

Tarnation, Personal Pop Songs and Home Movies

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Tarnation (2004) is an experimental documentary that condenses one man's life into an hour and twenty-two minutes. Jonathan Caouette is not only the film's director, but the person whose life unfolds onscreen as well. Caouette introduces his audience to his family and friends, to his life and his hardships, and to anything and everything that has shaped his life. The film is a video diary, and it is Caouette who chooses what the audience is allowed to see and what they should hear. The music for *Tarnation* contains a combination of modern avant-garde scoring with an array of pop songs spanning three decades. Without Caouette's musical authority the film would no longer have the same degree of personal insight.

Jonathan Caouette states in his interview with the *Austin Chronicle*, "I was never really anticipating any sort of distribution, and so I wasn't sensitive to the idea that there could be a possibility of having to go get music clearances." Caouette never imagined that his film would receive international attention or distribution. He took the footage he had accumulated since he was eleven and started editing it all together in Apple's

iMovie. He states in the director's commentary that he edited the movie by picking songs that he liked. He would select a song, and then try to convey through editing images the emotions that the song was invoking in himself. Caouette naturally chose songs that meant the most to him. When *Tarnation* began to receive significant attention, he was then faced with the colossal ordeal of obtaining rights to all the songs in his film. Caouette talks about this in his interview with Richard Sharp of Chicago Film

"One of the songs [that's] going to be really hard to clear is the Bob Dylan / Johnny Cash stuff. That's going to be a bitch to clear. Hopefully Bob will like it and the estate of Johnny cash will like it. It's just sort of a tragedy though, because it just so happens to be on when I'm filming my mother and my father. And of course, when I was doing that I had no idea I'd be making a movie and that I'd have to be worrying about clearance."

Tarnation contains sixteen pop songs ranging from indie rock, country, eighties pop, musicals, and television themes, from bands like the Magnetic Fields, Red House Painters, Glen Campbell and Dolly Parton. Producer Stephen Winter states in his interview with Filmmaker Magazine, "Jonathan's

amazing choice of songs is part of what makes *Tarnation* so extraordinary. Our goal is to retain as much of the music as possible without breaking the bank.”

With all that being said, one can move forward knowing that the music of *Tarnation* is as personal to Caouette as the images he shares of himself and his family. The integral role of music in this film is established immediately as the film fades up on Caouette’s mother singing “This Little Light of Mine.” The constant shift between diegetic and nondiegetic music is abundant throughout the film. When the mother finishes singing; Low’s “Laser Beam” begins playing, making it the first nondiegetic song in the film. Caouette states in his director’s commentary “I chose my favorite song from Low to evoke a feeling of waking from a dream, like what I was imagining my mom felt.” Caouette is referring to his mother’s recovery from her lithium overdose induced coma. His mother suffers from a mental disorder and the entire film centers upon the effects it has had on him throughout his life. The adagio tempo of the song is matched by the slowed down images in the opening credits. Here all the principle characters

are introduced; no themes or leitmotifs are ascribed to them. Caouette transitions from popular tunes into a much more minimalist avant-garde score written by John Califra. One would need to listen carefully, because most of Califra’s underscoring is sparse accented notes. It functions more as sound effects heightening the visuals rather than sympathetic symphonic movements overstating the onscreen actions.

Tarnation is not all popular tunes, it also contains an original score and music. Max Avery Lichenstein and John Califra both created the modern score for the film. The titles of their pieces directly reflect the actions of the events they are writing the music for. During one of the more disheartening scenes, in which the mentally ill mother interacts with a pumpkin in the manner of a three-year-old, Lichenstein’s underscored piece “Pumpkin,” follows. Similarly, “Depersonalized” plays during the scene where Caouette explains his mental disorder he suffered from as a kid, depersonalization. Califra’s underscoring is less melodic than Lichenstein. This might explain why Califra is credited with the original score and orchestration and Lichenstein

is credited with creating the original music. There is only one song that reoccurs in the film and is the movie's only theme, Lichenstein's instrumental song "Tarnation." The song plays four times throughout the film. Once when Caouette explains the circumstances regarding the marriage of his mother and father, another time when discussing his first boyfriend, again when Jonathan is interviewing his mother in New York, and lastly in the closing credits. The music's tenderness plays well with Caouette's favorite emotion "beautiful sadness." (Caouette 1) The song is not a concert piece and it fits in well with the other pop songs.

All of Caouette's montage sequences have a beautiful nature to them. However, the beauty of them is contrasted with a juxtaposition of text that conveys that the stories behind the photos are much darker and distressing in nature. The music enhances these juxtapositions as familiar songs form new meanings. The film starts abstractly, but soon establishes its form as a story that is told chronologically starting with the 1950s, and the wedding of Jonathan's mother's parents, Adolph and Rosemary. The Iron and Wine song

"Naked as We Came," plays. The use of popular tunes with photo collages cements the home-movie, slideshow aesthetic that is persistent throughout *Tarnation*. Caouette chose this song because "It talks about how temporary life is and that one of us is going to die first and that's something we all have to deal with." (Caouette 1) As the film moves into the 70s, Glen Campbell's "Wichita Lineman," functions as an indication of the decade and as a memory for Caouette. "I remember lying in the backseat of my grandparents big white Chevrolet with my ear pressed against the speakers so it was loud... The song is a connection to my mother and her electricity." (Caouette 1) Caouette does this again later during his "1992" clips in which he lip-syncs to "Divine" by a band named Hex. "1992 was the year that I discovered this great band Hex... They made a couple of great songs, and then they were gone." (Caouette 1)

Caouette acknowledges that some of his musical choices were made to run counter to the actions onscreen. The scene involving the introduction of his grandmother contains whimsical lighthearted music. This is one of John

Califra's more realized pieces entitled "Texas 1984." "The music doesn't seem to match at first as you realize that this whacked, loving, sweet, woman is raising this child. It can make you feel awkward and helpless." (Caouette 1) "Texas 1984" seems something more fitting for *The Nutcracker* or *Leave it to Beaver* and this seems to be exactly what Jonathan is alluding to. His family is a type not glorified in television or on par with American ideals.

Later on in the film when Jonathan begins to speak about the negative things he was exposed to as a child, Lisa Germano's song "Reptile" plays. This song is said to be used because "The out of sync beats help convey the symptoms of depersonalization and my feelings as a kid that I was an extraterrestrial." (Caouette 1) The song's lyrics insinuate persecution by religious activists and the feelings that come with being condemned. Caouette states many times in interviews and in his director's commentary that he felt like an alien as a child because of his dysfunctional family and circumstances. And if one can take Caouette's word as truth, then this song's content works effectively with

what he is conveying to the audience onscreen.

It is not uncommon to have popular songs in a film. Many mainstream movies and comedies use previously recorded pop songs in their soundtrack. The difference with *Tarnation* is that these popular tunes are used in combination with the film to further exemplify a person's life and feelings. The songs add another layer to the already complicated life and story of Jonathan Caouette. The songs are not used for commercial reasons, to entice specific demographics, or to sell soundtracks. They are used because to one person, these songs speak volumes about their personal life and create a deeper and broader portrait. Not only do strangers get a glimpse as to what Caouette has experienced, his history, his family photos and home movies, we learn a lot about the musical ethnography of a person in unique circumstances. The music of *Tarnation* is as vital to the film as the images and text. The music is the basis for Caouette's editing and without it the film would lack the sincerity and sentimentalism so vital to the film's structure.

Sequential Musical Breakdown of Tarnation:

"Laser Beam" - Low
"Weight of the World" - John Califra (*unreleased*)
"Rewind" - Max Avery Lichtenstein (*unreleased*)
"Naked As We Came" - Iron & Wine
"Tarnation" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Texas 1984" - John Califra (*unreleased*)
"Depersonalized" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Wichita Lineman" - Glen Campbell
"Reptile" - Lisa Germano
"Ice Pulse" - Cocteau Twins
"Innocence" - John Califra (*unreleased*)
"Frank Mills" - from the original film soundtrack of "Hair"
"Tarnation" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"The Ballad of Lucy Jordan" - Marianne Faithful
"Diviner" - Hex
"Embrace" - Low
"Departures" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Its All Over Now Baby Blue" - Chocolate Watch Band
"One Year Later" - Max Avery Lichtenstein (*unreleased*)
"Strange Powers" - Magnetic Fields
"Desperation" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Around & Around" - Red House Painters
"As Fate Would Have It" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Lil Bitty Pissant Country Place" - Dolly Parton
"Tarnation" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Back Home Again" - Low
"Pumpkin" - Max Avery Lichtenstein
"Confrontation" - Max Avery Lichtenstein (*unreleased*)
"How Many Times" - Mavis Staples
"Around & Around" - Red House Painters
"Tarnation (end credits)" - Max Avery Lichtenstein

Additional information regarding Caouette's trouble getting musical rights

Taken from the *Austin Chronicle* online October 2004:

Did you have any trouble getting the music clearances previous to Tarnation's becoming such a cause célèbre?

JC: Oh, my god, yeah. There was a lot of Nick Drake stuff I wanted and some Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, just all my favorites. I think Nick Drake's sister got very offended by the film because in the original cut it talked about this guy I had a crush on who *looked* like Nick Drake, and in captions gave his name, when he was born, and the fact that he committed suicide in 2000. And I think that because there was Nick Drake's music playing underneath these images of this kid, who was sort of emulating Nick Drake, that I upset her or touched a nerve. And I don't blame her. The thing of it is that when I was making this film initially, it was just a cathartic thing that was really very sort of private. I was never really anticipating any sort of distribution, and so I wasn't sensitive to the idea that there could be a possibility of having to go get music clearances. There was a lot of stuff that I wanted that we ended up not being able to get: clips from *The Exorcist*, the original *Stepford Wives*, *Halloween*, *Josie and the Pussycats*, *Wonder Woman*, *Isis*.

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