Abstract

This article considers Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘Mrs. Robinson’ in its original context of The Graduate (Nichols, 1967) in relation to its composition, lyrical content and narrative role. The song’s later use in other films is then examined, with consideration of issues of intention and reception in regard to evocation of The Graduate, and of the part that visual and other elements play in this alongside music. ‘Mrs. Robinson’ is seemingly universally employed as a deliberate nod to Nichols’s film, but a variety of contexts for and manners of this can be identified, in part using Serge Lacasse’s (2000) concepts of ‘autosonic’ and ‘allosonic’ quotation (where the former is the quotation of recorded sound, and the latter that of abstract musical structure, realized through new sonic means). The article argues that these later uses of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ have contributed to a re-inscription of the song’s signification in culture more broadly; much as Benjamin is seduced – led astray – by Mrs Robinson in The Graduate, we ourselves have now been seduced into new and arguably false interpretations of her musical namesake.

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[p.133]

I bet you didn’t know: that was all written for the movie. It was a score, technically.

(Miles, The Holiday [Meyers, 2006])

[p.134]

In Nancy Meyers’s film The Holiday, film composer Miles (Jack Black) vocally recreates the scores of several famous films as he browses a video rental store with his friend. Picking up a copy of The Graduate, he sings one line of Simon & Garfunkel’s ‘Mrs. Robinson’, before
making the remarks quoted above. It is unclear to *The Holiday*’s audience whether he is referring in those remarks to that song specifically, or to the broader role of the duo’s music in Mike Nichols’s 1967 film. Either way, he is not entirely correct.

Before the latter part of this article turns its full attention to *The Holiday* and other post-1967 films in which ‘Mrs. Robinson’ appears, then, the song’s place in its original context should be clarified. It was Nichols who initially approached Paul Simon about writing music for his film, commissioning three new songs for it. Prior to their completion, the film was ‘temp-tracked’ with existing Simon & Garfunkel songs – ‘The Sound of Silence’, ‘April Come She Will’, ‘Scarborough Fair/Canticle’ and ‘The Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine’ – that stayed in place for the final version of the film when Simon failed to deliver appropriate new material (Harris 2008: 358–61). But Nichols also heard ideas for a song that Simon was writing for another project, apparently with the working lyric of ‘Mrs Roosevelt’, and demanded that it become part of his soundtrack (Bart 2005).

‘Mrs. Robinson’ sounds like a work in progress in *The Graduate*; only fragments of a song are heard. The plot of the film revolves around recent graduate Benjamin Braddock’s (Dustin Hoffman) relationships with Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft) – a friend of his parents – and her daughter Elaine (Katharine Ross). The song is first heard almost subliminally, its verse melody quietly whistled as Benjamin drives in the rain to pick up Elaine for a date (only to be greeted when he arrives by her mother, who is trying to stop the two seeing each other). Though Benjamin does not look to be whistling, the sound notably does have fidelity (in the sense Bordwell and Thompson [2010: 283–84] suggest) to his position in the scene. Both verse and chorus are then heard, again whistled, as Benjamin is seen buying an engagement ring for Elaine. He can be seen whistling in one shot here, but the sound does not match the image in other senses, not least because the whistled melody now has guitar accompaniment and is far clearer in the mix. The possibility is nonetheless raised by both of these instances that Benjamin somehow produces ‘Mrs. Robinson’ himself. Later on, scenes of Benjamin’s drive through Pasadena in an effort to find Elaine are scored, in a seemingly more conventional non-diegetic fashion, mainly by ‘dee dee dee’ or ‘doo doo doo’ vocalizations on the verse melody with more aggressive strummed guitar accompaniment.

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1 Two songs were completed, but rejected by the film-makers: ‘Overs’ and ‘Punky’s Dilemma’. Both ended up on the 1968 Simon & Garfunkel LP *Bookends*. 
based on the so-called ‘Bo Diddley beat’. Solo guitar scoring based on that accompaniment is also used at several points.

At only one point are lyrics heard, and then only those of a single chorus. As not all of the songs heard in *The Graduate* were written for the film, then, so not all of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ alone was a ‘score’ in the sense Miles intends in *The Holiday*. Indeed, notably missing from Nichols’s film is the one line Miles sings, referencing the baseball star Joe DiMaggio. This hails from the now more familiar four-minute ‘Mrs. Robinson’ that appeared in 1968 on the Simon & Garfunkel LP *Bookends*, and as a single that peaked at number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in June of that year (Anon. n.d.), and number four on the UK charts in August (Official Charts Company n.d.). This ‘complete’ version has four choruses and three verses that will be considered lyrically below, and adds bass guitar and percussion in a fuller arrangement that introduces the famous rising guitar hook in its opening bars, undoubtedly a principal ‘signature’ of the song.

‘Mrs. Robinson’ and Mrs Robinson

The sung chorus in *The Graduate* is heard over a continuous shot of Benjamin driving. At this point in the story, he has ceased his affair with Mrs Robinson because of his love for her daughter. But when he tries to find Elaine, Mrs Robinson tells him that she is to be married to somebody else. Benjamin sets off to stop the wedding.

The relevance of the chorus’s lyrics to this situation is not particularly obvious. Its first words – ‘Here’s to you’ – imply a toast, and following that lead the rest of the lyrics, like those of the other songs in the film, can probably be understood most clearly as representing Benjamin’s thoughts (particularly if we think of him as *producing* this song, in which case he might be hearing even the accompaniment internally). We could also understand the lyrics

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2 Readers of this article are encouraged to consult the full lyrics of the song on Simon’s official website, at http://www.paulsimon.com/us/song/mrs-robinson. Copyright is held by Paul Simon Music. I have quoted a few words from these lyrics for the purposes of criticism and analysis, and consider this to be fair use.

3 Todd Berliner and Philip Furia (2002: 24) write that ‘The Sound of Silence’ in particular ‘expresses [Benjamin’s] feelings much in the way “spontaneous songs” had in the classical Hollywood musical’. They argue that “‘Mrs. Robinson” clearly comes from a perspective other than
as the commentary of a sympathetic narrator, but either way this toast is a sarcastic one made to Mrs Robinson, a woman who Benjamin feels has essentially ruined his life, selfishly trying to govern his actions (and those of her daughter) for her own benefit. This is itself a selfish view, of course, but reflects the naivety with which Benjamin appears to (fail to) understand Mrs Robinson’s tragic backstory of having been forced into a loveless marriage by her unplanned pregnancy. There is still ambiguity here, though; note that religion, while prominent in the chorus’s references to ‘Jesus’ and ‘God’, is not an issue that is emphasized in the film, its restrictions instead being only implied in the church setting of the climax (yet to come at this point). Do the lyrics deliberately tell us something about Mrs Robinson that the rest of the film leaves unsaid? Or does their vague relationship to her character merely have to do with when they were written, and how quickly the song perhaps needed to be ‘shoehorned’ into the movie? This is unclear.

As for the extended, later version of the song, there does not seem to have been any great effort to link its lyrics more closely into the themes of *The Graduate*. That the chorus heard in the film is slightly altered for the *Bookends* version – its content remaining much the same, but now presented with neater half-rhymes and alliteration – suggests that there was opportunity to make the connection more obvious: further writing clearly did occur, even if at least some ideas for the complete song were in place before Nichols came along. Indeed, when the director first heard it, Simon reportedly told him, ‘[i]t’s a song about times past – about Mrs Roosevelt and Joe DiMaggio and stuff’ (Bart 2005).

DiMaggio finds his way into the full song’s final, varied chorus, which Simon (1999) has said is about a desire for a hero in the vein of the legendary baseball player, nicknamed ‘Joltin’ Joe’, at a time when he felt that ‘genuine heroes were in short supply’. Along with the verse that precedes it, with its suggestion of a political climate that places voters in a no-win situation, this chorus might echo Benjamin’s feelings of alienation from the adult world of ‘plastics’ that awaits him. Mrs Robinson, though a member of that older generation, is also disillusioned with the life in which she is trapped. Complex issues of societal change are implicated in the film’s plot, and might be in the song’s lyrics too, though it is difficult to discern any direct parallels between the two here or elsewhere, not least because neither

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Benjamin’s’, perhaps that ‘of an omniscient author’ (2002: 25), but this is to miss the ‘sarcastic’ reading that I will outline here.
spells out its perspective on those issues clearly, instead leaving a space for the audience’s own ideas.

[p.136]

The first and second verses provide further examples of this. The precise topics of their lyrics are again unclear, though the act of enrolling in an institution of some kind is suggested in the first, while the second hints at a ‘secret’ that needs to be hidden and thus at a potential need for rehabilitation. The secret might be a tangible vice, such as drugs or alcohol. Early on in the film, Mrs Robinson informs Benjamin that she used to be an alcoholic, but this is not something that is given particular weight elsewhere, and there is no mention of any rehabilitation that took place (though again, the intention could have been for the lyrics to provide a backstory for the character untold in the film). ‘It’ could also be birth control, facilitating Mrs Robinson’s sexually free behaviour (regarding which one might suggest a double meaning to ‘affair’ in the second verse’s third line, similar to that present more than once in the film’s dialogue), or else something intangible. When Mrs Robinson later admits to Benjamin that she had to marry her husband because she was pregnant with their child, she asks him not to tell Elaine this, a request that the final line of the second verse can be heard to echo in suggesting that the secret must be hidden ‘from the kids’. That line might also hint at the broad issue of the ‘generation gap’ apparent in the film, if one takes Benjamin’s aforementioned disillusionment as standing for a generation’s as a whole, as many have done. In any case, though, the point is that there is again no clearly stated connection here.

Indeed, if the song’s protagonist had another name, the loose parallels between her and the character played by Anne Bancroft in The Graduate would probably go unnoticed. But, as will be shown below, ‘Mrs. Robinson’ – and not just the original, Graduate version of it – has been associated closely with both The Graduate generally (which itself has been hugely popular, currently standing as the 21st highest-grossing film of all time in the United States and Canada, adjusted for inflation [Box Office Mojo n.d.]) and the character more particularly. I have identified several later films that use the song, all of which do so in order

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4 Roger Ebert suggests that this reading is not truly supported by the film itself:

To know that the movie once spoke strongly to a generation is to understand how deep the generation gap ran during that extraordinary time in the late 1960s. There were true rebels in movies of the period (see Easy Rider [Hopper, 1969]), but Benjamin Braddock was not one of them. (1997)
to evoke *The Graduate* and/or the character of Mrs Robinson, in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. In doing so they not only draw on the song’s existing associations, but also contribute to its ‘meaning’ in a continuing process of resignification. These appropriations are the focus of the remainder of this article.

**The Graduate as cultural object**

Miles’s rendition in *The Holiday* gives proof of the cultural status of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ as an iconic film song. As noted above, the ‘score’ to *The Graduate* is only one of those he vocally recreates in the video rental store. It is thus placed (by an apparently authoritative judge: a film composer) in the same pantheon as the music of *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981; music by Vangelis), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989; music by Hans Zimmer5), *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming, 1939; music by Max Steiner), *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975; music by John Williams) and *The Mission* (Joffé, 1986; music by Ennio Morricone). That Miles sings a line from the *Bookends* version of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ indicates that it is not only the original film version of the song that is indelibly connected with *The Graduate*; it seems doubtful that the inaccuracy here (whether knowing or unknowing on the part of the film-makers) would be noticed by most audience members. And, in exploiting this general connection, *The Holiday* further strengthens it.

*Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) can similarly be seen to exploit the song’s renown as film music. This decade-crossing tale of the titular Gump’s ([p.137](#)) (Tom Hanks) life from the 1940s to the 1980s uses music throughout to mark the dates at which its various scenes take place, with a progression from Elvis Presley and Duane Eddy (the 1950s) to The Doobie Brothers (1970s) and Willie Nelson (1980s). ‘Mrs. Robinson’ – again, the *Bookends* version – accompanies a sequence in which Forrest is seen on television receiving the Medal of Honor from President Lyndon Johnson, after returning from the Vietnam War. The song works as an element of the film that, in the absence of a subtitle or other direct indication, signals roughly 1967 or 1968 as the date at which this event occurs. Through using a well-known song that is further connected with a well-known film, director Robert Zemeckis

5 Zimmer is the composer of *The Holiday*’s original score; the selection of *Driving Miss Daisy* here might have been a knowing nod in his direction from the film-makers. On *The Holiday*’s highly reflexive use of music more generally, see Fletcher (2008).
effectively gives his audience a greater chance of inferring the date: he offers not one but two reference points.

The same can be said when it comes to identifying a potential deeper relevance to the song’s use here. That broad theme of ‘disillusionment’ seemingly present in both ‘Mrs. Robinson’ and *The Graduate* chimes with the specific topic of contemporary feelings about and counter-cultural resistance to the Vietnam War, and indeed after the song fades out early in the subsequent sequence of *Forrest Gump*, Forrest – still in Washington, DC – finds himself swept up in an anti-war protest. (The music thus could be read as foreshadowing this, undercutting the celebratory nature of the sequence it actually scores.) The dual reference points are especially key here given that, lyrically, only a single chorus of the song is heard, meaning that the audience are left to recall that theme – which is also, as already noted, at most only implied in both contexts – for themselves. The use of the *Bookends* version of the song might be generally important too: it is the better-known version, and moreover has that rising guitar hook that renders it more easily recognizable even beyond the fact of its greater familiarity for most.

It is again the *Bookends* version that is used more explicitly to evoke *The Graduate* as a cultural object in the romantic comedy *Rumour Has It...* (Reiner, 2005). The main character, Sarah (Jennifer Aniston), discovers that her family were the real-life inspiration for the Robinsons in Charles Webb’s 1963 novel *The Graduate*, on which the 1967 film was based, with her grandmother the real-life Mrs Robinson, and her mother the real-life Elaine. Sarah experiences the key realization having been told that Webb attended school alongside both her mother and the ‘other man’ with whom her mother had a fling before marrying Sarah’s father. The moment is a quiet one: Sarah’s eyes widen, and *The Graduate* is not mentioned by name for another 25 seconds. But, of course, that initial moment is highlighted by the entry of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ on the soundtrack. In fact, one could argue that the song is the realization: an interpretation of the music as internal diegetic (i.e., as existing within Sarah’s mind, much as it might do within Benjamin’s) would not seem too far-fetched.

At this point in *Rumour Has It...* the audience already know that ‘*The Graduate*’ is the answer to the question that Sarah begins to ask of her mother’s best friend from school (‘what book did you say that he [Webb] wro...’), prior to being interrupted by her own successful thought process. But the song nevertheless stands in momentarily for that answer; the audience is still required to connect it with *The Graduate*. The recognizability of the *Bookends* version is again key here: the song starts to play from its very opening, and so it is,
in effect, specifically through that signature guitar hook in the four-bar instrumental introduction that viewers are initially asked to identify ‘Mrs. Robinson’.

Note, though, that as well as the Graduate and Bookends versions of the song once more being rendered essentially one and the same, book and film also become one (because Sarah is asking about the former). And, in that the song can metonymically stand for the film (and the book), ‘Mrs. Robinson’ and The Graduate are also here the same thing. Effectively, Rumour Has It..., like the other texts both already discussed and to be discussed below, utilizes not precisely targeted intertextual references, but rather inexact ideas and memories of what these earlier texts are, and of how they relate. It accounts for and relies on the fact that, in practice, intertextual processes play out in an inevitably imprecise medium: the mind of the audience member. And, in doing so, it further encourages the continued currency of those approximate recollections.

**Parallels and parodies**

In Rumour Has It... ‘Mrs. Robinson’ becomes the score for the post-realization sequence in which Sarah is seen driving to her sister’s wedding (phoning her fiancé en route to request that he obtain a copy of The Graduate from a video store). This recalls the aforementioned primary use of the song in The Graduate, in which it accompanies the sequences showing Benjamin similarly journeying by car to a marriage ceremony.

This more complex manner of employing the song, in which it forms part of a more extensive parallel between its host text and The Graduate, can be observed in several other texts. Something very like the use in Rumour Has It..., but with a more obvious emphasis on the plot parallel, occurs in The Other Sister (Marshall, 1999). Daniel (Giovanni Ribisi) is recounting the storyline of The Graduate – his favourite film – to another passenger on a train, and realizes the similarity to his own situation, in which Carla (Juliette Lewis), the woman he loves, is at a wedding without him (albeit only in attendance and not getting married to someone else, for the wedding is Carla’s sister’s). The 1991 cover version of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ by alternative rock band The Lemonheads fades up on the soundtrack – with a bass-guitar statement of that guitar hook being the first recognizable element heard – as Daniel suddenly decides to get off the train and embark on a journey to the church to be
reunited with her. The use of a cover that is more modern, in musical style as well as actual age, is apt in the context of this self-consciously ‘present-day’ re-enactment of *The Graduate*.

*The Graduate* is seemingly so familiar to us, though, that it does not have to be mentioned by name at all. *Wayne’s World 2* (Surjik, 1993) uses ‘Mrs. Robinson’ as part of a palimpsestic parody of *The Graduate*’s climactic scenes. The song accompanies Wayne’s (Mike Myers) drive along the very same Pasadena roads as Benjamin, in the same red Alfa Romeo Spider convertible, to the same church in order to stop the wedding of Cassandra (Tia Carrere), the woman he loves, to another man. A difference that probably very few would notice is that the ‘Mrs. Robinson’ heard in these driving scenes is again first the *Bookends* version (once more likely used because of its familiarity), together with a mixture of the *Graduate* version(s) and newly recorded recreations of the guitar-only ‘Mrs. Robinson’ scoring from that film. Those recreations follow the same musical template, but are not exact. This is probably the point: to the untrained ear they sound like they have been lifted from *The Graduate*, but in being newly recorded would have allowed a closer ‘fit’ with the slightly different timings of *Wayne’s World 2*. The similarities in the song’s use, though, extend to the manner in which it slows and eventually stops in parallel with the out-of-fuel car. The most noticeable musical disparity between the two sequences is that Wayne and Cassandra’s escape from the church is scored by the Lemonheads’ cover (the ‘modern’ sound of which here draws us out of *The Graduate*’s 1967 and back to 1993), whereas Benjamin and Elaine’s getaway has no musical accompaniment at all. (One other clear difference is the later film’s inclusion of a gag whereby the song is momentarily replaced by static as Wayne drives through a tunnel, thus implying that it is source music emanating from the car’s radio.6)

I would like to draw attention here to the idea of the use of pre-existing music in film as one of a number of related practices, and possibly as a subcategory of a larger technique. ‘Mrs. Robinson’ in *Wayne’s World 2* is only one of many elements that point towards the same thing. This is true of the song as used in both *Rumour Has It*... and *The Other Sister* too (and, in fact, *The Holiday*, for Dustin Hoffman makes a cameo appearance as himself in the

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6 This is a ‘diegetic reveal’ gag similar to the ‘harpist in the closet’ joke in *Bananas* (Allen, 1971) (to give but one example; see Biancorosso [2009] on the idea more generally), but here the reveal plays on the audience’s experience not only of general film-music conventions, but also of a specific use of music in an earlier film.
video store, muttering ‘Can’t go anywhere’ upon witnessing Miles’s performance of ‘Mrs. Robinson’), but *Wayne’s World 2* takes this to another level both qualitatively and quantitatively, which is surely a key reason why its audience does not need to be actually told the identity of the film being parodied. *The Graduate* is evoked here by the *mise-en-scène* (involving the settings, the car and camera angles), by the dialogue spoken and actions taken by the characters, and by the sequence of events more broadly. For example, Benjamin and Wayne both run the remaining distance to the church after their fuel-less cars come to a stop; both utter ‘Oh Jesus, God, no’ as they see the wedding in progress, then bang on the glass that separates them from the ceremony while shouting the name of the bride; and Wayne – a musician – uses a guitar to ward off angry wedding guests and bar the church doors as Benjamin does with a crucifix, similarly escaping onto a passing bus.

There might be helpful comparisons and analogies to be drawn between certain techniques: is it possible to say, for instance, that some uses of pre-existing music in film work in some way like cameo appearances? Whether and how such techniques can be compared might depend largely on how they are theorized. I would label *Wayne’s World 2*’s uses of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ – along with all of the uses in other films discussed above – as examples of quotation, a practice defined in this context as the reproduction of a pre-existing musical text, or part of one, within a screen text.\(^7\) *Wayne’s World 2* thus quotes (and therefore contains quotations of) ‘Mrs. Robinson’.

To be more precise, one could note that it quotes multiple versions of the song, and that it does so in different ways; Serge Lacasse’s (2000) concepts of ‘autosonic’ and ‘allosonic’ quotation – where the former is the quotation of recorded sound, and the latter that of abstract musical structure, realized through new sonic means – are useful for this purpose.\(^8\) While *Wayne’s World 2* quotes the *Bookends* and Lemonheads versions of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ autosonically, then, it quotes the *Graduate* version(s) both autosonically and allosonically, as

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\(^7\) Quotation is a concept that Dean Duncan (2003) and Anahid Kassabian (2001) have also used when discussing this topic, though Kassabian’s deployment of it relates to her particular notion of the ‘compiled score’: ‘a score built of songs that often (but not always) preexisted the film’ (2001: 2).

\(^8\) Lacasse offers the concepts in relation to intra-musical rather than cross-media quotation, but other than clarifying that it is in our case a film that is quoting – that it is a film into which, for instance, autosonic sound is imported – the definitions require no adjustment.
the aforementioned newly recorded recreations of the ‘Mrs. Robinson’ guitar scoring can be characterized as allosonic quotations.

This latter assertion highlights that quotations can, of course, be to some extent inexact and yet still be quotations. (Precisely where the border between quotation and other allusive practices therefore lies is not a question this article will attempt to answer, though the distinction between quotation and imitation is nevertheless drawn upon below.\footnote{J. Peter Burkholder’s work contains the most developed reflections on this topic as it applies to music (see, for instance, Burkholder 1994).}) Given this potential for inexactness, together with the clear intent in *Wayne’s World 2*, it might make more sense \footnote{p.140} to say that it is ‘the music of *The Graduate*’ that the later film quotes, rather or more than the versions of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ as they exist separately (even if not all of those versions actually appear in *The Graduate*). This also allows parallels to be more easily drawn to non-musical techniques: are some or all of the *Graduate*-derived non-musical components of the parody – camera angles, say – also quoted from *The Graduate*? Quotation seems to me a concept that could be applied universally; that Lacasse’s terms are transpositions of Nelson Goodman’s ‘autographic’ and ‘allographic’ – offered by Goodman (1976) as categories pertaining to the manner in which artworks of different kinds can be duplicated – perhaps indicates that certain subcategories are transferrable too. There is not space here for a thorough discussion on this topic, but it could be fruitfully considered elsewhere. Certain aspects of it will continue to be touched on below.

It is at least worth noting, however, that while examination of individual components of a film text is always worthwhile, there is undoubtedly something to be said for adopting a broader perspective. In regard to that sequence in *Wayne’s World 2*, for example, the status of the whole as a fairly exact copy means that it makes little sense to single out individual elements in terms of function and effect. The quotation in that case in particular might be better thought of as being of an audio-visual whole (with much of its ‘inexactness’ occurring for the purposes of comic subversion, as when Wayne first mistakenly interrupts the wrong wedding; ‘parody’ is still a valid descriptor at the broadest level).

Other cases lead us away from quotation in describing both the whole and its parts, including music. Moving briefly from film, I offer examples from *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, which both take on roughly the same sequence from *The Graduate*. In the season 2 *Simpsons* episode ‘One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue Fish’ (1991), Homer, desperate to get...
home in order to ‘be intamit [sic] with Marge’ prior to his apparently impending death, but frustrated by the wheel change that his friend Barney’s car requires, abandons the car and runs the rest of the way. His arrival is seen from inside the family home: Homer appears outside and bangs on the living room window with both arms outstretched, crying ‘Marge! Marge!’ In the season 3 Family Guy episode ‘When You Wish Upon a Weinstein’ (2003), Lois drives to Las Vegas in a red convertible to stop her son Chris – encouraged by father/husband Peter – converting to Judaism via a quickie Bar Mitzvah. The car runs out of fuel and Lois sprints into the city, appearing outside of the glass doors to the synagogue and attempting to stop the ceremony by banging on them and shouting ‘Chris! Chris!’ After having offended the congregation, the family escape onto a bus, barring the synagogue doors with a Star of David.

Homer’s run is scored by a lone strummed guitar, while the slowing to a halt of Lois’s car is scored by a gradually slowing pattern featuring strummed guitar, here joined by bass and hi-hat. Musically these are certainly not quotations – rhythmically, harmonically and in the latter case instrumentally they are different to the equivalent scoring in The Graduate – but they are close enough to be positioned as imitations of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ in these contexts.

In terms of directing the audience’s thoughts to the original piece of music as it exists outside of the referring context, something like a pastiche can do more or less the same thing as a quotation, and is generally intended to do so: Richard Dyer (2007: 1) defines pastiche as ‘a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation’. In fact, as far as evoking The Graduate is concerned, this is just one step further than using the ‘wrong’ version of the song in the manner that all of the other examples considered above do, at least in part. But because both the musical and non-musical parts of the Simpsons and Family Guy parodies of The Graduate are less exact than that in Wayne’s World 2 (visually, not least because they are animations in two distinct styles), it is all the more important that they combine and reinforce each other. Take any element away and the audience might still spot similarities to ‘Mrs. Robinson’ or The Graduate, but it will be harder – particularly in the case of The Simpsons, in which the parody is more fleeting – for them to infer with certainty an intentional reference (though of course there is no accounting for anyone thinking that they are sure of the ‘correct answer’).

This is borne out by the opening credit sequence of Quentin Tarantino’s 1997 film Jackie Brown (to deviate now briefly from ‘Mrs. Robinson’, while remaining with The Graduate). The similarities to Nichols’s film in this case are all visual: the camera tracks
titular character Jackie (Pam Grier) on a moving walkway, the top half of her body framed on the right side of the screen as the film’s opening credits appear on the left, against the tiled wall of the airport in which the scene takes place. Substitute ‘Benjamin’ for ‘titular character Jackie’ (and ‘his’ for ‘her’) and this is an accurate description of the opening credit sequence of *The Graduate*. Jackie Brown certainly evokes *The Graduate*, then, and does so in spite of using not ‘The Sound of Silence’ on the soundtrack as Nichols did, but rather Bobby Womack’s ‘Across 110th Street’. However, the visual elements seemingly shared between the two sequences in fact do not correspond exactly: the wall in *The Graduate* is white, while that in Jackie Brown is a variety of colours in a patterned design; the credit fonts are very different; the framing of Jackie is slightly more side-on than that of Benjamin.

Tarantino is surely too cine-literate not to have considered the evocation, and it certainly suggests an appropriate comparison between the two characters and their general situations: while Benjamin is simply carried along by the walkway, the shot thus hinting at how he will spend his summer ‘drifting’ aimlessly (both literally, in his parents’ pool, and figuratively, in relation to his post-college plans), Jackie is eventually forced to run to catch her flight, and in doing so is shown in another way to not yet be in control of her own destiny. As suggested, though, the removal of one element – that is, the overt dissimilarity of the musical elements of the two sequences – makes it more difficult to be absolutely certain of the director’s intent. (Tarantino has not, as far as I am aware, extratextually acknowledged any deliberate reference to *The Graduate* here.10)

**Older woman, younger man**

Whereas in *Wayne’s World 2* the connection to *The Graduate* is the very foundation of a sequence that is a significant part of its surrounding film in terms of length, placement and narrative content, in other cases such connections can be seen more as ‘asides’: ‘extra’ layers that one does not need to ‘get’ in order to understand broadly what is going on. The ‘clues’ that the referencing contexts provide for their audiences in these instances are thus fewer in

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10 He has noted that his opening sequence as a whole is a homage to the opening sequences of many Pam Grier movies, which ‘start with Pam just walking, and beholding the glory that is Pam’ (Anon. 1998). There is more that could be said here regarding the musical and other references to various 1970s blaxploitation films found throughout Jackie Brown. For one, the casting of Grier herself might be considered a quotation of sorts.
number (as in *Jackie Brown*, assuming the evocation to be intentional) and/or less precise (as in *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*).

The actual ‘Mrs. Robinson’ is heard in other films alongside even more general scenario parallels to *The Graduate*, but still without any clarificatory mention of that film. The music alone in these cases therefore seems to shoulder more of the responsibility for the connection that the film-makers hope the audience will make. That we are able to make it again illustrates the strength of the song’s association with *The Graduate*, though the nature of that association is also somewhat re-imagined in the examples discussed below.

In *My Spy* (Gallo, 2008), Martha (Meg Ryan) is heading out on a date with a much younger man, to the disapproval of her son Henry (Colin Hanks). As she leaves the house to ride pillion on her lover’s motorcycle (nicknamed ‘the beast’), the Lemonheads’ cover version of ‘Mrs. Robinson’ strikes up. In addition to its appearances in *The Other Sister* and *Wayne’s World 2*, as mentioned above, that cover also features in *American Pie 2* (Rogers, 2001), where it arguably functions to recall the use of the original *Graduate* version of the song in the first *American Pie* (Weitz, 1999) at least as much as it does the song’s appearance in *The Graduate* itself. In the first *Pie*, the song is heard as 18-year-old Paul Finch (Eddie Kaye Thompson) attempts to seduce the mother of his high-school friend Steve Stifler (Seann William Scott) – with the mother (Jennifer Coolidge) known only as ‘Stifler’s Mom’ – while in the sequel the cover version scores a repeat sexual encounter between the two. *My Spy* and the two *American Pie* films thus all play on and so reinforce the trope of the ‘older woman’ as sexually experienced figure found in *The Graduate*.

This returns us to the question of the song’s original meaning, which is, as has been noted, ambiguous, both in general and in terms of its relation to *The Graduate* and the character of Mrs Robinson in that film. Of the later texts discussed, only *Forrest Gump* seems relatively faithful to what could be inferred as the semantic intentions of Simon and Nichols. *Rumour Has It...*, *The Other Sister* and *Wayne’s World 2* (and, indirectly, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*), by contrast, ignore the issue of meaning, using the song in ways that recall its use in *The Graduate* in a superficial sense (though that is not to say that their audiences will not try to find other layers). *My Spy* and the *American Pie* films, however, effectively re-inscribe the song’s meaning. The lyrics, as Simon wrote them, certainly do not appear to
concern any kind of relationship between an older woman and a younger man, furthermore, the song was not used in *The Graduate* to accompany scenes dealing with Benjamin and Mrs Robinson’s sexual relationship. But these later film-makers want us to believe that the lyrics are about that, and that the song was used for that, or at least do not make any attempt to correct such mistaken beliefs.

Part of that strategy rests on the only lyrics actually used by those film-makers being those of the chorus (or part of it), so that the name ‘Mrs Robinson’ is heard, but not much else. The selective appropriation and re-contextualization of song lyrics is something that we all witness or even do in everyday life. *Rumour Has It...* in fact provides a fictional example of this: when Sarah later asks her fiancé why her family would have kept their *Graduate* connection from her, his shrugged response quotes Simon’s song’s line about hiding something ‘from the kids’. Then again, *Forrest Gump* seems to ask its audience to utilize the lyrics of the song that it does not actually sound in their interpretations. And even if more lyrics were used in any of these contexts, perhaps it is true that many perceivers would only really hear the title anyway.

In 2010, a campaign was launched to raise ‘Mrs. Robinson’ to number one in the UK pop charts, following the revelation that Iris Robinson, MP and wife of the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, had engaged in an affair with a 19-year-old cafe owner (Hough 2010). This does not prove in itself that either the organizers or those participating in the attempt understood the song in a particular way. But there are no doubt points to be made about the manner in which people listen to and remember music more generally, which I will not attempt to go into here. Certainly as far as examinations of the use of pre-existing music in film are concerned, though, the individual – and communal, cultural – understandings and interpretations of audience members always need to be taken into account.

The overall point is that the song in (and through) texts like *American Pie* is rendered far from ambiguous, very concretely standing for an idea of ‘Mrs Robinson’, a name that has itself transcended *The Graduate* to become a more general label for the sexually desiring

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11 The 1969 Frank Sinatra cover (from the album *My Way*), as well as changing ‘Jesus’ to ‘Jilly’ and ‘God’ to ‘Oh’ (presumably in order to avoid offending particular sections of Sinatra’s audience), makes other alterations, including introducing rather on-the-nose chorus lines that refer to Mrs Robinson ‘[f]oolin’ with that young stuff’.
older woman, a synonym for ‘cougar’ or ‘MILF’ (‘Mother I’d Like to Fuck’, a term popularized, coincidentally, by American Pie). Indeed, it is probably no longer necessary, upon hearing ‘Mrs. Robinson’, to make the connection to The Graduate in order to understand this apparent signification. That multiple such labels are common currency in popular culture reflects the socially transgressive nature of the older woman/younger man pairing even today. Iris Robinson was publicly humiliated because she ‘broke the rules’, much like her fictional namesake in 1967, with her complex backstory similarly reduced to a single action.

**Conclusion**

Whether in the technical sense of which version of the song is used, the semantic sense of which meaning of the song is engaged with, or both, all of the later contexts discussed above can be seen to misquote ‘Mrs. Robinson’ when judged against the song’s original use in The Graduate. Returning to the idea of ‘related practices’, it is true that other aspects of The Graduate have been misquoted too. In American Pie, for instance, note that it is the younger man who is seducing the older lady, not the other way around. And consider Stifler’s Mom’s dialogue: ‘Mr Finch, are you trying to seduce me?’ That she addresses him as ‘Mr Finch’ serves to make the Graduate connection all the more clear, but in fact the rather more uncomfortable Benjamin does not ask the same question of Mrs Robinson, instead awkwardly stating, ‘Mrs Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me. Aren’t you?’ The American Pie version is a common misquotation, much like its use of the song. Total accuracy is set

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12 The top Urban Dictionary entry for ‘Mrs. Robinson’ has one definition as ‘[a] term used to describe an older woman who likes to seduce younger men (ex. Stifler’s mom in American Pie)’ (Mikitira 2006). Dating websites have also been named after the character: datemrsrobinson.com is one example, though it admittedly has a design and tagline – ‘Graduate from girls to women’ – that play up the connection to The Graduate (Date Mrs. Robinson n.d.).

13 Steve Coogan’s comedy creation Alan Partridge, for one, also ‘humorously’ quotes the line as ‘Mrs Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?’ when kissed by his older personal assistant Lynn in the I’m Alan Partridge episode ‘Never Say Alan Again’ (2002; the episode’s title is itself a play on that of Never Say Never Again [Kershner, 1983]). Whether the show’s writers were intentionally (in order that Alan appear somewhat foolish) or unintentionally misquoting The Graduate is unclear.
aside, intentionally or not, and popular ideas of what constitutes *The Graduate* and its song are played upon and therefore reinforced. Like Benjamin (and Stifler’s Mom), the audience is, in effect, seduced.

**seduce, v.**

2. In wider sense: To lead (a person) astray in conduct or belief; to draw away from the right or intended course of action to or into a wrong one; to tempt, entice, or beguile to do something wrong, foolish, or unintended.

(OED Online 2015, original emphases)

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