The symphony of (not) belonging: music tales in two coming-of-age films

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Abstract

The 2010 film Submarine (Ayoade) and 2019's Blinded by the Light (Chadha) share similarities, such as depicting the coming into oneself of two teenage boys in the British Isles during the 80's, and the storytelling through music. However, both pose the same two issues when defining the genre to which they belong. Because both navigate identity development, they might be considered coming-of-age films. Similarly, and because it is through songs that the action unfolds, they could be analysed as musicals. The apparent difficulty in casting their features into one box is one of the points that this presentation will address. The aim is to analyse three moments of both films, in which I will look at the evolution of music's role in the narrative. Herzog has defined this 'musical moment' as a particular instance in which this combination reveals another truth of the film, an underlying narrative or the climax of the character's journey (Herzog 2010, 2). The two aspects will be concomitantly analysed: the scenes, as part of a genre, and the music, thus revealing how a song is central to the narrative and to the character's transformation. In other words, one song can encapsulate the meaning of the entire narrative and fit the criteria of a 'coming-of-age' film.

Keywords: Coming-of-age, Identity, Music, Sound.

Introduction

In this study my main aim is to analyse the storytelling journey of the two main characters in both films via the use of music as a means of conveying a message of (1) the loneliness that comes from the realisation of not belonging, (2) the search for identification and building a rapport with someone and (3) the release that comes from actively choosing to belong or not, thus contributing to the construction of one's identity.

On one hand, *Submarine* (Ayoade 2010) follows Oliver Tate, a precocious 15-year-old navigating the emotional turbulence of adolescence in 1980's Wales. As he attempts to win over his enigmatic classmate Jordana and save his parents' crumbling marriage, Oliver's inner world is shaped by self-conscious narration and romanticised fantasies. Music, particularly the original songs by Alex Turner (Turner 2011), expresses Oliver's unspoken feelings, thus taking centre stage in the storytelling fabric. On the other hand, inspired by true events, *Blinded by the Light* (Chadha 2019) tells the story of Javed, a British-Pakistani teenager in 1987 Thatcher-era England, who discovers personal and creative liberation through the music of Bruce Springsteen. Struggling with cultural expectations and his aspirations to become a writer, Javed finds

resonance in Springsteen's lyrics, which speak directly to his frustrations and dreams.

In this study, I employ a close viewing and analysis of the selected films, focusing on the use of sound, music, cinematography, and lighting as key tools of storytelling. By repeatedly viewing each film and pausing to take detailed notes, I examine how these audiovisual elements contribute to narrative development, emotional tone, and thematic expression. This method draws on established practices in film analysis, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how stylistic choices shape viewer experience and meaning.

As such, the text is organised in two sections. The first one focuses on the analysis of three selected moments from both films that depict the aforementioned stages of the main characters' journeys. In this selection, I compare how music, voice and light convey the message that climaxes in the choice between changing routes or accepting their story. The second one sheds light on how the emotional tone of both films confirms their placement in the coming-of-age genre, not for actual age matters, but for self-discovery and identity-building reasons.

Almost musical moments

Amy Herzog starts her work on musical moments by clarifying that films which include them tend to "push the boundaries of the musical canon" (Herzog 2010, 10). Similarly, Doherty states that when defining what coming-of-age films are, the term "teenpic may be more reliable as a bibliographical entry than as a critical category, but it conjures a common sense impression of a group of kindred motion pictures" (Doherty 2002, 22). These fading lines in the limits of these concepts are not the main aim of this study, and yet both are challenges that could be answered with the analysis of the selected films. Both appear to be a merger of these genres, as they present some of their features. For example, when it comes to the coming-of-age genre, besides their age (they are both teenagers) and the fact that they attend high school, the relationship between the main characters and their parents, particularly the father figure, are reminiscent of one of Doherty's references to a teenage-unifying sense of subculture in going against the parents' wishes (2002, 74). This generational conflict (Nelson 2019, 1) is what happens with Javed in *Blinded by the Light*, as one of the breaking points is the conscience he has of having to fulfill his dad's aspirations for him as a burden he carries (Chadha 2019). Another key element of coming-of-age films are the "budding romances" (Nelson 2019, 4), which in *Submarine*'s case, takes up a large majority of the plot and can be perceived as one of the triggers its events. Moreover, and as postulated by Nelson, when the aim is to

address teens and their concerns, not only do directors choose to tell the story from their perspective (which can be verified in both films, as the narrating voice belongs to the main characters) but also, to adapt the topics discussed to the most relevant issues of the time. He states that:

> In the 1930s and 1940s, society and the environment were to blame, and authority had to take charge; in the 1950s, it was the changing family structure, and parents had to reassert their power; in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the establishment as a whole, and there was little hope all around. In the 1980s, the factors combined and were multiple; teens were affected by failing institutions and the shortcomings of authority figures, as well as by internal and external pressure and by boredom and disillusionment (Nelson 2019, 10).

What about the first two decades of the 21st century? While there is room for further research in this particular topic, *Submarine* seems to address the growing concern with teens' mental health from an internal and not judgmental standpoint, as the film allows us to journey through Oliver's crippling social anxiety and overdriven imagination from inside his mind. Finally, both films also address the achievement of self-acceptance, but not without a troubled journey, which, as any good one, requires a soundtrack to accompany it and to help crystallise its moods.

While some of the classics of the coming-of-age genre seem not to have paid a serious amount of attention to the films' score, with Doherty referring to *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955) as having "an exceptionally bland score" (Doherty year, 70), the increasing emphasis on the relevance of music as an element of storytelling is ubiquitous in examples of the genre from the 80's onwards, with *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes 1985) taking centre stage. Gora goes further and describes an emotional synergy between the choice of songs and the films' moods (Gora 2010, 157), which is a pivotal concept to the following analysis of the role of music in the two films I selected. The outcome is, hopefully, an exercise of "highly interpretive, deep readings that depend on a close analysis of the film/music interactions" (Brown 1994, 2). Moreover, because of the type of narration both films present, where the voice heard is that of the main characters, in *Blinded by the Light*, the term "metadiegetic" could even be applied to the role music plays, as it is what moves the action forward not only by appearing on screen, but also my triggering the character's development (Heldt 2013, 119).

Hence, in this study I intend to shift the focus from whether *Submarine* and *Blinded by the Light* fit the format to their message and the way it is told through music and its absence. For that, I have selected three different scenes in each film. The reasoning was to show moments that reflect similar feelings, aided by music, pivotal in the storytelling, even if representing opposing trajectories in the self-discovery journey that both main characters go through.

Stuck on the Puzzle?

The opening scene of *Blinded by the Light* (Chadha 2019) presents the viewer with the image of a motorway sign, showing that one way leads to Luton, and the other to London, denouncing the need for escapism that will permeate Javed's narrative. This is followed by a 7-year jump that takes us to the first scene to be analysed. His voice is explaining why his town is "a four-letter word" (00:02:33) and the image shows him finishing a summer job and hopping on his bike. Pet Shop Boys' song *It's a sin* takes over, and a montage of images of the historical context of Britain in the 80's, the conflicts between far-right movements emerging and the British-Pakistani immigrants, contribute to the understanding of his detachment from the reality he lives in. As the words "When I look back upon my life / It's always with a sense of shame" (Pet Shop Boys 1987) fill the viewers' ears, Javed is seen riding his bike through historical moments. This collage of contrasts ends with the zooming out of the camera and its pointing at the sky, and at the sun, which is shining on the film's title (00:03:28). The viewer might be literally blinded by the light, as the character will be by Bruce Springsteen's light. This apparent loss of one of the five senses and the play on words with the title links directly to the first scene and the reasoning behind the choice of the title of *Submarine*, the other film analysed, thus drawing the first comparison, as both characters seem to be moving in opposing directions. Where Javed's camera is looking up, and referring to the light, Oliver's opening scene focuses on the darkness within himself, with several increasingly closer camera shots of his eyes, and his room, in a silence only occupied by the sound of the seagulls coming from the outside and his critical musings over people's concept of individuality, in a voiceover (Ayoade 2010, 00:00:50). The sea keeps calling Oliver, and he is drowning. This moment is also followed by a montage, not of historical facts, but rather of his storytelling and his disconnection from reality that embodies his recurring fantasies (00:02:39). Where Javed looks up, finds someone who and something that inspires him and is blinded by the light, Oliver is drowning in his own mind, as Alex Turner's song announces:

> I tried to swim to the side
> But my feet got caught in the middle
> And I thought I'd seen the light
> But oh, no
> I was just stuck on the puzzle (Turner 2011).

More than caught by his sadness, the lyrics point towards an emotional limbo in which he is stuck, as if continuing to live his life as it is feels unimportant, so he tries to swim to the side, and yet he is stuck on this anxiety-inducing puzzle of reality and fiction. The song unfolds with gentle, minimalist use of instruments, mainly the piano and a hushed guitar, which creates a sense of stillness, almost like holding one's breath. Turner's vocals are soft and intimate, whispering the hints at Oliver's vulnerability and confusion. This disorientation seeks to find refuge in his delusions, namely in his imagining of how people would react if

he died. His way of dealing with the fact that he does not fit in (at some point, he bullies one girl to belong to a group, and yet he regrets its results) is to manically keep track of everything that surrounds him and stating "I prefer my own company" (00:07:50). Both characters, Javed and Oliver, are trapped by the haunting desire to escape, even if both are unsure of what they are escaping from. Both perceive their lives as a collage of moments that are evidence of how different they are from the people surrounding them. The conflicting relationships that emerge from these differences play a relevant role throughout both films, in almost opposing measures: Javed's dad symbolises everything he does not want to be, and Oliver's is what he will become.

Born to run?

After the realisation of their loneliness, as the plots progress, the two main characters find themselves in a transition from introspection to engagement. Oliver is tricked into kissing Jordana and they start their romantic relationship (00:15:09). Javed is introduced to Bruce Springsteen's work by his Pakistani school friend, who tells him about 'The Boss' (Chadha 2019, 00:25:00). It is after these events that both films present what could have been the music videos for two songs. However, the message conveyed by the lyrics and the scenes is opposed in meaning.

Javed is growing more certain that Bruce Springsteen sings about the pain of being frustrated with the immediacy of the future and of all of the decision making it entails, and when the school's radio station refuses to play his songs, him and his friend invade it and forcefully play *Born to run* on the loud speakers (00:58:50). This sequence bursts onto the screen with unabashed exuberance, theatrical, and joyfully over-the-top. As both characters sprint through the streets of Luton, singing Springsteen at full volume, the scene borders on the absurd, leaning into musical fantasy with spontaneous dancing and lyrics plastered across buildings. Yet beneath the playful spectacle lies something far more poignant: a raw expression of freedom and self-discovery. This moment marks Javed's emotional release, a defiant joy in finally finding something that speaks to him. This declaration of his inner rebellion and longing for freedom mirrors the lyrics "Baby this town rips the bones from your back" (Springsteen 1975), which resonate deeply with Javed's experience in Luton, a town he associates with racial hostility, economic stagnation, and the suffocating expectations of family. Javed bursting out of the school doors is a physical representation of Springsteen's singing of breaking away. The silliness becomes cathartic, capturing the wild, reckless relief of believing in something bigger than your circumstances. This is immensely attractive to the female counterpart, Eliza, who becomes fascinated with this joy and joins him. Her presence is not passive, as she dances, runs, and matches his energy, becoming a partner in his moment of liberation. Eliza's involvement marks this not just as a personal fantasy, but a shared, public declaration of youthful defiance and desire. The fact that the lyrics of the song are projected onto the

urban landscape turn them into a form of visual graffiti which is impossible to ignore. In this moment, Javed's love for Springsteen is validated not in solitude but in solidarity. Eliza's participation signals emotional support and romantic intimacy, showing that escape is not only about leaving something behind, but rather about finding someone who runs with you. The sequence transforms Bruce Springsteen's music from private solace into a communal anthem for identity, resistance, and hope. Their outward expressions of companionship and almost "puppy-dog-eyed" love contribute to the scene and solidify the idea that Javed is engaged in the context he is in, but simultaneously growing more and more distant from his roots. This dichotomy only unfolds in a later scene, where he is kept from attending Bruce's concert when his father rips the tickets he had bought with money he had hidden (01:27:00).

In *Submarine*, the scene that is comparable in construction (song playing as the main character connects with someone) presents a clear contrast, as Oliver and Jordana seclude themselves from the world. However, it is a symbol of a superficial change of tone in the film, as his loneliness seems to be replaced by Jordana's companionship, setting things on fire and spending their time sitting inside empty bathtubs, to the sound of Turner's crooning words (00:24:50). The sequence unfolds with the two of them wandering together through beaches, fields, and quiet backstreets, very different from the visual language of the aforementioned scene from *Blinded by the Light*, with the outward excitement being replaced by youthful intimacy and a semi-private rebellion. The lyrics "Tomorrow I'll be faster, I'll catch what I've been chasing after" (Turner 2011) suggest a forward motion, but paired with Turner's delicate vocals and restrained guitar, they hint at a kind of dreamy avoidance, a desire to delay consequence. For Oliver, this phase of the relationship is less about truly seeing Jordana and more about fulfilling his idea of romantic normalcy, an idea shaped by books, films, and his own internal monologue. The song's title itself, *Hiding Tonight*, reinforces this theme: Oliver is not yet confronting the complexity of emotional connection; he is hiding in the glow of possibility, in the comfort of his imagined narrative. Ayoade's direction leans into this with slow pans, symmetrical framing, further emphasising Oliver's detachment from reality. The beauty of the sequence lies in its subtle contradiction: it is emotionally moving, yet built on illusion. Within the film's broader arc, just as the *Born to Run* sequence does (Ayoade 2019), this scene marks the climax that will later be destroyed by emotional immaturity and misunderstanding. The softness of Turner's song lingers as a reminder that what begins in aesthetic idealism must eventually confront the messiness of real life, which Oliver spends the rest of the film struggling to accept. It is also right before this scene that Oliver's dad offers him a mixtape of underwater-themed songs (00:23:44). This hints at two different moments to happen in the plot: the overwhelming feeling of being in love for the first time, thus being inside a bubble of an almost alternative reality, and the bursting of said bubble and

the sinking into depression and required isolation on Oliver's behalf when the relationship comes to a halt (01:17:00). The chosen topic for the songs also points to the film's title: the vessel which allows a human being to survive underwater is a submarine, and this could work as a metaphor for Oliver's choice between living amongst his fantasies or coming up for air in reality. As the lyrics show, his choice for hiding and delaying any form of action or change are the unveiling truth that, because he does not know how to handle real life, just like his father, he chooses the submersion of his hot lemon drink. Overall, both scenes precede the climax of the inner struggles that pave the plots: the apparent engagement with outward realities are followed by critical moments in the plot, that force both characters to make choices.

Blinded or submerged?

In a weave of emotional tones set by the music in both films, it is with monologues that both main characters solidify their self-discovery journey. That is, it is through their own words, and not a musical expression in the background, that they reveal themselves and their final reasoning, even if they contain no finality. Both monologues conclude that in maturing, there is an evident sadness of letting go of past and unfulfilled dreams, thus coming to the realisation that growing up entails making difficult decisions. However, they arrive at this from markedly different paths. Oliver's words at the beginning of the Epilogue scene in *Submarine* are hesitant and tinged with self-awareness (01:25:40). His journey has been marked by failed attempts at control and romantic delusion, and when he realises the ending of his fantasy might not be the one he had planned, that is, when Jordana does not accompany him after his apology, the only sound that can be heard are the seagulls and a softly playing piano, as he darts across town to the beach. Being closer to the water and its sound is his attempt at muffling down the sound of his ultimate loss: he failed to control one single act of his destiny. He admits, in a voiceover, accompanied by the sound of violins

> I don't know if I've come of age, but I am certainly older now. I feel shrunken, as if there's an ancient, tiny Oliver Tate inside me operating the levers of a life-sized Oliver shaped shell. (Ayoade 2010)

These words are revealing of the self-awareness of his limits and the finitude of his actions. This revelation is then followed by a montage of moving images of Jordana smiling and being with him, but there is no sound, no voice, other than the violins, which, paired with the darkness of the images (where the only pop of colour is Jordana's red raincoat) contributes to the melancholy of the scene. This is Oliver surrendering to life's uncertainty.

In contrast, Javed's monologue at the end of *Blinded by the Light* (Chadha 2019) is declarative and forward-looking (01:38:20). He speaks with clarity about where he has come from and where he hopes to go, drawing strength from his cultural identity, his family, and, most crucially, from Bruce Springsteen's music.

If Oliver ends by letting go of narrative control, Javed ends by claiming it. But there seems to be no place for music in this monologue either, it cannot be heard. However, it is the words from Bruce's songs which inspire Javed's speech. This represents a shift in the narrative, as his stance is no longer overshadowed by a desire to mimic Bruce, but rather he takes hold of the message and makes it his own. He is empowered by the self-reflectiveness potential of the following lyrics:

> If dreams came true, well, wouldn't that be nice?
> But this ain't no dream we're living through tonight.
> If you want it, you take it, and you pay the price.
> (Springsteen 1975)

These tie in with his rhetorical question of whether he is willing to pay the price of letting go of everything he has ever known. This fear of detachment is a change in his journey: where there was longing and yearning for being anything but a British Pakistani highschooler in Luton, he now understands that all of these facts are part of his identity. As the monologue progresses, *Born to Run* starts playing in the background, no longer as a dominant anthem of rebellion, but as a familiar emotional undercurrent. His relationship to music has matured, mirroring his own emotional development. When discussing the true message of *Blinded by the Light*, the homonymous song, he recognises that it is not about him as an individual, but about understanding that success is not materialised unless it is shared with others. This integration of the score with Javed's voiceover emphasises that music has become internalised: it is no longer something he performs, but something that has shaped his values and voice.

Coming-of-age musicals?

Despite the contrast in styles, *Submarine* (Ayoade 2010) and *Blinded by the Light* (Chadha 2019) both occupy a hybrid space between the coming-of-age and musical genres, using music as a central narrative device that mirrors and enables emotional transformation. Regarding the themes, both films centre on coming-of-age, but they differ in tone and trajectory. Oliver's growth involves a retreat from ideals of self-construction where he holds power. He realises that love and identity cannot be a fantasy he construes and performs. His final monologue suggests a growing uncertainty and self-awareness of the limits of human agency. Javed's stance, on the other hand, is about reconciliation between individuality and his background, his roots. His monologue is both a reflection on and a renewal of agency. This, in turn, solidifies the place of these films in the coming-of-age genre, if working with the definition that:

> is marked by teens who go through a coming-of-age process in which they question who they are and who they want to be, both as individuals and as part of a group. This process of becoming self-actualized occurs as they find an identity distinct from the previous generation, celebrate and survive adolescence, and recognize the significance of their current actions (Nelson 2017, 128).

Whilst it can be argued that Oliver has yet to fully survive adolescence, Javed has found his identity, which is distinct and yet respectful of his previous generation.

When it comes to the use of music and its role as the *déclencheur* of the characters' self-discovery journey, in *Submarine*, Alex Turner's introspective songs serve as an internal echo of Oliver's detachment. Turner's lyric from *Hiding Tonight*, "Tomorrow I'll be faster, I'll catch what I've been chasing after," encapsulates Oliver's longing for personal evolution without true confrontation (Turner 2011). Music here serves as a "safety blanket", accompanying Oliver's tendency to narrate, rather than live his life. Conversely, in *Blinded by the Light*, Springsteen's music interweaves into the visuals and narrative of the film. Lyrics such as "It's a town full of losers and I'm pulling out of here to win" from *Thunder Road* resonate with Javed's frustration and ambition, transforming internal conflict into external performance (Springsteen 1975). Moreover, in this particular moment this is exacerbated by the insertion of the words on the walls of the streets he is running in, and the mirroring of the weather, as a thunderstorm rumbles through as he cries out in rage. As Javed affirms in his final monologue, "Springsteen doesn't tell you what to do, he just tells you that it's possible," (1:46:00), the music becomes a model for personal agency, not escape. In both films, the use of music reflects broader cinematic trends in which soundtracks function not merely as mood-setting devices but as active agents of character development (Smith 1998, 39). *Submarine* treats music as reflective, an emotional escape to Oliver's ironic self-construction, and as a safe hiding space: it is when listening to his dad's mixtape that Oliver truly acknowledges his feelings and sinks down into them, literally shown on screen by the compilation of his bed submerging, his going into the sea and his holding breath underwater in a completely full bathtub. *Blinded by the Light* adopts a more extroverted musical form, using Springsteen's songs as tools of self-discovery, cultural negotiation, and eventual integration. This outwardly demonstration of identification relies not solely on Javed's choice of clothes, but also in a particular scene where, when working at clothes' stall, he sings out loud the words he is listening to on his Walkman (00:45:50). As put forward by Herzog, there is in both films a repetition of structure, a predictability in some scenes that could indicate a perfect framing for the musical genre: the two scenes chosen for the second section of this study are formulaic in their construction (2010, 3). Yet both protagonists ultimately arrive at a shared endpoint: a tentative embrace of emotional vulnerability and a more grounded sense of self, made possible through music's capacity to shape identity from the inside out. This transformative role of music in these two coming-of-age films points at the resolution, or not, of belonging or not to a context, and how the pondering over it might reflect a leap of maturity and a coming into oneself.

Conclusion

Throughout these pages the aim has been to analyse different moments from the selected films to show that firstly, coming-of-age films delve into topics that extend beyond becoming a legal adult, and which involve a self-discovery journey that might be told through and with the aid of music. However, as Nelson presents:

> The teen film addresses the coming-of-age transformation on many levels: the central conflicts are external between youth and authority and between different members of the peer group, and internal as the teens discover a confident sense of self. Also, as with most genre films, the narrative-based resolutions to the conflicts are merely temporary solutions to the larger problems teens face in their everyday worlds (Nelson 2019, 12).

This forewarning addresses the apparent lack of a solid resolution to the issues: Javed leaves to go to University in Manchester, but does he come back to Luton? Oliver and Jordana are on speaking terms, but will they be back together? As viewers, the absence of answer points to the fact that the coming-of-age genre leads with a stage of a larger journey, and it is the way the characters deal with their own changes on screen that feed into the narrative.

Secondly, the aim was to show that both soundtracks, tell the story of the films. One, written purposefully for the film by Alex Turner, and the other, in true appreciation of Springsteen's career, occupy not only the viewer's listening space, but also the characters' individuality-development route, becoming Javed's words and Oliver's inner claims. The more musical moments I analysed, the more these ideas were reinforced. And just as their almost dichotomous journey came to a different end, their resolutions on belonging or not to symbolically point at the evolution of their identity. The one who mouths he was born to run finds a home in the place he wanted to escape, and the one who is called to sea and nothingness by seagulls chooses to step into the ocean, emotionally attached to a person. This acceptance of attachments is but a sign of their maturity, sung by Springsteen (Chadha 2019) and Turner (Ayoade 2010) in these two musically driven coming-of-age films.

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