to Bob’s confused awaking the next morning [1:22:44]. The jazz singer is clearly pleased with herself, singing as she goes about her morning toilette: “Midnight at the oasis / Sing your camel to bed / Shadows painting our faces / Traces romance in our heads”. It’s anyone’s guess as to which of them is the camel in this scenario. The sexual implications between Charlotte and Bob become plain when she obviously takes offense at his one-night stand, and once again, it is not words that convey the truth of Bob’s previous night’s activities to Charlotte. It is the sound of singing that emanates from his room [1:23:21].

Pseudo-golden-age standards light no sparks between Charlotte and Bob, ’70s and ’80s pop hits do. But there is a third category of tunes in *Lost in Translation* that helps mediate their relationship, and that is ambient and noise music. Kevin Shields, lead singer, songwriter, and icon for the late ’80s U.K. noise band My Bloody Valentine, was coaxed out of hiding to write four new songs for the film.<sup>16</sup> The soundtrack also includes “Sometimes”, an old song by Shields with My Bloody Valentine; an original composition by the French ambient pop group Air; as well as yet another original track by the movie’s soundtrack designer Brian Reitzell and his band TV Eyes, called “She Gets Around”.<sup>17</sup> As a genre, noise music establishes an interesting verbal

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Lester, “I Lost It,” *Guardian Unlimited*, accessed online on 1 December 2005 at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1167043,00.html>>; Alexis Petridis, “Lost in Translation Soundtrack,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 5 December 2003, accessed online on 1 December 2005 at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1099836,00.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> “Sometimes” accompanies Charlotte and Bob’s taxi ride back to hotel from the karaoke bar [52:30-53:44]; Air’s “Alone in Kyoto” provides an extremely illustrative parallel to what happens on the screen during all of Charlotte’s day trip to Kyoto [11:13:20-1:16:16]; and “She Gets Around” begins as non-diegetic music while Bob and Charlotte

ethos: one where you can definitely hear the presence of words but are unable to decipher them. Shields' "City Girl" and "Sometimes" and TV Eyes' "She Gets Around" all feature this frustrating and intriguing aesthetic, which perfectly reflects the verbal frustration of the film's main characters. Guitar feedback, like Bob and Charlotte's jetlag, becomes the glass barrier between sound and sense, understanding and verbalizing.

It is significant, then, near the end of the movie, when we finally get music where the words are unequivocally enunciated yet treated seriously by the characters. Back in the hotel bar after the fire alarm, Charlotte and Bob gaze into each other's eyes to Atlanta Rhythm Section's 1976 breakthrough song, "So Into You" [1:27:16-1:28:15]. It is performed by the male half of Sausalito accompanied by piano and acoustic guitar in a convincing emasculated tenor of '80s pop, perhaps recalling Richard Marx's rendition of the same song. Charlotte and Bob feed off the spirit of the song, but we also get the impression that they have transcended its romantic superficialities and failures, as their steady retinal connection defies the lines that sing "I was captured by your style, / But I could not catch your eyes".

Charlotte and Bob never discuss outright the sexual aspect of their relationship, but it is clear that the attraction forms the foundation of their temporary partnership. As a result, *Lost in Translation* turns out to be typical of romantic comedy in that the sexual question is left unvoiced. Instead, it is up to the diegetic songs and non-diegetic soundtrack to fill in the gap. When we turn back to *When Harry Met Sally*, however, we find that our model romantic comedy is not quite so pristine a specimen after all.

As one might guess from the notorious orgasm scene, Harry and Sally are hardly reticent about the question of sex. The movie establishes early on that "the sex thing is already out there"

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are getting ready to go out together for the first time, then becomes diegetic when they arrive at the disco [43:45-45:25].

[12:50], and it continues to come out over the course of the film. Like Harry, the movie just won't "let it lie" (interesting idiom there...). Sexual indiscretion and romantic confession are laid face up on the table from the very start, robbing the romantic comedy narrative of the two largest tricks in its bag. Harry and Amanda make out unabashedly as Sally waits in the car [3:18], and the film is structured around documentary-style interviews of middle-aged to elderly couples talking about how they got together. Hours after meeting Harry, Sally declares to a crowded diner that "It just so happens I've had plenty of good sex!", at which the entire clientele, including the radio, falls silent [7:38]. Cheekily enough, the song that was playing until she made her statement is called "Don't Pull Your Love (Out)". Harry then proceeds to grill Sally about her so-called great sex with Sheldon, for which he performs a low-key version of mock orgasmic monologue that Sally will trump him with later in the movie.

The fuel that keeps the grill hot in *When Harry Met Sally* is not the suspense of the sexual question, which is defused when the main characters actually do have sex, but rather the spontaneity and continuation of verbal banter.<sup>18</sup> As a result, whereas music in *Lost in Translation* helps the characters talk about sex, music in *When Harry Met Sally* helps them talk about talking. This is made evident by songs such as "I Could Write a Book", which is performed in the off-screen diegetic at the first New Year's party where Harry and Sally are dancing together, basking in the glow of their newfound friendship [48:37]: "If they asked me I could write a book / About the way you walk and whisper and look / I could write the preface on how we met / So the world

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<sup>18</sup> Henderson claims the "ethos of spontaneity" as one "thematic constant of romantic comedy (at least in the thirties)" (20). This ethos can also apply to *Lost in Translation*. The use of comedic actors Billy Crystal and Bill Murray may be key to the success of this romantic comedy component in both films. As Henderson elaborates, romantic comedies "are dramatic—they present what is happening now, without mediation. Pace and timing are important and a sense that the characters are under pressure and must react quickly. Lines of dialogue are delivered fast, often unexpectedly, and must be countered fast....Not only are lines of dialogue rendered spontaneously, so are physical actions". This rapidity of back-and-forth is very much true of *When Harry Met Sally*, but less so for *Lost in Translation*, where periods of extremely effective hyperactivity and spontaneity contrast with periods of jetlagged sluggishness.

would never forget”. In the song’s value system, the ability to keep talking about one’s beloved is proof of one’s love. “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”, which occurs twice in the movie, is also about talking. It revels specifically in the kind of talking that Harry and Sally engage in throughout the film, which is the bizarrely, paradoxically communicative and yet silly activity of banter and argument. The conclusion of the song, not heard in the movie but familiar to anyone who knows the tune, is that “we know we need each other, so we better call the calling off off”.

Yet, if Harry and Sally have no trouble talking about sex, the film must hinge on some other unknown that they are struggling with. There must be something that replaces the sexual question. This question, as it turns out, is that of what opposite-sex friendship and marriage really mean in an age that is mostly concerned with sex. Besides commenting on the prevalence and importance of banter, the film’s soundtrack also fulfills a conventional role in an unconventional way. It helps Harry and Sally realize their compatibility by helping them understand their friendship, rather than by showing up their sexual chemistry.<sup>19</sup> Notably, even though the first diegetic rendition of “Auld Lang Syne” coincides with Harry and Sally’s early and happy days of their friendship, it reveals their naïveté by their awkward speechlessness when it begins [50:04]. They are still reeling from the not-quite-so-platonic emotions they had just felt while dancing cheek-to-cheek, and their status as friends has become momentarily confused. The trick, of course, has just been enunciated for them by Harry Connick, Jr. while they were dancing: “And the simple secret of the plot / Is just to tell them that I love you a lot / Then the world discovers as my book ends / How to make two lovers from friends”. Clearly, from the looks on their faces, they haven’t figured out how to do that yet. The second time you hear “Auld Lang Syne” is at the end of Harry’s successful declaration of love, which takes the form of a laundry

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<sup>19</sup> Garwood, 110.

list of Sally's eccentricities. At this point, they have it all worked out, and their banter about the song gives evidence of their closure:

Harry: What does this song mean? My whole life I don't know what this song means. I mean, should old acquaintance be forgot. Does that mean we should forget old acquaintances or does it mean that if we happen to forget them we should remember them, which is not possible because we already forgot them.

Sally: Well, maybe it just means that we should remember that we forgot them or something. Anyway, it's about old friends.

The founding of a marriage on friendship rather than sexual desire, however, is way outside the provinces of typical Hollywood romantic comedy. This is where the subversive independent roots of *When Harry Met Sally* rear their head. Krutnik claims that the documentary-style interviews in the film give us "men and women testifying to the value of the heterosexual love-match", but I beg to differ.<sup>20</sup> Romantic comedies are intended to be fantasies. Krutnik himself says so later in the same article: "*When Harry Met Sally* is an exemplary new romance because it values aesthetic fabrication as a necessary tool to achieve the reconsolidation of romantic illusion".<sup>21</sup> I would argue that the makers of the film recognized the significance of aesthetic fabrication in romantic construction, and therefore set out to put a chink in its armour. Rather than helping to solidify the romantic illusion, the documentary couples actually form an intrusion of reality into the fantasy. They even do this via the soundtrack, where the interviews are set to the vacuum-like, buzzing silence characteristic of documentaries, contrasting sharply with the rosy, studio-mixed sonic background and lush soundtrack of the rest of the film. Furthermore, each documentary couple has a vastly different tale of heterosexual romance to tell, and not all of them are peach-perfect. We have the Asian couple that got together through an arranged marriage, the couple that clearly cannot stop interrupting each other, the couples where

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<sup>20</sup> Krutnik, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Krutnik, 29.

one party does all the talking, the couple where the man is obviously a womanizer and the woman an embittered second-time wife. All these testify more to the disintegration of the traditional concept of romance as one universal ideal rather than to its endurance.

That Harry and Sally are also inserted into documentary footage for the last scene of the film further blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion [1:31:32]. And, as their interview shows, they, too, have a wildly different kind of relationship from the other couples, namely one that is a continuation of their friendship. This is embodied by their attempt to begin with the kind of nostalgic, narrative storytelling that the other couples had done before them, but they quickly lapse into their more familiar communicative style of banter. Even their dress is noticeably frumpier than it had been throughout the film, giving a rather musty smell to the idea of good old-fashioned marriage. Finally, the abrupt cut to the end credits interrupts Harry almost in mid-utterance, as if to say: “All right, we’ve had enough of this! Moving on!”

### **The End**

Music, urban space, romantic fulfillment, and the value of verbalization come together at last in the concluding scenes of both *When Harry Met Sally* and *Lost in Translation*. For *When Harry Met Sally*, the old rules apply. In romantic comedy, “the man has always eventually to learn the error of his playboy ways and accept the institution of marriage—has always therefore to accede to a relationship with the woman on the woman’s basic terms”.<sup>22</sup> Hence, it is Harry who, in the end, realizes that Sally is the one for him, and makes the active decision to race *off the streets* and *into* the crowded New Year’s party in search of Sally [1:27:14]. He abandons his outdoor space to meet Sally on her indoor turf, catching Sally just in time before she slips her post. That Harry was growing disillusioned with his bachelor, outdoor space is amply reinforced

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<sup>22</sup> Steve Neale, “The big romance or something wild?: romantic comedy today,” *Screen* 33, no. 3 (1992): 294.

in the scene by the soundtrack, which casts Harry's lonely stroll in the wrong key (see Appendix A). And, in the clearest possible instance of verbalization winning the day, it is several long moments after Frank Sinatra begins singing "It Had to Be You" that Harry finally gets it and sets off on his sprint. This is the only time that "It Had to Be You" is performed with text in the whole film; "But Not for Me", the song of unrequited love, stands the loser and never gets a voice.

And finally, we have the inscrutable parting scene that I declare one of the best feel-good endings I have ever seen [1:32:13]. How appropriate that the most famous line in a film called *Lost in Translation* is the one that cannot be heard, yet it is clear to us that whatever it was, it was enough to make the formerly muted non-diegetic soundtrack burst out in full oratory:

Listen to the girl  
As she takes on half the world  
Moving up and so alive  
In her honey-dripping beehive  
Beehive  
It's good, so good, it's so good  
So good

Walking back to you  
Is the hardest thing that I could do  
That I could do for you  
For you

I'll be your plastic toy  
I'll be your plastic toy  
For you

Eating up the scum  
Is the hardest thing for  
Me to do

Just like honey...

We cannot tell what the lyrics are about, exactly, but it is clear from the cutting back and forth between shots of Charlotte and Bob that the song relates to them both (see Appendix B). Sung by the Jesus and Mary Chain, the song also signals its dual focus by first telling you to "listen to the

girl”, then lapsing in the subsequent verses from the imperative and descriptive into the first-person confessional. At the end, it goes back to describing the girl with the words “just like honey”. Since the performer is male, our attentions are now equally divided between the male and the female point-of-view. We see Charlotte walking away down the busy street, smiling happily in spite of her tears, and Bob backs away in the direction of his taxi with the largest, goofiest grin on his face. It is the only time he has smiled during the entire film. As we see him back in the taxi and Charlotte wending her way through the crowds, it is evident that they have both found something that they were looking for. Symbolically, Charlotte now has audible words in her music, and Bob has music, period. As a result, both are now much happier in the respective sides of the indoor/outdoor dichotomy they have chosen. In fact, when Bob rolled down his taxi window to make sure it was Charlotte that he was seeing on the street and then ran out to catch her, it was the first time that he had voluntarily let the outside world in. What he got in return was some music to fill his emptiness.

### **I Get the Last Words Too**

To conclude, I have now shown that both *When Harry Met Sally* and *Lost in Translation* contain important elements of romantic comedy as well as subversions of its conventions. Music helps convince us that Harry and Sally like their typical gender roles, but that they no longer believe in sex as the basis of romantic fulfillment. In *Lost in Translation*, music tells us that Bob and Charlotte have gotten closer to defining the roles they want, and that, as the wisdom of romantic comedy goes, the question of why we are not having sex is perhaps best answered through other means than actually having it.<sup>23</sup> In sum, music in both films help us go where we

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<sup>23</sup> “Note that in romantic comedy resolution of the problem of non-fucking involves both a theoretic question and a pragmatic one (as in psychoanalysis). Determining why we are not fucking and overcoming the barrier by actually fucking are quite different things, though romantic comedies and their characters consistently confuse them. The



cannot go, and it helps us appreciate and understand where we have to be, which is perhaps why I like *When Harry Met Sally* and *Lost in Translation* as much as I do.

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theoretic answer to the question does not necessarily lead to the desired result and achievement of the desired result does not necessarily imply that the theoretic question has been answered” (Henderson, 22).

Appendix A: Conclusion of *When Harry Met Sally*

Time	Scene	Music
1:25:05	Sally dancing half-heartedly at the Tylers' New Year party.	"Don't Get Around Much Anymore" (Harry Connick, Jr., vocals and big band)—diegetic, moderate swing, B-flat.
1:25:23	Harry walking the empty streets of Manhattan at night, sees a couple embracing and laughing.	"But Not for Me" (solo piano)—non-diegetic, E-flat, melancholy, mid-range register, melody clearly audible w/ minimal accompaniment.
1:25:49	Sally pretends to laugh at a man's joke	"Isn't It Romantic" (string arrangement)—diegetic, E-flat, sappy.
1:26:11	Harry keeps walking and ends up back at Washington Square Park, where he remembers being dropped off there at the end of the Chicago-New York drive. He goes through a series of flashbacks of his friendship with Sally.	"But Not for Me" (solo piano)—non-diegetic, D-flat, high register, clearly an estranged key from the E-flat of its own previous rendition and "Isn't It Romantic", more complex melodic and harmonic variations than earlier E-flat version, begins modulating back to E-flat for transition to "But Not for Me".
1:27:14	Flashback ends and Harry begins to run towards the party; shots of him running are interspersed with shots of Sally getting ready to leave the party. Harry arrives and launches into his declaration of love.	Glockenspiel "ding" on B-flat and ascending string sweep marks transition from "But Not for Me" to "It Had to Be You" in E-flat (Frank Sinatra, vocals and orchestra). Harry's non-diegetic "It Had to Be You" obliterates the diegetic dance music when he arrives at the party. It is eventually drowned out by party-goers starting the New Year countdown.
1:29:50- 1:31:32	Harry is in the middle of his declaration of love. Harry & Sally kiss, they banter about the meaning of "Auld Lang Syne".	"Auld Lang Syne" (crowd impromptu singing cued by diegetic orchestra and band, mainly strings, trumpets and saxophones)—F major, diegetic.

Appendix B: Conclusion of *Lost in Translation*

Time	Scene	Music
1:33:45	Mid-range shot of Bob walking away from Charlotte and back to his taxi. He turns back to look at her, but continues to back up towards the taxi.	Synthesizer drums start up.
1:33:50	Close-range shot of Charlotte's face. She is still standing there watching Bob leave, smiling through her tears.	Single bass synthesizer keyboard note on the tonic.
1:33:53	Bob flashes a grin and continues grinning as he backs up towards his taxi. At the last second he turns away.	Electric guitar comes in.
1:34:00	Close-up of Charlotte's face. She looks down and turns to walk away. [1:34:02] Cut to close-range shot of her face facing away from Bob. [1:34:04] Cut to mid-range shot of Charlotte walking away with her back to the camera. She looks back.	"Listen to the girl / As she takes on half..."
1:34:06	Bob still walking away with his back to Charlotte.	"...the world"
1:34:08	Mid-range shot of Charlotte turning away from Bob to keep walking down the street.	"Moving up and..."
1:34:11	Switch to front view, mid-range, waist-up shot of Charlotte walking down the street towards the camera. She is smiling privately to herself.	"...so alive / In her honey-dripping beehive"
1:34:18	Taxi interior. Bob opens the backseat door, gets in and shuts the door, then nods and says to the driver "All right." He looks simultaneously rattled but relieved. Taxi starts to move.	"Beehive / It's good, so good, it's so good / So good / Walking..."
1:34:33	Mid-range shot of street and Bob's taxi pulling away from the curb.	"...back to you / Is the..."
1:34:36	Mid-range shot looking down the road, and Bob's taxi driving away from the camera.	"...hardest thing that / I could do"
1:34:41	Bob inside the taxi. He starts to smile a little.	"That I could do for you / For you"
1:34:51	Close-up of taxi driver in silhouette, as if from Bob's point-of-view. Camera pans left to look out the windshield.	"I'll be your plastic toy / I'll be your plastic toy / For you"
1:35:00-1:35:49	Montage of shots of Tokyo at dusk, jerky handheld-style footage as if	"Eating up the scum / Is the hardest thing for / Me to do / Just like honey...just like

	filmed out Bob's taxi heading towards the airport.	honey...etc."
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