CHAPTER 3

The Acoustic Wound: Reflections on the Crystal-Song in Five American Films

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The musical moments[1] that interest me are those that affect us profoundly, intervening in our experience of watching a film. The frisson we may well feel as a result of such events momentarily superimposes an intensely personal emotional space on the diegetic space of the film. It creates a new space, an affective archaeological space, constructed of overlapping layers with oblique seams of meaning; these include the connotations of the music, colliding temporalities and resurgent memories. I have tried to indicate the complexities of such moments and their intersection with what Deleuze calls sheets of time (1989) by a shorthand term, the crystal-song (Powrie 2017).

In this chapter, I will explore four points that seem to me to be typical of the crystal-song: the title song of a film; the narrative position of a song which reinforces its pivotal function; the congruence or lack of congruence with the period in which a film is set; and, finally, extreme repetition

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A. K. Windisch et al. (eds.), *When Music Takes Over in Film*,
Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89155-8_3

of a musical motif. I shall do so using several recent American films. I first explore how we can use the concept of the crystal-song to inform analysis of different types of pre-existing songs, where cultural connotations raise complex issues. The songs I shall consider all have specific contextual functions, and in each case, attention is drawn to the song. *American Honey* (Andrea Arnold, 2016) and *Beautiful Boy* (Felix Van Groeningen, 2018) are examples of songs performed by the characters and that give the films their title, adding interpretative weight to them and prodding us to consider their function relative to the film. In *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), the characters not only perform the song, but also talk about it, drawing attention to its cultural associations. I continue with a song that is neither performed nor talked about and is not the title of *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017). But as is the case with all the other examples, the crystal-song draws attention to itself and in so doing forces us to consider its function in ways that the remainder of the music is less likely to do; that function is pivotal and has a strong relationship with time, memory and affect. Finally, I focus on a diegetic piece composed for *La La Land* (Damian Chazelle, 2016) which is performed at different points of the film. I am taking as an example a composed rather than pre-existing piece so as to reflect on the structuration of the crystal-song without the additional complexities of a pre-existing piece's cultural connotations or the complications raised by lyrics. But it is also to demonstrate that a 'crystal-song' does not have to be a song with lyrics, nor indeed the flamboyant number often found in musicals; what draws our attention to its structuring function is the fact that it is repeated on several occasions, at critical moments of the narrative. All of these examples serve to generate intense affect at moments of narrative crisis while also demanding our critical attention in answer to the question: Why does this musical moment affect me so deeply and (retrospectively) so much more than any of the other musical moments in the film?

One of the issues raised by the term crystal-song is that it could be seen as a convenient way of creating distance by turning the musical moments I have mentioned into reified objects of analysis. However, the spatial doubling of the crystal-song—the superimposition of intense emotion on the diegetic space—allows us at one and the same time to feel vividly a particular moment in the narrative flow while remaining attentive to that flow. Paradoxically, in such moments we can, I suggest, retain a critical distance both from the flow of the diegesis and from the intensity of feeling overlaying it, precisely because of the spatial doubling: we follow the story but we also follow our feeling, in what I have suggested (Powrie 2017: 170–171) is a combination of Barthes's *studium* and *punctum* (1982). The musical moment is always a conjuncture of image track and soundtrack that threatens to unravel the process of suture as soon as we become more aware of the music. From 'unheard', to reprise the term used by Claudia Gorbman (1987), the music can often become heard, liminally and at the edges of cognition and ratiocination, but without necessarily obtruding. The crystal-song takes this one step further, however; it un-sutures the listener, producing articulations of archaeological and temporal layers that can engulf us, that can thrill as well as cause anxiety. From being immersed in image-sound coalescence, the moment 'pricks' us like Barthes's *punctum*. Suture unravels to leave a leaking acoustic wound. We rise abruptly to the surface, immersion becoming emersion, a momentary disengagement from the narrative; indeed, immersion and emersion occur in one and the same moment of intense feeling.

Such an intensely affective experience is not necessarily felt by everyone; moreover, the crystal-song that precipitates this flush of feeling in me may not do the same thing for you. This may seem like something of an insurance clause in theoretical terms. Indeed, even when they accept the concept, colleagues have questioned the validity of crystal-song examples I have used. But clearly if the intensity felt during a crystal-song is partly due to memory work and intimate personal connotations, it stands to reason that a crystal-song is particularly and intensely subjective. I see no contradiction in a musical moment that appeals at the same time to the heart and to the head; there is every reason to celebrate surges of emotion, musical moments during which aesthetic rationalisation commingles with euphoric poignancy. I am also attracted to the idea that what we feel when we view and listen to a film may well be evanescent and conjunctural. What I feel on the first viewing may not occur for subsequent viewings; equally, music 'unheard' in a first viewing may well come to haunt me in further viewings. And then there is always the possibility that a song may haunt me every time I hear it in a film, raising the question of whether the crystal-song's effect of intense affect is extendible in time and subject to repetition.

Arguably, the subjective nature of what we might feel on listening to a particular musical moment could occur at any time in a film, conditional on memory work and personal connotation. The crystal-song does more than generate intense affect, however. It crystallises critical moments in the narrative of a film, and for this reason is unlikely to emerge at the start or at the end of a film. The intensity of the musical moment induces in the listener a particular attentiveness and an ascription of 'momentousness' to what is happening in the diegesis. I mean by this the standard definition of 'momentous', which indicates an awareness of the significance of a decision or the weight of an event that is deemed to have implications for the future. In the recesses of the word's etymological history is also the meaning of mobility, of giving movement and of being moved. This suggests the critical function of the crystal-song, its crystallisation of temporalities in an intervention that brings together past, present and future. It calls up the past for the listener through its personal connotations, but also through its gestures to the past within the film's diegesis. Part of the thrill experienced on hearing a crystal-song will, therefore, be its conjuncture of personal and diegetic pasts in the context of the present narrative and the conjuring of presumed future events in that narrative. The work of analysis, such as the present chapter, attends to and identifies the conditions that might allow such privileged musical moments to occur.

To function as a crystal-song a musical moment must be in some senses singular and differentiated from other parts of the soundtrack. In that respect it conforms to Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell's view of the musical moment as 'a particular point of disruption [..] which is most notable for its potential to disturb the text through its unexpectedness or at times excessiveness', although I do not agree that it is always 'an isolated musical presence in a non-musical film' (2006: 2). A musical moment can be talked about before we hear it, it can be repeated, in both cases drawing attention to itself, and leading to enhanced attentiveness to differences in the music as well as the contexts in which the music occurs. Marianne Kielian-Gilbert uses the productive term 'infolding' for musical repetition, pointing out repetition's potential for the transformation and reshaping of context:

> Moments of difference in repetition work as impulses for transforming context, jostling with those of identification and recognition. This is suggestive of a listening experience in which one hears and absorbs something that changes sonic orientations and performance toward the future. One listens for difference that has the potential to reshape what one hears. This differentiation infolds and/or extends outward to transform the context in which it occurs. By 'infolding' I mean the redoubling or

> folding back of experience in a self-referencing exchange that preserves difference. (2014: 503)

The transformation and reshaping pertain to music, but we can extend the point to the combination of music and image. Music can also be unusual and unexpected in the context, drawing our attention to it and away from the narrative flow, such as a diegetic song in an otherwise non-diegetic musical soundscape. If a song, it can be sung in its entirety, stretching the moment and reshaping the economics of the narrative. And finally, often combined with one or more of these criteria, the music can be performed, so that what we might feel in our body is 'infolded' in the body of the performer, listening becoming in part what I would like to call, so as to differentiate it from the problematic term 'identification', *haptic palimpsest*. The intense affect we feel is overlaid on the presumed feelings of the characters and may well be at odds with them in some cases by virtue of its very subjectiveness.

Whether we are dealing with a repeated musical moment, where a song's narrative importance is likely to be constructed cumulatively, as is the case in my examples from *La La Land* and *Lady Bird*, or a single instance of a song, as in *American Honey*, *Beautiful Boy* and *Call Me by Your Name*, my contention is that unlike what happens in the majority of film musicals, the crystal-song does not pause the narrative so much as reconfigure it in its pivotal function, wounding it, reshaping it, reflecting the film and reflecting on the film.

The Title Song: *American Honey* and *Beautiful Boy*

When we hear a song that references the title of the film we are watching we are likely to feel that the song is more significant than others in the film, or at the very least we are likely to consider how the song is related to the film's title. This is all the more the case for *American Honey*, a road movie in which the freewheeling group of characters are constantly and exuberantly singing along to and sometimes dancing to songs as they travel around the American Midwest selling magazine subscriptions. But it is not just the fact that our attention is drawn to the songs in general, turning the film into a kind of realist musical, or as one reviewer put it less kindly, 'a music video of tediously exaggerated proportions' (Sexton 2016). It is also because amongst the many songs we hear, the title song is the only country song, the film's 'only major on-the-nose musical choice […], especially given how at odds the song is to their choice of music to that point' (Farley 2016). Moreover, 'American Honey' is mentioned in passing earlier in the film by the mag crew's boss, Krystal, when she asks Star if she knows the song (00:21:06). And in the many interviews Andrea Arnold gave at the time of the film, she talked of the song's emotional importance for her. Indeed, when asked specifically about the mention of the song by Krystal, she hinted at its symbolic weight for her personally:

> AVClub: what was the order—did the song come first, and then the line from Krystal [Riley Keough] that star is an 'American honey', and then the title?
>
> AA: I think the song probably came first. Then it started to take on this feeling of what I was trying to do with the film [...] [It] seemed to start symbolizing something that felt like the bigger picture in the film. So that came first. And then the title from that, and then Krystal saying that (2016).

We only hear the title song towards the end of the film (2:33:00). The main character, Star (Sasha Lane), has slept with the leader of the group, the charismatic Jake (Shia LaBeouf), but has prostituted herself to earn more money. Jake comes to see her, bloodied, and we assume he has beaten up her client. They argue, and Krystal tells Star that she has let Jake go. The van comes to pick the team up, and Jake, inexplicably to Star—and to us—is in the van. 'American Honey' comes on the radio, and most of the crew, but not Star, sing along to it, one of the crew, QT, looking at Star and winking at her as she sings. As one otherwise hostile reviewer pointed out, this musical moment is amongst the film's most 'cathartic' scenes; the other one he refers to is the meet-cute sequence at the start of the film in which Jake attracts Star to the crew when they are both shopping in a supermarket and he gets up onto a checkout counter dancing to Rihanna's 'We Found Love' (00:05:46). Both sequences are

> daringly obvious and openhearted, even ridiculous, in their pursuit of an emotion or idea. They generate the precious few bursts of seeming spontaneity: the flirty, stuck-out tongue [...] Star [...] throws at Jake [...] in a Rihanna-blasting department store; the sweet little wink-back QT [...] sends to Star over the Lady Antebellum chorus. (King 2016)

In the final sequence that follows the Lady Antebellum song, the crew light a bonfire by a lake and celebrate, dancing to Raury's 'God's Whisper', with its insistently repeated lyrics: 'I hear God's whisper/Calling my name/We are the saviours' (the dance around the bonfire reprises Raury's video of the song). Star is pulled aside by Jake who privately hands her a turtle. Star takes it to the edge of the water and releases it before following the turtle into the water. She immerses herself fully before rising out of the water.

'American Honey' could be interpreted as a reflection of the narrative and the characters' feelings: Star and Jake were together, they have argued, and the song suggests a yearning for the status quo ante of their relationship, with its 'I miss those days', 'wanna go back in time' and 'got to get back to her somehow'. But it also suggests much more: the return to an almost prelapsarian innocence, emphasised by 'God's Whisper' in the final sequence, a life not just before Jake, but before life in the gig economy that Star has stumbled upon. Key to this interpretation is the fact that the song has already been mentioned in the film, as I pointed out above, and that Star quite clearly does not know the song; she is left out as the others in the crowded van sing it. This marks her out from the crew; as Ira Madison points out, she does not quite fit into this all-white group (2016). She is out of place in an ethical elsewhere of which we get occasional glimpses when she buys groceries for the family of a drug addict rather than try to get them to subscribe to the magazines.

The following and final sequence, in which Jake and Star appear to make up, brings apparently positive closure to the question of their relationship; but the film finishes with Star apart from the others, quietly baptising herself in the lake. It is a new beginning rooted in the innocence of the past that goes well beyond Jake and Star's romance, and in which she values her independence, as the lyrics to 'God's Whisper' make clear: 'I won't compromise/I won't live a life on my knees'. Star lives life on the edge and doubly so: she is on the edge of a group who themselves are already on the edge. The combination of the prelapsarian past ('I just wanna go back in time') in 'American Honey' and a wandering collective future in a dislocated present over which Star has a precarious purchase ('I gotta get back to her somehow') is precisely what makes the film's very white title song a crystal-song, as opposed to the merely joyous exuberance of the other songs we hear, which are all hip-hop or RnB; it is hardly surprising that it gives its title to the film.

Beautiful Boy is about the relationship between a father (Steve Carell) and his drug-addict son Nic (Timothée Chalamet). The song that gives its title to *Beautiful Boy* is by John Lennon from his last album *Double Fantasy* (1980) and refers to the son he had with Yoko Ono, Sean, born in

1975. Like *American Honey*, the soundtrack is saturated with music in an eclectic mix that was much critiqued by reviewers; the *Observer* reviewer considered that the film's 'worst flaw' is 'one of the most annoying and intrusive musical scores in years that drowns every emotion in musical chaos. Almost every scene is overwhelmed and the dialogue obliterated by decibel-crunching rock and roll' (Reed 2018). Like 'American Honey', the title song of *Beautiful Boy* is very different from the otherwise insistently loud music heard elsewhere. It occurs halfway through the film, after Nic has been in hospital and is rescued by his father David who books him into rehab. David croons the song in a flashback during which he tucks Nic as a child into bed before sending him on a flight to his mother, before we hear it sung by Lennon as David takes Nic to the airport (00:58:00). The lyrics—'Close your eyes/Have no fear/The monster's gone/He's on the run and your daddy's here'—quite clearly emphasise the close relationship between the two; but more than that, they pull us into a utopian past at odds with the dystopian present. David tucks the grown Nic into a blanket in their hotel room, and this simple action recalls a similar tucking in at the time of a difficult separation in the past.

This is a less powerful crystal-song than 'American Honey' because it too obviously appeals to sentimentality. But it nonetheless functions as a pivotal moment in the father's struggle to help his son, its pivotal nature, as was the case with 'American Honey', emphasised by its contrast with the other songs, its position in the narrative, the insistent close-ups of father and son, and, finally, the fact that it is performed by David. It is the performed aspect that interests me here above all: the close-ups suggest what would normally be called 'identification' with the character; but the character played by Carell in my view serves as a vehicle for something deeper mobilised by the song he sings. We may well identify with him; but he functions as an enabler of intense feeling generated by the song, made all the more intense by the fact that he croons it 'artlessly', as Gorbman might put it (2011); our subjective and personal space is overlaid on his, as haptic palimpsest, encouraging identification, but stretching it and reshaping it through affect to something else.

The Song that the Characters Talk About: *Lady Bird*

The song that interests me in coming-of-age film *Lady Bird*—'Crash into Me'—is talked about in a more obvious way than Krystal's mention of 'American Honey' to Star, and is repeated on a number of occasions. We hear it in three sequences of the film, first when Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) has broken up with her boyfriend who has turned out to be gay, and weeps in a car with her best friend Julie (Beanie Feldstein; 00:34:00). The song is reprised, again in a car, when Lady Bird is driving to the school prom with her new group of friends whose company she has sought while abandoning Julie (01:09:00). Her pretentious 'cool-guy' boyfriend, Kyle (Timothée Chalamet), on hearing 'Crash into Me' being played on the radio, says 'I fucking hate this song'. Lady Bird rebels, saying that she loves it, and asks to be driven to her friend Julie's house. She and Julie make up, and in its third iteration the song functions as non-diegetic foregrounded sonic overlay; we hear only the song with no ambient sounds or dialogue as the two girlfriends enjoy themselves at the prom (01:11:50).

'Crash into Me' is a well-known song by the American rock group Dave Matthews Band. It reached number 7 on the 1997 US *Billboard* Modern Rock Tracks chart and was nominated for the 1998 Grammy Awards. The cultural context of the song is as important as the narrative context, more so than Lady Antebellum's song in *American Honey*. 'Crash into Me' was one of the most talked-about aspects of the film on release. It was, said one reviewer, 'one of the great music moments in film in 2017. Even those people who hate Dave Matthews Band and "Crash into Me" found themselves falling for the song' (Sharf 2018). In the early 2000s when the film's events take place, Dave Matthews Band was considered by many as tedious middle-of-the-road music—'middlebrow, mainstream radio bro-rock' (McDermott 2018), hence Kyle's aggressive rejection of it. The song is a cultural fit for the period and for the type of adolescent fantasies about sex that the film's characters obsess over: 'If you were in college around then, you know you couldn't sneeze without hitting a melancholy dude finger-picking "Crash into Me" on an acoustic guitar' (Purdom 2018). There is, therefore, a nostalgic charge in the song for early-millennials; as the film's director Greta Gerwig said in a much-publicised interview, in terms that recall Andrea Arnold's comments on 'American Honey', she felt that it was 'an incredibly romantic song, and

I always wanted to make out to that song, and I never did' (Petrusich 2018).

The song is pivotal in narrative terms, acting as a 'spine, with each act hinging into the next alongside the breakup-to-"Crash" routine' (Purdom 2018). It allows Lady Bird to accept her dissatisfaction with the relationship she has with Kyle and his overly sophisticated friends, and to recognise the value of Julie (Beanie Feldstein); when her new friends ask her 'who's Julia?', she responds 'my best friend'. The song's middle-of-the-roadness is a knowing rejection at both the level of the narrative and in terms of audience reactions to the 'irony and dissonance, touchstones of brooding-hipster culture' and the acceptance by Lady Bird of 'an interiority that doesn't hew to her own expectations of herself' (Petrusich 2017). It is an idiosyncratic return to an adolescent past with its clumsy and excessive affects—the first time we hear it, the two girls sing along to it tearfully—combined with a rejection of the emerging hipster future.

The crystal-songs I have considered so far—'American Honey', 'Beautiful Boy' and 'Crash into Me'—do not just have diegetic performance in common, something that enables the hapticity characteristic of the crystal-song. They are all used to bring characters together at a critical moment in the narrative, and in each case, they celebrate not just the moment of community but the separation from that community: Star accepts the end of her romance with Jake, as does Lady Bird with Kyle, and Dave accepts his son's drug addiction. The next example I would like to consider is a single non-diegetic song, in other words the type of song that does not obviously have characteristics that would attract our attention, such as being talked about, repeated or performed.

THE ANACHRONIC SONG: *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

Call Me by Your Name takes place in Italy in 1983 and recounts the coming out of teenager Elio (Timothée Chalamet), the son of an American professor of archaeology (Michael Stuhlbarg), with Oliver (Armie Hammer), the professor's doctoral student. Elio is precocious: he speaks several languages, spends his time reading, transcribing classical music and playing the guitar or piano; like the other films I have discussed, this one is musically saturated. Elio resents Oliver because he has had to give him his bedroom. They both pursue heterosexual relationships, but are gradually drawn to each other, and sleep together in a brief but intense romance until Oliver returns to the USA. At the end of the film, Oliver writes to

Elio to tell him that he is engaged to be married to a woman, and the film closes on Elio's tears.

The song that interests me, 'Futile Devices', occurs approximately in the middle of the film (01:03:42); unlike the other crystal-songs discussed so far, it is non-diegetic and unperformed. Elio and Oliver have kissed and Elio is waiting for him assuming that they will sleep together. We hear the song as Elio waits for Oliver, who returns home late but goes straight to his room. At first sight, the song appears to do no more than illustrate the narrative and Elio's emotions. For example, the lines 'It's been a long, long time/Since I've memorised your face/It's been four hours now' clearly express Elio's desire for Oliver. But the musical context of the song suggests that its function is more complex. The soundtrack is mainly composed of diegetic music, whether it is classical music played by Elio on guitar or piano or pop numbers heard as background, for example in a club scene. The latter correspond more or less to the year in which the narrative is set, 1983, as they were all released 1981–1984.[2] 'Futile Devices', however, is composed and sung by Sufjan Stevens, taken from his 2010 album *The Age of Adz*. Stevens contributed two other songs for the film, both originals, one of which, 'Mystery of Love', which we hear as Elio accompanies Oliver when he leaves for the USA, received an Oscar nomination. The other song, 'Visions of Gideon', is heard right at the end of the film when Elio is crying after Oliver has left. Both of these songs do no more than emphasise what Elio is feeling. In the first, the singer recalls a first kiss, evoking Alexander the Great's lover Hephaestion: 'Like Hephaestion who died/Alexander's lover/Now my riverbed has dried/Shall I find no other?' In 'Visions of Gideon' the singer laments 'I have loved you for the last time […]/And I have kissed you for the last time'. Unlike these two songs, 'Futile Devices' does more than echo Elio's feelings, in three distinct ways.

First, it is difficult not to notice that it is the first of the three non-diegetic numbers in the film, drawing attention to what is happening in the narrative. It underlines what is a pause in the narrative, all the more so because Elio is waiting for Oliver. We see him waiting interminably in the failing light, the image and the music floating in the penumbra. Once he has returned to his room, Elio waits nervously and impatiently, his impatience evident from his fidgeting. The lyrics stress the difficulty of expressing the desire that courses through his body: 'I would say I love you/But saying it out loud is hard/[…] Words are futile devices'. That futility is underlined by the difficulty Elio has in reading his book in the failing light, an activity that might have filled the gap left by his lover's absence.

Second, we briefly see the flickering image of a celluloid strip during this sequence (see Fig. 3.1), which attracts our attention but which is inexplicable in the film's context. In a Q&A at the 2017 New York Film Festival, the director Luca Guadagnino explained that the film returned from the lab with the defect and that he decided to retain it because it corresponded, as he put it, to the ephemeral nature of Elio's feelings.[3] The confusion that we as spectators might feel in understanding the image, therefore, corresponds to Elio's confusion. He loves Oliver but does not know how to express that love; words fail him, they are 'futile devices', much like the film fails to maintain the illusion of realist narrative at that point, introducing external elements: a non-diegetic song and a break in the fourth wall.

Third, the song functions as a bridge between expectation and disappointment, between love and hate, as is made clear when Elio realises that Oliver will not come to him and spits out the word 'traitor'. This occurs on the final words of the song—'words are futile devices'—when Elio has realised that he cannot find words to express his love and desire for Oliver. 'Futile Devices' functions as the narrative pivot of the film, emphasising the moment when everything in the relationship between Elio and Oliver

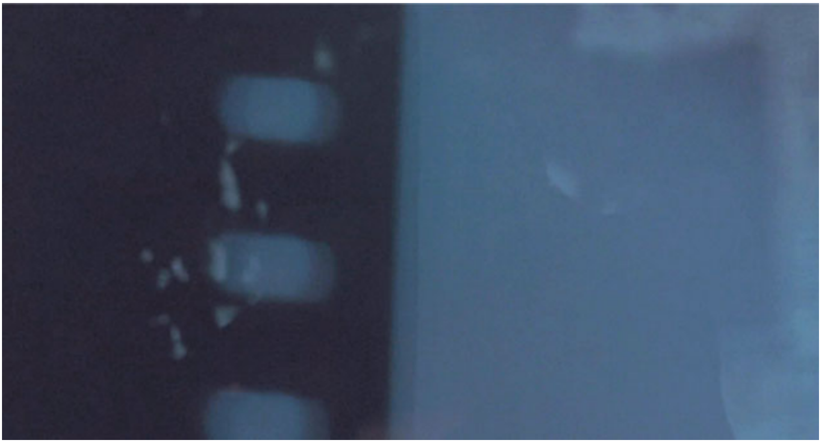

Fig. 3.1 The celluloid strip in *Call Me by Your Name* (*Courtesy* Sony Pictures)

changes, because Elio finally understands that his grudges against Oliver hide his love for him. This twilight moment corresponds to what Richard Dyer writes on the 'sad young man' in such moments of transition:

> Twilight […] connotes sadness […]; it is also a period of transition, which here is not so much that of childhood to adulthood as between straight and gay worlds. The idea of a 'half-world' suggests both being in between the sexes and also not being a self-sufficient world […] The sad young man allows for an expression of the experience of libidinal fluidity while offering the reassurance that it will not last. (Dyer 1998: 86, 88)

The impact of the song, to which our attention is so forcefully drawn by its sudden non-diegetic nature, and sudden disruption of the realist aesthetic, is quite unlike the utopian musical moment common in film musicals. Like the title song of *Beautiful Boy*, and, as we shall see, like 'Mia and Sebastian's Theme' in *La La Land*, the song is deeply melancholic and nostalgic, reflecting on the 'could-have-been'. On the other hand, the crystal-songs in *American Honey* and *Lady Bird* celebrate utopian community in the more familiar utopian aesthetic of film musicals. It is perhaps not coincidental that the dystopian flavour is connected with male characters in films directed by men, while the utopian flavour, conversely, is associated with female characters in films directed by women.

My final case study is a musical. Standard musicals are constructed around a sequence of musical numbers, generally involving song and dance, and are utopian in nature (Dyer 1977). Arguably, the concept of a crystal-song is less appropriate for a musical genre in which specific musical numbers are less likely to stand out. The purpose of this final case study is threefold: to demonstrate that crystal-songs can function in this genre; second, that cumulative repetition of a performed number can be a feature of the crystal-song; finally, that the crystal-song does not have to be a song with lyrics. Precisely because a musical has a sequence of generally spectacular song-and-dance numbers, which we expect, my contention is that the crystal-song is less likely to be one of them. The crystal-song, like Barthes's *punctum* (and Conrich and Tincknell's 'musical moment'), is often unexpected, it 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow'; it is 'the accident which pricks', searing like a sudden 'wound' (Barthes 1982: 26–27), causing a bleeding of the narrative body.

The Song Without Words: *La La Land*

La La Land is a musical with a standard boy-meets-girl narrative in which the boy and the girl are both struggling in their careers, Mia as an actress and Seb as a jazz musician. They get together, drift apart, and become successful artists; but unlike the standard narrative they stay apart. The film ends on a nostalgic but dystopian moment when they share the song that became 'their song'. The song that won an Oscar in *La La Land* was 'City of Stars' (00:46:17–00:48:00), and it would not be unreasonable to assume that it functions as a crystal-song. Counter-intuitively, I want to claim that a more pivotal song, the film's crystal-song, is 'Mia and Sebastian's Theme'. This is partly because 'City of Stars' is constantly repeated as backscore as well as in set pieces, being something closer to a leitmotif (of which more below). 'Mia and Sebastian's Theme', however, occurs five times in three major sequences, either in piano solo or in orchestral arrangements, generally filtered through Mia's perceptions, and unlike 'City of Stars' the song scores (in both senses) critical moments of the narrative.

1. (00:16:18) On the first occasion, Mia hears Seb playing his tune as she passes the club where he is the pianist. We witness her amazement first at the beauty of the music, and second when she realises that she has seen Seb before, and then her disappointment as Seb, who has just been fired for playing the tune rather than the required playlist, bumps past her on his way out.
2. (00:23:10) The same scene is repeated in a section seen from Seb's point of view. Already, then, the tune being used to bring the two leads together, the meet-not-so-cute, is split into two variant perceptions of that event.
3. (00:51:24) Later Mia fantasises that she hears the tune when attending a boring restaurant meal with her boyfriend and his friends, when she had promised Seb a date to see a film that evening. She is amazed to hear the tune, as we are, and rushes to meet Seb.
4. (00:55:40) They go to see *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and subsequently visit the planetarium that is the location for the film's gay subtext—the (Platonic) love between Plato (Sal Mineo) and Jim (James Dean)—and Plato's later death at the hands of the police. Seb and Mia's ecstatically utopian heterosexual melodrama swamps the dystopian homosexual connotations as they waltz into the air

and dance through the clouds (see Fig. 3.2), the sequence ending with an old-fashioned iris shot on their kiss. We would be forgiven for thinking that this seals their relationship, but it is only half-way through the film; the second half explores the gradual collapse of their relationship.

5. (01:50:19) We hear the tune again towards the end of the film when Mia, now happily married to someone else and a successful film star, stumbles on Seb's Café, and watches him play the tune as she had done at the start of the film. This time, in a long fantasy sequence, events from their relationship seen in the first half of the film are replayed in utopian mode as, we assume, Mia and Seb's fantasy of what could have been their life together. Instead of brushing past her as had happened earlier in the film, in this fantasy they kiss, for example, and have children.

Seb's tune ties the two halves of the film together, bringing Mia and Seb back together nostalgically at the end, and replaying the past in a melancholic time loop. While the crystal-song here is not the *punctum*'s 'anterior future of which death is the stake' (Barthes 1982: 96) when he looks at the photo of the man to be executed, nonetheless Seb's tune articulates the conditional perfect, a 'could-have-been (if only….)'. It articulates a utopian nostalgia for what has been lost (his attachment to jazz and then to Mia), scoring the utopian surface of the film with an acoustic wound redolent with loss.

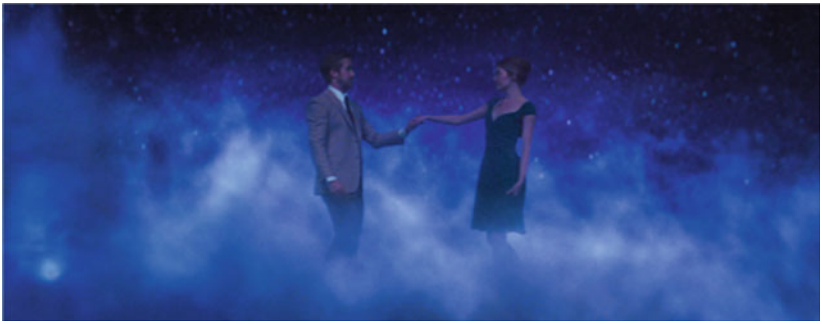

Fig. 3.2 Seb and Mia in the planetarium (*Courtesy* Lions Gate Home Entertainment)

Three films with narratives of lost love are very knowingly referenced in *La La Land*, two in the same moment: when Mia shows Seb round the film-sets, she points out to him the window from which Bogart and Bergman looked out in *Casablanca* (1942; 00:39:35), so recalling the iconic scene in Rick's café when Bergman asks Sam to play 'As Time Goes By', a song that arguably has the same function as the tune Seb plays in *La La Land*. At the same time, we see a shop window selling umbrellas below the window, recalling the equally melancholic dystopia of Jacques Demy's musical *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg (The Umbrellas of Cherbourg,* 1964). *La La Land* replays these two films, alongside *Rebel Without a Cause*, all three films incorporating a dystopian subtext formally within the broader generic framework of Donen-Kelly musicals, utopia and dystopia jostling side by side. 'Mia and Sebastian's Theme' is a crystal-song, as it crystallises time and mixed feeling through its narrative and its refracted genre manipulations.

A natural objection to my concept of the crystal-song would be that 'Mia and Sebastian's Theme' is no more than a leitmotif, sentimental, lightweight, and no more pregnant with intense affect than the Oscar-winning 'City of Stars'. However, a leitmotif attempts to provide continuity as part of the narrative weave, or to use a term common in linguistics, it is diachronic, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Powrie 2017: 239). The crystal-song, on the other hand, is not concerned with continuity but with critical moments of change, whether the song is singular or repeated, moments in which strands of time coalesce; it is synchronic.

Conclusion

The crystal-song is a moment in film that we feel is pivotal. It is marked by intense affect which is of necessity subjective as it depends on constellations of connotation and memories. But there are less subjective conditions for the crystal-song. The conditions all have singularity or disruption at their core; they draw attention to the music and in so doing momentarily deflect our attention from the narrative to a network of constellating affects. It is then and only then that subjective criteria determine the impact of the song, and the extent to which we may feel the acoustic wound it generates.

When we hear a title song, for example, as in the cases of *American Honey* and *Beautiful Boy*, sudden recognition drives us to the hermeneutic imperative, if only momentarily, of seeking some kind of meaning. When characters talk about the music we hear (*Lady Bird*); when the music is repeated (*Lady Bird*, *La La Land*); when it is performed, especially when that performance is imperfect (*American Honey*, *Beautiful Boy*, *Lady Bird*, *La La Land*); when the music occurs at a point in the narrative that we recognise as pivotal (*La La Land*, *Beautiful Boy*, *Lady Bird*); when, finally, we become aware that the music is not congruent in terms of period with other parts of the soundtrack (*Call Me by Your Name*, *Beautiful Boy*), our attention shifts from the forward propulsion of the narrative, the diachronic unfolding of events, to a synchronic infolding, to use the term coined by Marianne Kielian-Gilbert.

For her that infolding leads to recombinations that 'become and perform temporal difference' (2014: 502) that may leave us unmoved, 'un-momentised' to suggest a neologism. But when the musical moment generates flushes of affect connected with involuntary memories and connotations, it becomes a crystal-song. The intensity of feeling in such crystal-songs does not only recombine moments in time. We are both infolded in such moments, reliving them, as well as outfolded in bursts of time and affect; to recall the terms I used earlier, we are both immersed but at the same time emersed. 'Emersion' signifies not just emergence from submersion, but also 'the reappearance of the sun or moon from shadow after eclipse, or of a star or planet after occultation' (OED). The crystal-song submerges us in affect, briefly eclipsing the narrative in an intense musical moment, from which we emerge 'pricked' (Barthes 1982: 96), changed, astonished, and moved by the perfect congruence of what we see and what we hear.

Notes

1. To use the term coined by Conrich and Tincknell (2006) and taken up by Herzog (2009).
2. In the order in which we hear them: 'M.A.Y. in the Backyard' (1984), 'J'adore Venise' (1982), 'Paris Latino' (1983), 'Lady Lady Lady' (1985), 'Love My Way' (1982), 'Germination' (1983), 'Words' (1981), 'Radio Varsavia' (1982).
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCJquKusENs (34:56–46:00).

Filmography

American Honey, 2016, Andrea Arnold, UK/USA.
Beautiful Boy, 2018, Felix Van Groeningen, USA.
Call Me by Your Name, 2017, Luca Guadagnino, Italy/France.
Casablanca, 1942, Michael Curtiz, USA.
Lady Bird, 2017, Greta Gerwig, USA.
La La Land, 2016, Damian Chazelle, USA/Hong Kong.
Les Parapluies de Cherbourg, 1964, Jacques Demy, France/West Germany.
Rebel Without a Cause, 1955, Nicholas Ray, USA.

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'Beautiful Boy'. John Lennon (pf. & comp.). © Lenomo Music.

'City of Stars'. Ryan Gosling (pf.). Justin Hurwitz, Benj Pasek, Justin Paul (comps.). © Justin Hurwitz Music, B Lion Music, Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp.

'Crash into Me'. Dave Matthews Band (pfs.). David Matthews (comp.) © Colden Cray Ltd.

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