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Constructing Glee's Sung-Through Musical Narrative through Spontaneity and Verisimilitude. In

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[This is the text version of a paper presented on the day. It is a summary of a work in progress and in no way a finished product. Comments and feedback on the ideas in this paper are most welcome and encouraged. Please 'leave a reply' in the box at the bottom of this page.]

From 19 May 2009 until 20 March 2015, FOX aired six seasons of musical comedy and teen drama television series *Glee*. Created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, the show follows the antics of the New Directions, a fictional high school 'glee' club or show choir in Lima, Ohio. The New Directions sing and dance their way through the show choir competition circuit, performing a mix of Broadway show tunes and pop music chart hits while dealing with personal problems to do with bullying, sexual orientation, discrimination and relationship issues. Songs covered in the show were released through the iTunes Store during the week of broadcast, and a series of *Glee* albums have been released by Columbia Records. The series' merchandise also includes DVD and Blu-ray releases, an iPad application, and karaoke games for the Wii. There were live concert tours by the show's cast; a concert film based on the 2011 tour, *Glee: The 3D Concert Movie*, and a reality television series, *The Glee Project*, with participants competing for a role on the fictional show. Academic work on *Glee* has predominantly focussed on two areas. Firstly there has been much discussion of the series' handling of contemporary social issues as well as its progressive representations of gender, race, disability and queer politics [1]. Secondly, scholars have tended to focus on the production and distribution structures that have enabled *Glee*'s phenomenal commercial success, and the activities of its huge teenage fan base on social media and through fan fiction [2]. There is as yet little discussion of the series' unique genre-blending structures and its reinterpretation of the popular music and musical theatre canon with a focus on performance.

Most recently within this area, Kyra Hunting and Amanda McQueen have identified that *Glee* has the "mash-up aesthetic" as its governing structural logic" [3]. That is, the series follows a mash-up logic on a generic, structural and aesthetic level. Hunting and McQueen argue that *Glee* simultaneously embraces and distances itself from the classical integrated musical by mapping "the editing and cinematographic conventions of the music video on top of the narrative functions of the integrated musical, creating a musical-music video mash-up that is more familiar to contemporary youth audiences"[4]. As Steve Neale has noted, the term integration is often used fluidly in film musical literature [5]. For most scholars, "integration" refers to numbers that arise

spontaneously from the dialogue as expressions of a character's thoughts and feelings in order to advance the musical's narrative [6].

Building on this understanding of *Glee* as mash-up of the musical and music video, This paper is interested in how this unique form also allows the series to access *authenticity*. "Authenticity" is a fluid and problematic term and a problem for *Glee* at both a musical and genre level. I am particularly interested in how the interplay between the genres of pop music video, teen drama, and the musical enables a performance mode that accesses authenticity through both a genre and a song convention typically seen as "inauthentic". I argue *Glee* uses the integrated musical number, or spontaneous song and dance as an attempt to build authenticity of character development and emotional expression in the teen drama format. It is therefore interesting that *Glee*'s huge success with its teen audience relies on an inauthentic song convention to build authenticity in its 'music as narrative' format. Within popular music the quest for authenticity is a long-held goal and an ongoing negotiation, varying across genres, time periods, national and cultural boundaries, and individual performers. I want to stress that authenticity is obviously always a construction in every case, but the ways that it is constructed is what interests me here. Artists firmly in the American pop music mainstream, such as Beyoncé, Gaga, Katy Perry, which *Glee* regularly covers, are often lumped with claims of inauthenticity, manufacturing, showmanship and spectacle, and are often described as 'entertainers', not as 'musicians' or 'artists'. This is more so than performers in folk, blues and roots, rap or R&B, which have supposedly greater claims to "truth" and authenticity in performance.

This negotiation of authenticity in music can also be applied to the ongoing debates about "quality television" and the devaluing of certain genres, such as reality shows, melodrama, "women's" television, and teen drama, which are seen as less "authentic" or "real" compared to shows such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos* or *True Detective*. This echoes similar and unhelpful value debates in popular film criticism where the musical genre is seen as pure spectacle, highly emotive, and non-realist, and the sudden bursts into song are seen as uncomfortable for contemporary audiences.

From this position, we can see how *Glee* is dismissed on three counts: first for its recycling of mainstream pop music, secondly for its teenage characters and target teenage audience and thirdly for its position within the musical genre. In this paper I hope to illuminate how *Glee* is negotiating these tensions and how its adoption of the integrated musical number is possible within the current media environment and the state of the musical genre at large.

This paper will examine *Glee*'s construction and disruption of discourses of authenticity through its attempt to build musical realism or what I call a 'naturally musical world'. I will do this by focusing on integrated number, "Don't Speak," in the episode "The BreakUp," from Season Four, but originally performed and recorded by American rock band No Doubt in 1995. Specifically I want to look at how *Glee* both constructs and

disrupts discourses of spontaneity and verisimilitude in its musical performances, in its attempts to create this naturally musical world. By distancing and aligning itself with film musical conventions, *Glee* creates tensions within its own claims to authenticity. “Don’t Speak” is one of those moments.

There are several factors that enable *Glee*’s unique performance of authenticity. Firstly, we must consider *Glee*’s place within the larger genealogy of the musical genre, and the current media saturated environment. *Glee* is enabled by the rebirth of the blockbuster film musical post 2000, and the ongoing mutation of the musical genre in paratexts such as film trailers, advertising, music videos, viral videos, and television special episodes. Since the decline of the traditional film musical in the post studio era, spontaneous singing and dancing has been seen as unappealing to audiences who are unfamiliar with the genre convention. Musicals in the 70s and 80s therefore followed less integrated formats, taking shape as youth or dance films such as *Flash Dance*, *Footloose*, and *Dirty Dancing*. There has been a well-documented increase in integrated film musicals post 2000, however, with box office hits such as *Moulin Rouge*, *Mamma Mia*, *Chicago*, *High School Musical* and *Les Miserables*, and the stage success of *Wicked*, *Jersey Boys*, and *We Will Rock You*.

*Glee* is also enabled by the increase in spontaneous musical performance in the wider media environment. One only has to look at the popularity of dancing flash mobs since the early 2000s and the Harlem Shake viral videos of early 2013. *Glee*’s teen audience has been raised on musical reality television shows such as the *Idol Franchise*, *The X Factor*, *The Voice*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *So You Think You Can Dance*. The increasing fragmentation of musical meaning and proliferation of musical material also enables *Glee*’s reworking of the American popular music canon. YouTube offers unlimited access to the musical archive, streaming and download services such as Spotify, Rdio, and iTunes increase accessibility and personalization of music, while the wide uptake of personal mp3 players and its accompanying shuffle culture increase the fragmentation of musical meaning from its original source.

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Within the show itself, there are several strategies that *Glee* adopts to build authenticity. The first strategy is *Glee*'s grounding of its storylines in realist codes (see above image), enhancing its verisimilitude. The series emphasizes the ordinariness of the *Glee* universe, grounding its characters and its musical numbers in a realistic setting of a public high school in Lima, Ohio, and later in New York City. The story lines and characters mention current events at the time of broadcast, and tackle recent popular cultural and political issues. The characters also reflect common stereotypes in a typical teenage drama: football jocks, cheerleaders, and music nerds. Many songs are importantly sung in everyday spaces: either a public space such as a school, hospital, park, or a private space such as a bedroom or any other room at home.

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The second strategy is the legitimizing singing as personal expression. The series spends a lot of time naturalizing musical performance as emotional or personal expression, as Will Schuester, the teacher at the head of the glee club, repeatedly tells his students to “get it out through song”, “tell it through song” and “express themselves”. These songs content contain communication with another character, an internal monologue that illuminates how that character is feeling or an aspect of their personality.

The third strategy is the show’s building and legitimizing its character’s musical ability. *Glee* can only get to using fully integrated numbers in later seasons by first working its way through the well-known strategies of the backstage format, showing the hard work and preparation that goes into each musical performance before and during competition. Integrated numbers are more frequent in later seasons once the characters’ musical worlds had been established and their singing abilities confirmed and legitimized.

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Diegetically-motivated songs such as rehearsal occur in the music room or auditorium, and performance at show choir competitions (see above image). These instances have visible background music sources such as instruments, bands, musicians, or music players.

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*Glee* also notably uses the dream or fantasy song strategy (see above image), with lighting and costuming changes signaling movement into a dream space, and the camera and editing techniques taking on a flighty, roving, spectacularised MTV aesthetic. In both cases, backstage and dream song, *Glee* avoids the “burst into song” quality of traditional film musicals, and such songs dominated the earlier seasons. However, as the series progressed, *Glee* embraced its third strategy: the integrated musical number. Here characters sing to each other with no visible musical accompaniment, as though the music existed in the very air of the *Glee* universe. *Glee*’s integrated numbers come at moments of extreme emotion, often during a tense moment in a romantic relationship, such as “Don’t Speak”, or feelings of heartbreak, rejection, confusion or isolation. Like musicals, these are moments when *Glee* is trying to access “true” emotions, or authentic emotional expression. The tension lies between *Glee* trying to authenticate its teen drama storylines and character emotions through ‘spontaneous song’, which is only possible through technologies of recording, playback, auto-tuning and lip-synching, and production practices of planning and rehearsal. By not committing itself to any strategy of song performance, either backstage, fantasy or integrated, *Glee* blurs the boundaries between spontaneity and performance, verisimilitude and fantasy.

The rebirth of the musical, proliferation of musical material, the show’s grounding in realist codes and its legitimization of its characters musical abilities and performance allows the series to include a fully integrated number such as “Don’t Speak” by Season 4. “The Break Up” episode features the end of several long-established romantic relationships on the show: Finn and Rachel, Kurt and Blaine, and Santana and Brittany all break up. “Don’t Speak” is performed by Finn and Rachel, and Kurt and Blaine. All

are original cast members of *Glee* who have graduated high school. Blaine and Finn have come from Lima to visit their respective partners in New York, but things are going so well. You can watch the number on YouTube [here](#).

Finn, Rachel, Kurt, and Blaine's singing is immediate, unrehearsed and the direct expression of their feelings at that moment. The number begins when the first soft guitar chords are heard and Finn turns away from Rachel to sing the first line. Importantly, there is no change in lighting, costuming, or camera movement, as the characters remain in the rather ironically romantic setting of central park at night. The camera does not suddenly become unhinged and break into an MTV aesthetic (such as following the flow of the music or zooming in or zooming out spectacularly), but continues with the midline shots, close-ups, eyeline matches and match-on-action shots between the couples that have been following the dialogue leading up to this point.

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Initially, there is no marked change in Finn's voice quality from speaking to singing, as though the singing is an extension of the dialogue. There is no dancing per se, and their body language and gestures seem appropriate for the realistic settings of the scene. All of these stylistic choices seek to impart spontaneity to the musical performance, to tell us that this singing is an instant realistic portrayal of the characters in that moment.

*Glee's* attempts at verisimilitude mean its spontaneous songs rest precariously on the realistic/fantasy divide. Is "Don't Speak" a subjective experience happening simultaneously in the minds of the four characters in some fantasy space where they all connect, or all they all singing this together in central park? The series continued build



up of musical realism both allows and disrupts this integrated number. On one hand it makes it more believable that and therefore not uncomfortable for the audience that these characters can and would burst into song at heightened emotional moments, as it is something they are used to doing in performance settings. On the other hand it also makes it less legitimate as the *Glee* follows the backstage musical formula of showing us the hard work and rehearsal *Glee* club members do to perform their numbers at competitions.

As Jane Feuer has pointed out, the myth of spontaneous performance forms a part of the greater myth of the musical as entertainment – it is both demystifying and remythicising musical performance and the genre to the audience [7]. By using a combination of diegetically motivated, fantasy and integrated musical numbers *Glee* creates a naturally musical world where characters can sing and dance at any moment. This also means that *Glee*'s claims to authenticity are confused/confusing. *Glee* is trying to access a particular kind of authenticity here, one that relates to authenticity of character expression, teenage emotion and romantic relationships, rather than authenticity in musical performance, thereby both building and disrupting its authentic discourse. What is interesting is that *Glee* tries to create these authentic moments through an *inherently inauthentic mode*. *Glee* therefore represents a new and interesting mode of popular song in visual media (one that conflates the authentic with the inauthentic).

I argue *Glee* is part of a larger audiovisual modality occurring across film, television, music video, and online media that constructs authenticity in music performance in this way, and my doctoral research examines this trend as a larger project. I argue the confluence of the inauthentic with the authentic is an attempt by musical audiovisual media to give their texts more weight and meaning in our media saturated environment. *Glee* uses integrated numbers to construct its characters, diegesis and narrative as legitimate, authentic, true tales of the American teen. By doing so it taps into the whole raft of historical, cultural and popular associations of the American songbook and reattaches them to its characters and its narrative, legitimizing them in the process. The show rides on the back of the intense emotional expression of original songs and reuses them for the intense emotional expression of its characters. The proliferation of musical and audiovisual material, the personalization and fracturing of musical meaning, means *Glee* is able to rework and reuse the popular music and musical theatre canon for its own narrative devices, to allow its characters to express pure emotion in a particular moment, regardless of our knowledge of the production practices at play. It no longer seems inauthentic to use, because spontaneous musical performance is slowly becoming normalized, the repurposing and personalization of musical meaning is natural. *Glee* is attempting to re-tether musical performance to meaning, to give it more lasting hold on the audience, to make us stop and watch and listen, rather than pass over, these musical moments.

## **Endnotes**

1. See for example *Glee and New Directions for Social Change*. (2015). B. C. Johnson & D. K. Faill (Eds.). Rotterdam; Boston; Taipei: Sense Publishers.
2. See for example Wood, M. M., & Baughman, L. (2012). "Glee Fandom and Twitter: Something New, or More of the Same Old Thing?" *Communication Studies*, 63:3, p328-344.
3. Hunting, K., & McQueen, A. (2014) "A Musical Marriage: The Mash-up Aesthetic as Governing Logic in Glee", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 31:4, p291.
4. Ibid, p298.
  
5. Neale, S. (2000). *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, p107.
6. Mueller, J. (1984) "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical," *Cinema Journal*, 24:1, p28–30; Cohan, S. (2002) "Introduction," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. S. Cohan, New York: Routledge, p9; Block, G. "Integration," (2011) in the *Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*, ed. R. Knapp, M. Morris and S. Wolf, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p98–99.
7. Feuer, J. (2002). The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment. In S. Cohan (Ed.), *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*(p31-40). London and New York: Routledge. p33.