

Vesna Mikić

Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

Adriana Sabo

Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia

'Women, be Good!' – Music in the Production of 'Femininities': Case Studies of *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Good Wife*¹

Abstract: As Keith Negus and John Street wrote in their Introduction to the “Music and Television” Special Issue of the journal *Popular Music* (No. 3, 2002), television is an important mediator of the knowledge, understanding and experience of music. Inverting their formulation to “music is an important mediator of knowledge, understanding, and experience of television” (as James Deaville writes), we can further our understanding of different, more or less obvious meanings transferred by a television program. Bearing these two complementary ideas in mind, we aim to map the kinds of knowledge that are being produced and mediated through music in two extremely popular TV shows, which are also famous for their (innovative) use of music: *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005) and *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–16). These two series – a medical drama and a series about lawyers and politics – have (at least) two things in common: 1) the already-mentioned role that music plays in their narratives, and 2) the fact that both focus on female characters and ‘feminine’ stories, employing numerous, liberal and/or postfeminist discourses. Our goal will thus be, to investigate what ‘kind’ of a female subject is being produced through interactions of music and image and by the music itself, as well as what kind of (post)feminist discourse is deemed ‘acceptable’ in a mainstream television discourse.

Keywords: music; television; *The Good Wife*; *Grey's Anatomy*; postfeminism; knowledge

With the advancements of digital technology and the Internet, more than ever before, television has been faced with the public’s fatal prognosis, doomed to extinction by the intellectual elite, and yet, instead of giving way to newer, younger media, it has managed to adapt and achieve a new form in the last decade (especially with the Web 2.0 protocol) and confirm its status as the “world’s vastest, varied, and influential

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narrative medium”² The role that music, and especially popular music has played in this “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins),³ or “multimedia/multi-image context” that became known as “television after TV”, or “postnetwork” TV, had, though acknowledged, not been of great interest to music scholars. It may be that the shift that Caldwell describes as the need for studying television’s “culture of production” along with the usual research in its “production of culture”, both understood as the production of knowledge, could open up a space for re-introduction of theorizing music as one of the actors in this production which supposedly is in the multimedia/multi-image context that pushes us to learn new ‘viewing protocols’.

During the past decade or so, and especially since Donald J. Trump won the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, television series have, in many cases, taken up the role of the ‘social educator’, addressing numerous social issues that ‘haunt’ the everyday lives of Americans and people worldwide. It is as if numerous television series have adopted the liberal (and from time to time left-wing) discourses of human rights, social equality etc. that have been ‘under attack’ in recent years, bringing to light, but at the same time neutralizing these issues. In a multi-layered political and social context, fictional characters are being openly used to create a social critique, music isn’t always given a prominent role. However, it is precisely music – the choice of genre, the way it is ‘placed’ within the narrative, the extent to which it ‘stands out’ or is ‘drawn back’ into ambient music – that can, in many cases, further explain or deepen our understanding of the kind of knowledge that is being produced or affirmed by a certain show.

Bearing these ideas in mind, we are going to examine two prime time shows that, at first glance, may not have that much in common: *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005 –)⁴ and *The Good Wife* (Netflix, 2009–16)⁵. The highly popular medical drama, and political/legal show, both address important social issues in their narratives, though in quite different ways: the former introduces the viewer to the world that is much better than the real one, a world centered around a state-of-the-art hospital with dedicated doctors, brilliant scientists and sincere human beings; the latter shows us a more ‘realistic’ vision of the world of politics and business that is very often painted as corrupt. Both series focus on female characters, adopting many postfeminist⁶ discourses of female empowerment but again, with different outcomes. Dr. Meredith Grey⁷ is, in a way, ‘static’: she is already ‘perfect’, as a woman, a brilliant surgeon, a mother and

² Jeffrey Sconce, “What If? Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” *Television After TV. Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Linn Spiegel, Jan Olsson, (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2004), 111.

³ The concept of “transmedia storytelling” was discussed in detail by Henry Jenkins in his seminal book *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2006).

⁴ The creator of the show and the person mostly responsible for its postfeminist angle is Shonda Rhimes.

⁵ Created by Michelle and Robert King.

⁶ Cf. Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, “Introduction. *Feminist Politics and Post Feminist Culture*, in *Interrogating Postfeminism. Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.

⁷ Played by Ellen Pompeo.

a good friend and she is never in conflict with the society that surrounds her (and if she is, that conflict is quickly resolved). On the other hand, *The Good Wife* is focused primarily on the radical transformation of Alicia Florrick,⁸ from a housewife into a politician surrounded by scandals, a lawyer and a businessperson who doesn't care about justice or fighting 'the good fight'. In other words, she becomes precisely what the world of high politics expects her to be (would the authors perhaps imply, she becomes more 'masculine?'). Her character is envisioned in order to question a particular system of values, not affirm it.⁹

Other than adopting the postfeminist angle, both shows establish a strong connection with music: not only is every episode of *Grey's Anatomy* titled after a pop song, but it (effectively) uses music, as well as silence to 'explain' different aspects of the narrative;¹⁰ on the other hand *The Good Wife's* composer David Buckley employs classical, as well as pop music to establish and question the worlds of the political elite, often uncovering their 'fakeness' through use of quasi-classical or 'fake' classical music. Both shows employ musical numbers that are already familiar to the viewer/listener (thus using the specific set of meanings 'attached' to that music, in order to create new meanings), as well as music that is especially created for the show. This is especially important when it comes to Buckley's music, since he composed most of what we hear in the show, be it 'pop' or 'classical' music. It is precisely this fact – that we hear 'quasi-pop' and 'quasi-classical' music – that, on the one hand, reminds us that TV series are *different* than life, that they are not *real*, but on the other also helps us discover the 'lie' in the narrative and pinpoint those moments in which the show doesn't merely 'uncover' something, but also steers us towards accepting a (desirable) kind of knowledge.

Thus, this paper will focus on some moments in these series, where society and music meet; our goal will be to map the ways in which music is used to portray the lead female characters and the social contexts in which they appear. Given the fact that, as was already mentioned, both series strongly rely on (quasi)feminist discourses, we couldn't help but wonder, what knowledge about music, our contemporary societies and the role of women, can gather from the show's narratives? According to their creators, is it possible to 'step out' of the established pattern of given social/gender norms we are born into? What kind of women do we see these female characters becoming (to paraphrase Simon de Beauvoir), and what kind of music is 'their' music? In what ways can music 'uncover the lie' in the society we see on the screen and what is it telling us about our societies and the women?

⁸ Played by Julianna Margulies.

⁹ One step further in this kind of social critique is taken in the spin-off of the show, titled *The Good Fight* (CBS, 2017–), that focuses on an all African-American-lead law firm that is, in fact, fighting the good fight in Trump's America.

¹⁰ The choice of music for the show's soundtrack is attributed to Alexandra Patsavas and the musical coordinator is Danny Lux.

The story and the (good) women

Being part of a kind of movement that swept across numerous contemporary TV shows, *The Good Wife* and *Grey's Anatomy* echo – in different ways – many contemporary discourses of female empowerment that have been, in numerous occasions, defined as postfeminist. As Eva Chen explains,

'Choice', 'freedom' and 'agency' are terms liberally appropriated in recent years by popular women's cultural genres such as chick lit, chick-flicks, makeover TV programmes and beauty adverts, to advance an image of the new, empowered woman confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture. While these terms suggest a feminist legacy, they are used not to advance the feminist cause, but to celebrate a rhetoric of individual choice and freedom which often is measured in terms of commodity consumption.¹¹

Arguing that we are witnessing a "rise of this new type of active female subject, a type that reflects the workings of the neoliberal process of subjectification as immanent within and responsive to normative power",¹² Chen offers us a definition of basic premises from which both TV series in question start. Namely, all female characters are powerful *because* they work and *because* they are able to, simply put, buy all the things they want.¹³

This, primarily economical form of emancipation can be, as the very title of *The Good Wife* implies, interpreted through the premise of rethinking the issue of ethics, moral and the basic good vs. bad dualism. In the case of this show, this struggle is at the very center of the narrative that deals with the ever-changing world of high politics, law and business. The story focuses on the life of a (good) wife Alicia Florrick, (who gave up her career as a lawyer to be a /house/wife and a mother) of a (bad) husband and politician, and her struggle with different and always contradictory roles society gives to women. After finding herself in the spotlight when her husband's 'indiscretions' (sexual and political) become public, Alicia decides to – publicly – stand by her husband, but at the same time, to take matters into her own hands and go back to being a lawyer and become an emancipated businesswoman. What begins as a story of female empowerment, a story about a housewife who, betrayed by her husband, has to rejoin the work force and thus emancipate herself, turns into a critique of the political and social system and the way business and politics are 'done'. A woman who was,

¹¹ Eva Chen, "Neoliberalism and popular women's culture: Rethinking choice, freedom and agency," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, 4 (2013): 440.

¹² *Ibid.*, 441.

¹³ This aspect of showing female empowerment through a consumerist lens is explicitly shown at the very beginning of *The Good Wife*, as Alicia Florrick feels the (economic) power for the first time after she is able to afford a really expensive apartment of her own, after separating from her husband and finding a job.

in a way, a victim of the system (Saint Alicia, as they call her), eventually becomes an important 'player' in the game of politics, a politician surrounded by scandals (Marie Antoinette, as she is later referred to) – 'she' becomes 'he', that is, she becomes like her husband (whom she never divorced, allegedly only for fear of how it would look to the public). In other words, the show formulates a kind of question for the viewers: was Alicia 'good' when she chose not to publicly denounce her husband despite his public infidelity and decided to become a lawyer that helps those in need, or did she become 'good' when she decided to support the political/social system that she once despised? In other words, the series sheds light on the fact that 'goodness' is always a relative category: we could argue that Alicia is always good, but for whom? For herself? Her husband? The system? Through their critique of the political system in America, the authors raise other important questions concerning female empowerment: what kind of power do we 'get' (or win) as we empower ourselves, and do we have to 'become men' in order to be equal in the world of politics and business that is currently in place? Without a systematic change of the neoliberal society, is it possible to ever have 'good people' in positions of power?

While *The Good Wife* insists on uncovering the 'real' world hidden behind empty political promises and campaigns, *Grey's Anatomy* strives to show us a – seemingly – a better reality or, at least, to show us how to achieve it. In this sense, it is much closer to the idea of creating a neoliberal subject (be it female, black, white, Christian, Muslim, transgender, gay, lesbian, etc.) that is supposedly free and powerful.¹⁴ The story is set in an imaginary hospital in Seattle. Relying on the 'varied repetition' mechanism of the cumulative television narrative, *Grey's Anatomy* adopts the conventions/plot stock of the soap-opera ('reluctant romance', for instance), and it neatly fits in the long line of television series that promote neoliberal political correctness, addressing many neuralgic spots of the day, naturalizing all kinds of 'fish out of the water' characters and issues (gender, race, PTSD, OCD, religion, disability, obesity, sexual preferences, numerous medical conditions etc.). Gender equality and race are two of the most prominent 'issues' addressed and constantly naturalized by the series.¹⁵ Women are those who 'run the show', as *Grey's Anatomy* shows us a rich palette of strong, well-educated successful women that, no matter how complicated their story is, end up conforming to social norms, getting married and having kids, showing that women can 'have it all'. Thus, a quasi-feminist or a postfeminist angle is established and confirmed throughout the show, which is also announced by the very title, as the "Grey" in this case is not a Henry but a Meredith.¹⁶ *Grey's Anatomy*, unlike *The Good*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For example, the auditions held for the series were, reportedly, "color blind", which means that each cast member was chosen only based on their acting skills and not on their ethnicity (sic!).

¹⁶ The lead character of the show is Dr. Meredith Grey, played by Ellen Pompeo. The show 'borrowed' its title from a famous anatomy U.S. medical school textbook (by Henry Grey, first published in 1858 and then reissued multiple times, the latest, 41st revised edition published in 2015). By choosing to reuse the title of the textbook, creators of the show directly pointed (us) to the fact that the show will be involved in some kind of knowledge production.

Wife, affirms more openly the neoliberal idea of individualism, steering clear of the issues that are directly connected to U.S politics and policies.¹⁷

Given that it is a medical show, *Greys Anatomy* 'runs into' the question of ethics, however, in its case the ethics of the characters is impeccable and is never even brought into question: each and every doctor is brilliant and each ready to do everything for their patients. Despite focusing on some important social issues, the show, for example, completely fails to question America's medical system and the fact that the kind of treatment offered by the doctors at the hospital cannot be afforded by many citizens. In other words, the creators of the series seem to mostly ignore some major issues of the country's political system: they stay away from serious social problems, like gun control, wars in the Middle East (in fact, 'our boys overseas' are constantly glorified, mainly through the story of major Owen Hunt, one of the leading characters), invasion of privacy, election frauds, etc.¹⁸

In other words, *Grey's Anatomy* (like a real soap opera) focuses predominantly on 'personal otherness' and then 'tells' us how it's absolutely possible to fit 'the others' into the existing system, with just a few 'minor' changes. Thus, the people we see are always 'good': every woman is strong (or she becomes it during the course of the show), especially if she is a woman of color, there are no racist characters, and if a racist should appear (in episode roles), he/she is quickly 'dealt with'; none of the characters struggle with poverty (some of them did, but not anymore); everyone finds it perfectly normal if a character is gay, lesbian or transgender etc. Also, mainly due to its soap opera roots, the series manages to show a kind of equality that is, paradoxically, often achieved through a number of overstating gestures: be it through constant emphasis on the differences, a story that relies strongly on pathos and emotion, or through music, as well as silence that often exaggerate the emotional impact of certain scenes.

In cases of both shows, music is there to 'further explain' – to affirm the story, enhance the emotion presented, but also, at times, to 'give an opinion' on the situation at hand.

The (good) music and the (good) women

In its own way, each series deals with the question of what and who is 'good' and in many cases, music acts as a compass, that (whether we are aware of it or not) steers us towards a certain kind of knowledge that we are to 'take' from each episode. While *Grey's Anatomy* uses only pop songs *The Good Wife* 'plays' classical music that,

¹⁷ As Stéphanie Genz remarks, drawing on writings of J. McGuigan, "neoliberalism comes to represent a 'scheme for reordering the social' as well as a 'design for refashioning the conduct of the self'; bringing about a transformation of subjectivity that folds neoliberalism into the subject itself". Cf. Stéphanie Genz, "'I Have Work . . . I Am Busy . . . Trying to Become Who I Am': Neoliberal Girls and Recessionary Postfeminism," in *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls. Feminism, postfeminism, authenticity, and gendered performance in contemporary television*, ed. Meredith Nash, Imelda Whelehan (Palgrave: MacMillan, 2017), 19.

¹⁸ These questions are, to a certain point, addressed in another show created by Shonda Rhimes, titled *Scandal* (ABC 2012–2018).

more often than not, symbolizes the corrupt, pompous and superficial world of the political elites,¹⁹ and is in many cases opposed to pop songs, connected to 'silly' emotions, love affairs, characters who are predominantly positive, yet a bit weird (like Elsbeth Tascioni, for example), etc. In this case too, a question of 'good' and 'bad' music is raised, since, as the show unfolds, it becomes unclear whether classical music is the good one – as the cannon of music history teaches us – or if pop music is the one that is actually good (and again, good for whom and from whose point of view?).

Within this web of meanings, the 'femininity' of Alicia Florrick is established and transformed numerous times, as she moves between being 'good' and 'bad', and music, in its own way, follows and at times even creates or prompts this transformation. In most episodes of the show, speaking from the standpoint of 'her' music, she is no different than other characters – her music is both classical and pop, depending mostly on the context she is in – but one particular episode takes us closer to her more intimate thoughts. In the 14th episode of the sixth season – at the moment she is well on her way to becoming a politician of questionable morals –, titled *Mind's Eye*, music joins the role of the narrator as Alicia suffers from laryngitis and is therefore forced to rest her voice and prepare mentally for an important interview.²⁰ The more people tell her to rest, the more restless she becomes, and she spends the better part of the episode walking the streets of Chicago, listening to music, imagining possible interview questions and having flashbacks of situations that shaped her into what she is now. The narrative, thus, constantly skips from scenes happening in her mind to reality, and these cuts are introduced either by her changing the song in her playlist, her phone ringing, or by the abrupt silence that suddenly stops the music and changes her train of thought.

Besides the fact that music is, as is conventional, connected to the subconscious, the imaginary and unreal (or partly real), in this episode we are 'faced' with a kind of musical struggle that reflects the inner, emotional and ethical struggles of Alicia's mind. Her playlist, namely, contains different kinds of music: some of the numbers are soothing, some agitating and they all, in a way, speak on her behalf, as she is unable to. As the lead character walks the streets, she is nervous, uneasy, afraid of her own emotions and reactions. After talking to her daughter on the phone (a scene happening in reality), she changes the song and we hear The Velvet Underground's "Sweet Jane", as covered by Liz Phair. In her mind, Alicia moves to the offices of her law firm where she confronts an opposing lawyer (Lewis Caning), who is suing the firm and who often 'plays dirty', inciting emotional reactions and sympathies via his

¹⁹ The so called false classical music, mostly composed by Buckley to simulate baroque and often gallant musical styles, is heard, for example, in moments when a scheme is set in motion – whether it's a plan to undermine the opposing counsel, to manipulate the jury or the voters, or to get someone to do something they don't want to do. Its fast pace very often 'follows' the lawyers/spin doctors/campaign managers, as they 'scurry around' in a hurry to get their work done. In these cases, the quasi-baroque, Lilly-esque music adds a grotesque note to situations in which people are fighting tooth and nail to earn even more money, get even more power, achieve even more influence, hinting at a kind of 'emptiness' that hides behind their endeavors.

²⁰ Exerts from the episode's soundtrack are here: <https://www.tunefind.com/show/the-good-wife/season-6/22087>

medical condition. As Alicia gets angrier and angrier at the man in a wheelchair and insists on him admitting whether he really is dying or if he is faking it, he accuses her of attacking him and, as we hear Phair's somewhat aggressive cover becoming louder and louder, she yells "It's not me, it's the music!". At that moment, we are taken back to reality as she changes the song – this one is making her too emotional, which is unbecoming of her status – and we hear a chicken clucking noise from "Mucka Blucka" by Tally Hall, as she sees her estranged son, homeless on the street, asking "why are you still angry at me?". Trying to escape her emotions, she again changes the song and finally finds peace as she hears the soothing sound of "Largo" from Bach's Concerto for Harpsichord in F minor, BWV 1056. As she calms down, she once again sees herself and Canning, this time talking calmly. With the healing sound of Bach's music in the background, he explains that the whole point of 'it' (his lawsuit and most likely the whole 'game' the lawyers play) is the happiness he feels if they lose and he wins.

In other words, the music of Bach – who has the role of one of the 'founding fathers' in the classical music history cannon, and the 'father' of (at least German) music, so to speak – is used to represent a number of things: he stands for (male) reason, as his composition opposes the angry and emotional "Sweet Jane"; he is the representative of 'high' art, loved by the members of high society, to which Alicia Florrick belongs; but also, due to the fact that Bach's music 'follows' the previously described dialogue, it also stands for elitism and kind of 'fakeness' that is also often associated with the dealings of 'high society'. Finally, it represents Alicia's (sometimes unwilling) acceptance of her role within the political system, and represents her 'blending in'. In other words, it is not a coincidence that Buckley chose to use a quote and not a piece of his own music to explain the moment in which Alicia becomes herself. This gesture is, namely, supposed to tell us that 'this is real', this is the reality 'behind' the postfeminist image of an emancipated woman.

This kind of conflict between the good and bad, and a constant reinterpretation of their positions is completely absent from *Grey's Anatomy*. As mentioned before, its soundtrack only features pop songs and numbers belonging to the indie pop/rock or the so-called alternative genre of music. Music is not used to question anything in the show, it mainly establishes the stereotypical relationship between female characters and 'cheesy' love songs. There are, namely, numerous connections between 'femininity'. The most obvious one being that a soap opera, or a show with a cumulative narrative is often designated as a 'female' genre, given the fact that, according to many traditional views, 'the feminine' is viewed as open, avoiding closure, unstable, with multiple 'layers', etc.²¹ As was pointed out already, one of the main features of *Grey's Anatomy* is the constant meandering between raising important social questions and neutralizing them at the same time. In this sense, another aspect of the appearance of 'the feminine' in the show can be found in the fact that most artists whose voices we hear singing are actually female, which, one more time, reinforces – if not openly – the idea of women loving the 'tender', 'sweet' pop songs that, on numerous occasions,

²¹ Cf. John Fiske, *Television Culture. Popular Pleasures and Politics* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001), 179–98.

contrast the apparent strength of the female characters (possibly showing us their 'true' selves?).

However, a deeper 'exploration' into the 'feminine' is achieved in the ninth episode of the 12th season and not via music but rather through the absence of it. Namely, the episode titled "Sound of Silence"²² shows Meredith Grey being brutally attacked by a patient and losing her hearing due to severe head injuries. The show begins in the usual way, with the voice of the lead character introducing the story, but there is no music to follow her words. In the introduction, she explains that it is scientifically proven that the female voice is harder for the male brain to register. In other words, according to science, men have a hard time hearing what women have to say because of their biology, which means that, "in this world, where men are bigger, stronger, faster – if you're not ready to fight...The silence will kill you"²³ claims Dr. Meredith Grey. It is, we believe, not a coincidence that the role of women in our societies – and the fact that our voices *can't* be heard by the 'male brain' – was used to introduce the 'deadly silence' to *Grey's Anatomy*. With these words, two important aspects of the show are being revealed: one is the central role of postfeminist ideas, the other pointing to the importance of music. Since music was omnipresent in previous episodes, it was there to explain, to follow, to make the viewer cry or feel better about something, it seems that it can also be the weapon we use to fight the deadly silence.

As silence being introduced to the show, we can point out a few more issues that are open to interpretation from a feminist angle. Most of them can be connected with the idea that women 'don't have a voice of their own', that is, that – according to, most notably, French feminists like Luce Irigaray, for example – women don't have access to the language (understood as a system that shapes us and our surroundings), and thus (as Freud would put it), do not exist. In the case of *Grey's Anatomy's* "Sound of Silence" episode, we can also notice a kind of (bio)political message that is being sent: women finally managed to 'find their voice' (which is an idea that stands in the root of the postfeminist angle that is dominant here) and are in constant risk of losing it again by being silenced (metaphorically or literally, through multiple acts of violence and abuse many women suffer). However, when music 'returns' in the "Sound of Silence", so does Meredith Grey's voice and her complete sense of her surroundings. She is 'herself', thus, only when she 'has' pop music with her, when she assumes the role of the perfect, healthy, brilliant surgeon. In other words, the sound of silence appears to be something dangerous and we need to accept the voice 'given' to us by the neoliberal society.²⁴

²² The title is borrowed from the famous song by Simon and Garfunkel.

²³ This introduction is one perfect example of how knowledge – Grey's knowledge of human anatomy – is produced and reinforced by the show. It nicely portrays the way in which *Grey's Anatomy* acts as a textbook for modern-day viewers.

²⁴ Curiously enough, the only pop song featured in the "Sound of Silence" episode is titled "I Surrender" and is sung by a male artist, Aron Wright.

It could be argued, thus, that music plays a central role in mediating knowledge that appears to be hidden (or at least not as apparent) in the visual text of the TV series discussed here. *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Good Wife* both invite a kind of social criticism and reinterpretation of basic postfeminist ideas, although in rather opposite ways. But in both cases, music is the element that acts as a guide through an intricate web of knowledge productions, it offers us a way to uncover (at least some of the) hidden meanings behind the images of the strong and powerful working women, workings of lawyers, politicians, businessmen, etc. *The Good Wife's* David Buckley openly questions the world of high politics, law, business and the role of women within it, by (clever) use of his own music, composed to sound *like* pop or classical music, as well as appropriation of the already existing musical numbers and the, often subtle, juxtaposition of the two. On the other hand, *Grey's Anatomy* soundtrack fails to make such a deliberate 'step away' from the story, which is again a gesture that makes the show's agenda visible more clearly. By constantly affirming the given 'order of things', music actually (or the lack of it) guides us to see the exaggeration and the fakeness of the 'reality' shown on the screen.

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