

EDGAR WRIGHT AS AN AUTEUR

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### **Abstract**

This thesis is an interpretation of the work of film director Edgar Wright using auteur theory as the primary method. The first portion of the essay contextualizes and provides a brief summary of auteur theory before moving into an analysis of Wright's films. The auteur analysis comprises the entirety of "Part One" of the essay, beginning on page 5. The examination of Edgar Wright's work can be found in "Part Two" of the essay, beginning on page 17. The films analyzed within include: *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007), *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), *The World's End* (2013), and *Baby Driver* (2017). "Part Two" of the essay comprises the majority of the paper and addresses topics including: the function of sound, the usage of reference/homage within, and the consistent introductory elements in an Edgar Wright film.

*Keywords:* auteur, auteur theory, Edgar Wright

### Introduction: Edgar Wright as an Auteur

Edgar Wright's first brush with cinema fame came at the age of sixteen, when he won a competition for the BBC television show *Going Live*. He returned to British television for some time after studying film at Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design. His notable works from this time period include *Alexei Sayle's Merry Go-Round* and the cult-classic show *Spaced*, where he first met his longtime collaborator Simon Pegg. Edgar Wright's professional film career began in 1995 with a film called *A Fistful of Fingers*. Presently, the director's filmography stands at six feature length films. Those films, listed chronologically, are: *A Fistful of Fingers* (1995), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007), *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), *The World's End* (2013), and *Baby Driver* (2017).

Of these films, the first to gain wide acclaim was *Shaun of the Dead*. This film is also notable, in the context of Wright's career, for being the first film in the Cornetto trilogy. These films, while not a traditional "trilogy," had the same writers (Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright) and a consistent group of collaborating actors. *Shaun of the Dead* managed to elevate Wright's filmmaking career to a new level; this acclaim undoubtedly helped Wright to gain the support to produce *Hot Fuzz*, the best-known work in his early career. At this point Wright's filmmaking left British cinema behind for Hollywood, returning only to finish the Cornetto Trilogy with 2013's *The World's End*.

My evaluation of Wright as an auteur will focus largely on the "Cornetto Trilogy" films as well as his Hollywood films, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* and *Baby Driver*. Sadly, we will not be examining *A Fistful of Fingers*, primarily due to the difficulty of procuring the film. The goal of studying Wright's other five films will be to establish his position as an

auteur and identify some features of his style. Detailing every element of his style is a daunting task to say the least; accordingly, our study will focus on the several key features of Wright's style. We will examine the way an Edgar Wright film starts, how an Edgar Wright film sounds (and why that matters), and the relationship Wright's films have to the classics of the film industry that inspired them. Before jumping into parsing Edgar Wright's films, we must examine the history and context of the term "auteur"; in doing so we will establish a criterion for auteur status as such.

## Part One: The History of Auteurism and Challenges to Auteur Theory

### **Part One, Section One: The “Traditional Auteur”**

The first issue to address is outlining a working definition of the term auteur, as auteur studies have a fraught past within the academic community. For that reason, a certain amount of justification is necessary when utilizing an auteur approach. The origin of auteur theory and auteurism lies with essays produced by a variety of French critics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, notably François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard in the film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. Auteur theory, in a basic sense, is a theory of cinema that views films as being the product of a director who, regardless of their level of control over the final product of the film, manages to leave a distinct and personal imprint on the film.

This personal impression is the indicator of a “good” director according to the French New Wave critics. The French New Wave was a movement within cinema that took place during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by the usage of non-traditional or experimental techniques in filmmaking. Those French New Wave critics, André Bazin in particular, noted that other directors will be mere “metteurs-en-scene” (the phrase is translated literally as “stage director”). Bazin uses the example of Jacques Feyder, a Belgian actor and director in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bazin tells us that directors such as Feyder possess “craftsmanship where one is looking for style, the generous humility of a clever technician meeting the demands of the subject instead of the creative imprint of a true auteur” (Bazin 63). He contends that Feyder “belongs to a family of directors” that fit these criteria; though technically competent such directors lack a stylistic flair that distinguishes their films as the work of an auteur.

The presence of the auteur within a film is more complicated, of course, than simple competence or expression of individual directorial style. Anne Gillain, in her book *Truffaut on Cinema*, tells us “a film resembles the man who makes it even if he has not chosen the subject” (Gillain 52). She contends primarily that auteur theory is not simply about this relationship between a film and its supposed author. The auteur theory, according to Gillain, is “a declaration of support for the kind of cinema these filmmakers were creating. Above all, however, it revolved around the idea that the man who has the ideas and the man who makes the film should be one and the same” (Gillain 52). The goal then is to take the auteur and place them on a platform, focusing the praise for a film on a single individual; if indeed that individual deserves such praise. Timothy Corrigan tells us, “one of the chief mystifications within early theories and practices of auteurism has been a valorization of one or another idea of expression” (Corrigan 45). The point of auteur theory from the historical critical stance then, is a veneration of directors who serve as the driving force behind their films. Furthermore, to qualify as an auteur there must be some personal relationship between the director and the final product of the film; some aspect of the auteur’s personality must bleed through into their films.

However, this does not answer the question of what makes a director an auteur *per sé*. Erin Hill-Parks, from her article titled “Developing an Auteur through Reviews,” tells us “the traditional notion of an auteur is a director who consistently displays an artistic signature in the films he or she directs, making the director the primary source for artistry and unity in not just an individual film, but in a set of films” (Hill-Parks 18). Hill-Parks

provides a neat and functional definition that gives the reader a sense of the early definition of an auteur.

Andrew Sarris, one of the first film critic proponents of auteur theory, provided three specific criteria in his “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” that outlines the characteristics of the traditional auteur. Sarris describes the three criteria as being “three concentric circles” (Sarris 563) The first circle is the “technique” a director’s technical competence and ability to produce a coherent film. The second circle is “the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value” (Sarris 562); this “middle circle” encompasses the stylistic fingerprint which this essay will primarily focus on interpreting, as it pertains to Edgar Wright’s filmography. The third circle is the “interior meaning” of the auteur’s films, the meaning to be derived from the film’s supposed message. This interior meaning is the “ultimate glory of cinema as an art” as well as the “ultimate premise of the *auteur* theory” according to Sarris (Sarris 562). The idea is that the third circle comprises the artistic goal of the director, giving the film a deeper meaning beyond its basic elements.

The three circles comprise Sarris’s definition of the auteur. However, they have not remained the functional definition of the contemporary auteur. As a result of criticism from anti-auteurists in general, and Pauline Kael in particular, effectively produced a need for what Erin Hill-Parks calls “a shift in how the auteur was conceptualized” (Hill-Parks 19). We will now review some of the anti-auteurist criticism before moving on to a working definition for the contemporary auteur.

## Part One, Section Two: Challenges to Auteur Theory

Sarris's "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" faced a considerable amount of contention in the film critic community, especially from critic Pauline Kael. Kael's article "Circles and Squares" released in 1963, was a direct response to Sarris's promotion of auteur theory. She opens the essay with a diatribe against the critics that promote auteur theory, attacking Sarris personally for his methods as well as disassembling the practice of auteur criticism. Kael states: "It may be expedient to point out that it takes extraordinary intelligence and discrimination and taste to use any theory in the arts, and that without those qualities, a theory becomes a rigid formula" (Kael 14). The main concern, from Kael's perspective, is that auteur theory does not genuinely promote good filmmaking or scholarship. She proposed that Sarris, and other auteur theorists, were operating under the guidance of a particularly vague set of guidelines with regard to the Third Circle/ Interior Meaning. Kael seems to believe that in practice the auteur theory venerated supposed "bad" works by auteur directors and promoted an exclusion of otherwise "great" artists.

In "Circles and Squares" Kael responded to each of Sarris's "Three Circles" directly. The Outer Circle, according to Kael, is invalidated by her idea that "sometimes the greatest artists in a medium by-pass or violate the simple technical competence that is so necessary for hacks... great new directors are very likely to be condemned precisely on the grounds that they're not even good directors" (Kael 14). Kael is proposing here that artistic innovation can indeed stem from directors who do not have the "technical competence" that Sarris claims as the first requirement for the auteur. With regard to the Middle Circle, Kael refutes Sarris's claim that the personality of the director is a positive aspect of

filmmaking. She posits that “Often the works in which we are most aware of the personality of the director are his worst films...when a famous director makes a good movie, we don’t think about the director’s personality; when he makes a stinker, we notice his familiar touches because there’s not much else to watch” (Kael 15).

Kael’s statement presupposes that the films an auteur critic focuses on are those which have little in the way of acclaim. Kael proposes that the focus of an auteur interpretation seems to venerate bad films for the purpose of elevating their directors. This may have been the approach in the days of Sarris’ “excavation.” However, the auteur theory has evolved to accommodate this criticism. The auteur theory of today is not an effort to excavate old films; if this were the case then this thesis should rightfully be an attempt to convince the reader that Edgar Wright’s little-known *Fistful of Fingers* has a comparable amount of value to the highly commercialized and successful *Baby Driver*. The commercial aspect of a director’s career is significant, in the context of our study, because it distinguishes the auteurs of the past from contemporary auteurs.

Before we discuss today’s commercial auteur, we must address one of the major points of criticism for auteur theory. When a film is driven by an auteur, has credit been justifiably attributed to the director as an “author”? Does the director genuinely have enough influence over the film to be considered the primary author? Every film has writers, actors, and a production crew that contribute to the final product. Nearly every film that makes it in front of an audience is the result of significant funding, time, and effort from a variety of sources. So, can we really credit the director as the author of a film in the same way that a novelist is the “author” of their latest book? The short answer is no. The medium

is different, and the relationship is obviously not the same. The director is an author when they leave a unique impression on their films that expresses something of themselves; crediting an author as such involves isolating features that distinguish their films.

Sarris later revised his statements on auteur theory in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970," partially a response to Pauline Kael's criticism in "Circles and Squares." Sarris states "The auteur theory was therefore never a theory at all, but rather a collection of facts, a reminder of movies to be resurrected, of genres to be redeemed, of directors to be rediscovered" (Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970," 8). According to this view, auteur studies emerged initially for the purpose of excavating films and showing them in a new light (as the French critics were dealing with a backlog of international films following the end of Nazi occupation). Auteur studies also served to celebrate the works of contemporary filmmakers in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century such as "Jacques Tati, Robert Bresson, Max Ophüls, Jacques Becker, and Jean Renoir" (Gillain 52). This raises the question of whether the auteur theory applies to examining contemporary filmmakers, especially ones that are as well-known (relatively speaking) as Edgar Wright. If auteur theory, as Sarris seems to posit, is means of excavating lost cinematic treasures then it seems a pointless effort to define a director like Wright as an auteur. If the director is already well-known for his work, why go the effort of accrediting and highlighting his films as auteur works? I contend that a director's auteur status continues to hold value for reinforcing those positive elements of a director's style. The "commercialized" auteur makes use of their status as such to develop their style. The status of an auteur allows directors a degree of breathing

room for developing a personal style. This personal style present in an auteur's works allow their films to stand out when compared to other contemporary films.

### Part One, Section Three: The “Commercialized” Auteur

Today Edgar Wright is considered a Hollywood director. However, Hollywood certainly isn't the only point of origin for cinema, much less the only point of origin for an auteur to emerge. The Cornetto films are examples of British cinema rather than Hollywood films such as *Baby Driver* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. However, *Baby Driver* and *Scott Pilgrim* do not fit within the standards of the average Hollywood film, as Wright's style and skill help to distinguish them. In fact, it seems that Wright's films standing out in this way provides support for the concept of his distinct stylistic fingerprint, given the difference in origin (Hollywood vs. British cinema) among his films.

Works produced by contemporary auteur directors consistently stand out among Hollywood films. The works of Wes Anderson, Spike Lee, and Quentin Tarantino all claim a personal style and this “personal style” seems to become more and more exaggerated with time. Anderson's eclectic aesthetics become more so, and Tarantino's gory historical revisions gain more blood and less regard for historical events with each new release. The purpose of mentioning these directors is to highlight their work as being divergent from mainstream cinema. I contend that their auteur status is key to this divergence, though being an auteur is not simply a matter of diverging from mainstream cinema. If this were the case, films such as Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* could be considered an “auteur” work. Divergence from the norm was not, as we have seen, always the case.

Sarris and many of the French critics of the New Wave were interested in uncovering little-known directors that had particular styles, or little-known films by directors that later gained commercial fame. The New Wave was also particularly focused on deviations from

traditional filmmaking. This is not the case for the contemporary auteur. Tarantino, Anderson, and Lee all have a habit of reviving older techniques in their films. The most outstanding example among these directors is the continued usage of actual film (35mm generally) rather than digital photography. The contemporary auteur is, to some degree, a reversal of the traditional auteur in this sense. Rather than relying heavily on experimentation (though some do use experimental techniques) as a means of distinguishing their works, the contemporary auteur makes use of traditional techniques that have fallen out of style to set their works apart. This decision is still ultimately a disruptive one, but also one that revives film techniques of the past. The personal style of a contemporary auteur is often characterized by this relationship to film history. Wright's films explore this dynamic through consistent use of pastiche.

The contemporary auteur benefits from being designated as an auteur. This status serves to elevate their works. Those films may still reside in the category of "Hollywood"; but they stand out as being the works of director with a particular style. The auteur benefits from being distinct in this way. The "name brand" recognition that accompanies, for example, a Tarantino film is a key piece of the marketing behind his films. Corrigan notes that the auteur theory has changed significantly over time, and points to a "commercialized" and "modernized" form that the auteur takes in contemporary cinema.

The difference between a standard contemporary director and the modern auteur is that an auteur possesses skills beyond competence in their craft. Sarris's First Circle, in this regard, holds true for the commercialized auteur. Unlike some other elements of auteur theory, Bazin's point regarding the "craftsmanship" behind a competent director—but not

an auteur director—remains strong. The standard director is a craftsman, perfectly capable of producing quality product. The auteur is an artist, and auteur works should therefore be distinct to the trained eye. In the same way that an art critic can look at an unfamiliar canvas and say, “This is a Degas” —the film critic can watch a scene from an unknown film and say, “This is a Hitchcock movie.” This is the case I intend to promote and explore in terms of the introduction to an Edgar Wright film. We will explore the degree to which a critic can potentially identify an Edgar Wright film from the onset, based on the scenes that take place in-between and including the initial auditory cue and the title card.

Today’s auteur is often a creature of commercial success. Erin Hill-Parks proposes that the auteur of today is formed by response to their films. Indeed, she posits “that critics’ reviews in the general media promote a language...that helps enhance a specific auteur persona” (Hill-Parks 17). The status of the auteur, in this approach, is formed by the critical analysis of a film as being characteristically “Christopher Nolan.” The same can be said of Quentin Tarantino or Wes Anderson; their films are often compared to one another and designated as being a “good Tarantino flick” or a “bad one.” The auteur is no longer the discovery of a sort of cinema archaeologist, as with Sarris and the early days of auteur theory. The auteur is now a public figure, formed through a relationship of popular and critical response to their films. Our goal then, is to form an idea of what is characteristically “Edgar Wright.”

Auteur theory produces a relationship between author and film that gives the audience a deeper sense of both. In studying the films of an auteur, we gain a deeper knowledge of the films as well as a personal sense of the director. The process of paring

down a film to elements that are unique to the director allows the audience and the critic both to examine the director in light of those elements which they personally bring to a film. For example, a critic may study Hitchcock films and notice that shots containing women's feet tend to be lengthy. The result is that the hypothetical critic theorizes Hitchcock may have had a foot fetish. This is a reductive example, but it illustrates an important concept. The stylistic fingerprint of an auteur allows audience members and critics to examine the director on a personal level. The auteur approach also allows us to re-examine films given personal knowledge of the director. For example, if we know that a director experienced a traumatic childhood experience with fire, we can then re-examine the narrative role that fire plays in that director's work. There are limitless permutations of examples for the efficacy of this approach. The general concept unfolds in two steps. First, some directors leave a unique impression on their filmic works. Second, identifying this fingerprint allows us to develop theories of the film based the personal qualities of the director and personal theories of the director based on the film.

I mentioned earlier that the study of an auteur serves to improve the scholarship on a given director and their works. This is an important benefit of the process of isolating the style of a director, but there is one other essential gain for such scholarship. In isolating the elements that we, the audience, view as distinguishing the director we can examine the relationship between those elements and the positive reception of the film. As Gillain noted earlier, ("declaration of support") one of the goals of auteur theory is to celebrate the stylistic choices that make a filmmaker influential enough to have that same auteur status. In studying our contemporary auteurs (e.g. Spike Lee, Wes Anderson, and Quentin

Tarantino) we can gain a sense of what makes these filmmakers and their films so outstanding. This is what I intend to do for the works of Edgar Wright, and so accordingly we will now launch into a study of his directorial career.

## Part Two: The Auteur Elements of an Edgar Wright Film

### **Part Two, Section One: Edgar Wright's Background and Cadre of Collaborators**

“One time I remember vividly on *Shaun of the Dead* one of the zombies came up to me, had no idea I was the director, walked up to me and goes ‘Oof, straight to video for this one’”

-Edgar Wright

2018 interview with *The Feed*

Like so many other directors and auteurs of his generation, Wright first began filmmaking using a Super-8 camera. This camera allowed Wright to produce a variety of largely homage-esque short films during his teenage and college years. Wright himself tells us “I made amateur movies when I was a kid and I won a national competition on TV when I was 16” (Fennell 2018). He began his formal directing career five years later with *Fistful of Fingers* (1995) before moving on to work in television for BBC. In this capacity as a television director Wright first met the actors with whom he would collaborate on so many future projects, including Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, the leading stars in all three Cornetto films.

The consistent collaboration between Wright and these actors is key to the examination of three films: *Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*. As these films constitute three of the five that we will examine, they obviously hold considerable weight in this study. These three are also the films for which Edgar Wright is most well-known and helped to shape those elements that constitute both his style and oeuvre. Simon Pegg and Nick Frost starred in all three films, with Pegg credited as a writer for all three as well. The

films also share a variety of actors in common among the supporting cast, largely a cadre of British drama and comedy performers. Consistent collaboration supports Wright's placement among contemporary auteurs, given that auteurs such as Tarantino and Wes Anderson also consistently cast their films with the same actors.

This immediately draws into question the placement of both *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* and *Baby Driver* in the oeuvre, as these two films share none of the common collaborators of the so-called "Cornetto Trilogy." I posit that this is a strength of their inclusion rather than a fault. Given that the Cornetto films contain a roster of the same actors and writers, it could be argued that Wright's supposed auteur style is potentially more influenced by their presence than his own auteur style. *Scott Pilgrim* and *Baby Driver*, in the context of this study, will serve the purpose of refuting this argument. Examining these two films in comparison to the Cornetto films, as well as parsing elements from the Cornetto Trilogy, will allow us to isolate those elements which belong to Edgar Wright himself. Approaching the films in this way will allow us to counter the argument that Wright's films are a result of collaboration with the shared group of actors present in the Cornetto films.

## Part Two, Section Two: How does an Edgar Wright Film Start?

“Ever have one of those nights that starts out like any other,  
but ends up being the best night of your life?”

-Gary King, as portrayed by Simon Pegg.

*The World's End, 2013*

The logical place to begin to parse the auteur elements of each film is the beginning. Accordingly, this section intends to examine the introductory scenes of each Wright film, leading up to the presentation of their respective titles. I mentioned earlier that the critic, when viewing an auteur film, should be able to identify the director behind the film within a relatively short window of time, provided that they are familiar with the auteur, of course. If the hallmark of an auteur is to leave a distinct fingerprint that permeates each of their works, then the introduction to a film should be no exception. Wright's style shines perhaps most brightly in the opening frames of his films. The beginning of an Edgar Wright film has three key stylistic components, including: the auditory elements present at the very onset of the film, the narrative content of the opening scene, and the delayed presentation of a unique title card.

Each time the audience is brought into an Edgar Wright film the first experience is an auditory one. The sound of these films always precedes the visual elements, and the sound often establishes the tone of the film from the very beginning. Production companies and their various logos notwithstanding, the films all have a black screen with auditory elements that come before the first “proper” shot of the film. In the case of *Shaun of the Dead* the auditory introduction is a diverse one. We hear a series of electronic noises that gradually

become an emergency siren; this siren morphs back into an electronic beat with the classically Hollywood organ becoming gradually louder and louder. As the organ crescendos into unbearable tension for the audience the sound is cut off by a bell ringing to indicate the last call at The Winchester. *Hot Fuzz* brings the audience in similarly, with whistle that melds into a siren; the siren ultimately becoming rhythmic and droning until it is suddenly cut by the opening of a sliding glass door in the police station where the film begins. *The World's End* begins with a song ("Summers Magic" by Mark Summers) that plays through the whole introductory scene of the film. *Baby Driver* begins with an off-key tone that rises in pitch steadily, until being layered under the sounds of the street that fades into view after the logos have been concluded. Out of all of these films *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* differs slightly by replacing the Universal introductory tones, which play the majority of the time during the Universal logo, with a modified version meant to emulate the synth tones of an 8-bit video game.

At this point it may seem that I am simply summarizing the first moments of each film. This is not the case. I contend that these different ways of bringing the audience into each filmic universe, though distinct, are unified in their intention and indicative of Wright's stylistic fingerprint. Each one of these auditory cues bear a special relationship to the film itself. The closing bell in *Shaun of the Dead* takes the audience from a place of tension, the preceding organ music, to something more comfortable and amusing, the Winchester pub itself. The Winchester takes this place in the film as well, being variously described as "familiar" and "safe"—though it isn't ultimately the latter. *Hot Fuzz's* introduction

immediately brings the audience into the police-centered plot of the film. In all the films this is perhaps the most obvious connection between the auditory cue and the film itself.

The cue that brings us into *Baby Driver* is initially difficult to parse. However, the sharp and high-pitched tone should be familiar to those of us who experience tinnitus (a ringing in the ears resulting from damage to one's hearing). The protagonist of *Baby Driver* is revealed, later in the film, to suffer from tinnitus as a result of traumatic childhood experiences. To cope with this, Baby listens to music constantly. The film's opening then, having the sharp ringing being replaced by environmental sounds and then covered by the first song of the film ("Bellbottoms" by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion), reflects Baby as well as the film as a whole. The ringing becomes a motif as well as a plot point of the film, consistently touched upon when Baby remembers his childhood. It returns next when Baby is holding a tape labeled "Mom." This motif of the tinnitus associated with childhood trauma is also the first instance of the audience's perspective being merged with Baby's reality.

*The World's End* and *Scott Pilgrim* both choose to open with auditory cues that are decidedly non-diegetic, but the introduction to *The World's End* is similarly situated to appear multiple times throughout the film. The song "Summers Magic" was released in mid-1990 and became a chart topper in early 1991 —the film's opening scene is set on a particular date "June the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1990." The chronological relationship here is obvious, but the relation runs deeper still. This song's claim to fame is that it was the "first ever dance track to heavily feature a sample of music from a children's TV theme tune..." The song's content, engaging with the childhood nostalgia of the listener, parallels the action of the film as

Simon Pegg's character is reliving the "best day of (his) life." *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World's* musical opening is rather similar in its relation to the film. The opening of the film manages to take a familiar experience for the audience, the Universal "jingle" and spin it as well as the logo itself to the world of *Scott Pilgrim*. The adaptation pixelates the Universal logo to resemble an 8-bit video game, as well as adapting the auditory elements to resemble the synth-driven tones of such a game. This simply sets the stage for a film that consistently strays into video game references, both visual and auditory, as a matter of course.

All of this begs the question; why do these introductory sounds distinguish themselves as Edgar Wright's signature? There are certainly films that choose to present auditory elements before visual ones, and plenty of films that play music in the opening scene. Indeed, most films often choose to begin with sounds that generate a specific mood, or with music that plays more than once during the film. Wright stands out among other filmmakers because his choice of sound always has a direct relation to the narrative of the film. Of course, every piece of every film contributes to the "narrative" in some way. Wright's introductions are distinct hallmarks of his style because they relate to the heart of each film; they don't set the tone for a single scene or moment but establish a pattern for the progress of the film going forward.

The next step in parsing Edgar Wright's stylistic fingerprint is looking at the scenes which precede the title cards in each of the films. Given that these scenes generally set up the presentation of the title, it is necessary to examine these opening scenes and title cards in pairs regarding each film. Wright's films, without exception, choose to present their titles after an establishing scene. *Baby Driver's* title (appearing at 6:28) appears after the opening

scene in which we meet Baby and several other key characters, Baby's driving skills as well as his reluctance towards violence are demonstrated, and the crew neatly escapes from the police in a relatively "clean" getaway (compared to others in the film). The title card appears in black and yellow along the side of the skyscraper, with the camera facing upwards to show use the vertical face of the building. Wright has a penchant for unique title cards in his films. These cards seem to emerge at roughly the same time stamp in each film as well. The convention for title cards in cinema is to appear either before the first shot of a film, generally set to a neutral background, or to appear after a scene that establishes the starting point of the film. This second option is often produced by a camera that pans upwards from a given scene and focuses on the title set against the blue sky. Among the title cards for Wright's films, *Baby Driver* is perhaps the most conventional, though instead of panning from the ground to the sky the camera moves from the title card down to face the street as Baby emerges onto the sidewalk.

The rest of Wright's films employ somewhat more unusual methods of presenting the title. In *Shaun of the Dead* the audience experiences the tame setting of the Winchester for the first several minutes. We see the primary characters and get a sense for the relationships between each of them before cutting to several shots of people going about everyday tasks with zombie-like levels of enthusiasm. The title, in this instance, is almost easy to miss as it appears against the ground (4:00) as the camera pans from left to right across an alleyway full of individuals (presumably extras in the film) moving in shambling step towards the camera. Among the films *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*'s title is the most like *Shaun of the Dead*. In the opening scene the audience is introduced to the initial conflict of

the film (Scott's relationship to Knives) during a conversation between the characters of Scott, his bandmates, and Knives Chau, all of whom are gathered for band practice. Sex Bob-Omb begins to play and the camera flips back and forth between the performance and the face of Knives Chau as she reacts to their music. The camera settles on the performers and begins to pan slowly away from them, seemingly stretching the small space out as the screen becomes more distorted. Finally, the words "Scott Pilgrim" appear above the band (3:08) before dropping behind the couch to join "VS. THE WORLD."

*The World's End*, as I mentioned previously, opens with an upbeat scene that occurs on a specific day in the past, a day that Simon Pegg's character will continue to attempt to recreate throughout the film. This introduction introduces the key characters of the film as well as the locations where the majority of the action will take place, the pubs along the "Golden Mile." We are treated to a brief scene immediately following this, which contrasts heavily the joyful nostalgia of the opening shots. Simon Pegg's character is in some sort of Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He seems to make the decision to re-attempt the Golden Mile, and the title shot begins with an overhead view of the circle of people at the meeting. The camera zooms out as a large black "O" comes into frame, eventually becoming the "O" in the title of *The World's End*, stamped on the side of a bubbling pint glass of beer (4:40).

Let us now summarize the Edgar Wright introduction as it has been described thus far. Each film begins with an auditory element which precedes the opening shot of the film, moves through roughly three to five minutes of exposition to establish the action of the plot and the world of the film, and then settles into an unusual presentation of the title card. How does this differ from most films they might see from other directors? How is the Edgar

Wright introduction unique? For one, the presentation of the title comes considerably later in the film than the convention. Most popular directors, even among auteurs, choose to present the title of the film in one of two chronological positions. The title will appear either before the first shot of the film itself (perhaps then technically becoming the first “shot” itself) or it will appear within the first minute of the film. Wright’s films, without exception, choose to present the title only when the world of the film is firmly in place.

What do these opening scenes from Wright’s films tell us about his style as an auteur? We can glean several things about his personal style from these brief openings alone. Firstly, Wright’s openings have a uniformity that appeals to the critic identification approach. A critic familiar with Wright’s films should be able to identify a previously unknown film as a Wright film from the very start. These openings also contain examples of Wright’s personal style, specifically his tendency for pastiche and focus on music. Examples of pastiche include: the eerie opening noise from *Shaun of the Dead* is directly borrowed from George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, the opening line of dialogue from *The World’s End* is taken from the BBC radio program *It’s That Man Again*, and the *Legend of Zelda* “treasure” sound effect borrowed for Knives Chau’s entrance in *Scott Pilgrim*. Wright is clearly layering his films with connections across the spectrum of pop culture from the very first moment. In terms of music, all of Wright’s title sequences are accompanied by musical tracks. This alone does not justify claiming a personal connection, but the fact that these pieces are often performed by some of Wright’s personal favorite artists does indeed lend support to an auteur’s personal fingerprint. With this auditory focus in mind, let us move on to role sound and music play within Wright’s films.

### Part Two, Section Three: What Does an Edgar Wright Film Sound Like?

“He had an accident when he was a kid. Still has a hum in the drum. Plays music to drown it out. And that's what makes him the best.”

—Doc, as portrayed by Kevin Spacey.

*Baby Driver* (2017)

We have already addressed the auditory elements of an Edgar Wright film to some degree in the previous section. However, given that the auditory elements parsed thus far encompass all of five-to-fifteen seconds at the onset of the film, more analysis is necessary. If the very first sounds can successfully convey the meaning I have attributed to them previously, then the remainder of each film should be a treasure trove of auditory nuance. Indeed, each film has a similarly complicated relationship to its own audio elements which we will examine in order to isolate Edgar Wright’s consistent style across the different films. There are two key features I intend to identify in the film. The first is the tendency to blur the lines between diegetic (sound that occurs in the world of the film itself) and the non-diegetic (sound which does not have a source within the world of the film). The second feature is the tendency for the films to adopt a perspective, in terms of auditory cues, which aligns with the protagonist or star of the respective film.

We will examine the blurring of the line between diegetic and non-diegetic sound first, with special attention to instances of musical accompaniment for a given scene. Musical pieces do not, of course, cover every moment of the five films —but they do serve as key plot points in both of the non-Cornetto works (*Scott Pilgrim* and *Baby Driver*). *Baby Driver* is unique in this regard as the film seems to intentionally justify the nearly

omnipresent musical tracks. Baby's attachment to music (for the purpose of drowning out his tinnitus) is explicitly detailed during an early scene in the film by Doc, Kevin Spacey's character. This lengthy exposition is ostensibly for the benefit of Bats, played by Jamie Foxx, in order to explain Baby's constant headphone use. The purpose, I contend, is to prime the audience for musical elements that are presented as being within the world of the film but ultimately serve the purpose of organizing the editing of the film. Wright uses the narrative device of Baby's need for constant music in order to justify the careful editing of scenes that appear choreographed. The result is that the audience does not view musical scenes within *Baby Driver* as being jarring for the lack of realism; instead Baby's auditory reality seems to envelop the audience.

Amanda McQueen's article "'Bring the Noise' Sonic Intensified Continuity in the Films of Edgar Wright" explores the "creative potential of sound" (McQueen 13) in Edgar Wright's oeuvre. She contends that Edgar Wright chooses to use sound in his films "to draw attention to a film's construction and method of storytelling" (McQueen 13). McQueen's analysis heavily supports the notion of a consistent style carried across the films. The essay focuses upon two "strategies" that define Wright's style with regard to sound, "intricate detail" and "aggressive impact." The former is characterized by the usage of "sonic transitional devices" and techniques such as "sweetening" while the latter is characterized by the usage of sound to enhance the jarring nature of certain actions.

It is important to note that McQueen's study, published in 2013, does not include the film *Baby Driver*. However, she does discuss the Cornetto Trilogy and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* in terms of their "overt and highly stylized soundtracks" (McQueen 13). *Baby*

*Driver* qualifies without a doubt for this criterion. The only film among the five which could be said to have a more “overt” or “highly stylized” soundtrack would be *Scott Pilgrim*. For this reason, we will continue to employ McQueen’s methods in examining *Baby Driver*. The “stylistic flair” that she isolates in Wright’s use of sound in the Cornetto Films and *Scott Pilgrim* is particularly relevant to our study. The primary goal of the following analysis will be to match the audio elements within *Baby Driver* to those that McQueen has isolated among Wright’s other films.

The music in *Baby Driver* occurs both within the world of the film and audience’s experience of the film. This seems an obvious observation. The music within the film must be also within the audience’s experience, or the audience would have no perception of it. However, *Baby Driver*’s relationship to music goes beyond the typical. In presenting the plot device of the headphones/iPods, coupled with Baby’s built-in need for music as a character, the film provides a justification for every piece of music within the film. Each instance where music plays during *Baby Driver* (except in the instance of the credits) is both a diegetic and a non-diegetic experience. In each instance the music begins when the audience is shown the source of that music within the world of the film (i.e. Baby’s headphones/turndtable/audio system within a vehicle etc.). The music itself plays across different shots in a scene, without being limited to the space in which the music would be audible in the world of the film.

The first scene, for example, shows Baby listening to his music inside the getaway car. We even see Baby choose the song on a rather outdated iPod. The music immediately becomes a key part of the film’s progression; both the action of the scene and the editing of

the shots are matched to the timing of the song. The editing here makes use of the song's initial bursts of two-beats (guitar and drums), each with a brief silence between, in order to rotate between close shots of the four characters within the car. Every time the music flares and the shot cuts to the next character the film makes use of the silent pauses to linger momentarily on each character. This affords the actors a unique window for expressing their characters through physicality. Jon Bernthal forcefully chews gum, Jon Hamm sits stoically in the back, and Eiza González gives the camera a smirk before reaching for the door handle. This careful editing continues as they exit the car, each cut from shot-to-shot is timed to the beat of the song.

A nearly identical tactic is utilized in *The World's End*, though admittedly for a different effect. Roughly fifteen minutes into the film there is a scene in which Gary King, portrayed by Simon Pegg, delivers a particularly poor joke. The line itself is not particularly significant, but the way in which Wright shows the four other characters present reacting to the joke parallels the previously discussed scene from *Baby Driver*. Gary delivers the poor joke, at which point a bell begins to toll in the distance indicating four o'clock. We are presented four brief shots of each individual character, with the cuts between those shots being punctuated by the chimes of the bell. We see one character looking concerned, the next disgusted, followed by pitying, and finally confused. The result is comedic and foreboding at the same time, as bells themselves are classically somber. The contrast between the sound and the facial expressions of the characters ultimately produces comedic effect, as well as allowing the audience a chance to watch all four characters react

individually. The similarity between these two scenes is undeniable and lends considerable support to this technique as a hallmark of Wright's sound style.

Returning to the *Baby Driver* scene specifically, editing a scene in this fashion is a meticulous feat of editing within its own right. However, the true significance here is that the timing is not limited to the editing of the film's shot progression. The timing of the music also matches the diegetic noises of the film; the noises and actions which take place in the shots themselves are also matched to the music. In this particular scene, the characters open their respective car doors, shut the doors, open the trunk of the car, and close the trunk, all timed to the beats within the music. This is an ideal example of the following observation from McQueen: "In Wright's films, sound and image function cooperatively. Visual and aural formal flourishes emphasize each other, allowing sound to enhance, reinforce, and supplement the stylistic norms of editing and cinematography" (McQueen 143). The "cooperative" nature that the visual and audio elements have may seem obvious to the reader at first glance. For a film to appear realistic there must, of course, be a cause-and-effect relationship between the action on screen and the diegetic noises within the film. However, by arranging the musical elements to correspond to the action taking place the other characters appear to be moving along with the music that only Baby, within the world of the film, can hear. Clearly McQueen's statement that "visual and aural formal flourishes emphasize each other" holds true in this film as well as the other four Edgar Wright films which her essay addressed.

This emphasis relationship continues through the whole of the opening scene and is similarly choreographed. The police vehicles and pedestrian cars alike collide in time with

the beat of the song playing in Baby's headphones. This continues throughout the shots which show the car chase; the music reaches a beat or a crescendo and the shot changes or a moment of action will occur. The use of music to heighten the action on screen is hardly novel, and it should be no surprise that music being used for increased emphasis alongside visual effects is a commonplace tactic. However, Wright's scenes are not simply organized to present the music as an accoutrement to the on-screen action. The action on-screen also serves to provide emphasis for the music, as with the trunk closing, the rapid cuts to new characters, and the car collisions; the diegetic sounds are being used to benefit and enhance the non-diegetic. As McQueen notes, the effort is a "cooperative" one that serves to produce a world where visual and auditory elements are deliberately, and perhaps obviously, organized in a way that supports both stimuli in presenting the film to the audience.

Baby's interaction with the music in the film also serves to illustrate the second feature of the sounds within these movies. Another scene containing a musical accompaniment—choreographed much the same as the opening, with bystanders seemingly moving in time to the music within Baby's headphones— begins immediately after the title has appeared. Baby walks down the street, characteristic headphones in place, to the tune of a new song. He eventually reaches a coffee shop, where he removes one earbud in order to speak to the beleaguered barista (00:07:50). Immediately the volume of the music is reduced considerably, though the audience can still hear the music faintly. Here the perspective of the audience has been merged with Baby's own. The barista asks, "Can I take your order?" to which Baby responds "Yeah, yeah, yeah" in unison with the

lyrics of the song still playing faintly in the background. The significance here is that Baby's experienced reality is being merged, in terms of auditory stimulus, with that of the audience.

The scene wraps up and Baby moves the loose earbud back into place, the volume rises again in turn. As walks down the street there are a variety of activities taking place: a man preaching to passers-by, another playing a brass instrument on the street corner, and various pedestrians having conversations. Each of these events in turn increases in volume as Baby approaches the source and decreases in volume as Baby draws away from the respective sources. Baby is clearly the center for the audience's auditory experience of the film in this scene. A deeper effect could be postulated here resulting from this choice; it may very well heighten the audience's empathy for Baby to give the viewers an anchor to his perspective. Placing the audience within a character's point-of-view is generally accomplished using a first-person camera angle. *Baby Driver*, as well as Wright's other films, manages to place the audience in Baby's shoes by sharing his auditory perspective instead.

This tactic of modulating volumes to "place" the audience firmly in the shoes of the protagonist demonstrates Wright's attention to detail in his films; and it does not occur in *Baby Driver* alone. *Shaun of The Dead* has two scenes, intentionally near-parallel for the purpose of comparison, in which Shaun makes the journey from his flat to a nearby convenience store. The first time Shaun makes this trip he passes by arguing pedestrians, a barking dog, and a child kicking a soccer ball. The volume, as it does in *Baby Driver*, modulates in step with Simon Pegg's character as he walks. The second time the volume is notably absent, and the audience is meant to notice (in a post-zombie outbreak world) that

many of the auditory elements of everyday life have been replaced by ominous noises or simple silence.

McQueen analyzes the *Shaun of the Dead* scene thusly: “numerous diegetic sound effects are layered with careful shifts in emphasis to produce a dynamic soundscape” (McQueen 157). Given that these films were produced over a decade apart and with different production crews, a unique sequence such as this can be attributed to Wright’s style. Evidently the “soundscape” method is an enduring trend within his style. *Shaun of the Dead* also contains a notable example of the same coordination between music and diegetic sound that occurs within *Baby Driver*. The famous “jukebox scene” from *Shaun of the Dead* plays out as the characters attempt to defeat a large zombie using only pool cues as weapons. The scene is played out as a jukebox nearby plays “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen. The pool cues strike in unison as the characters of Liz, Shaun, and Ed move around the zombie in circles, seemingly dancing. A scene that would be otherwise played as terrifying in a prototypical zombie film is imbued with levity and humor simply by adding a bit of music and careful choreographed actions by the performers.

In terms of soundtrack selection alone there are several distinct patterns that correlate to Wright specifically across the films. As the auteur’s personal identity is relevant to their stylistic fingerprint, choices such as these are to be expected in an auteur film. Notably, the films seem to all draw from a shared pool of artists that Wright personally favors: Queen songs feature in *Shaun of the Dead* and *Baby Driver*, performances by Beck in *Scott Pilgrim* and *Baby Driver* (Wright also directed a music video for Beck), Jon Spencer Blues Explosion performs the opening number of “Bellbottoms” for *Baby Driver* and also

composed the credits song in *Hot Fuzz* ("Here Comes the Fuzz"). *Scott Pilgrim*, *Baby Driver*, and *Hot Fuzz* all feature either songs or performances by T.Rex. In a similar vein, the Canadian artist Kid Koala remixed and produced songs for both *Shaun of the Dead* and *Baby Driver*. *The World's End*, among Wright's films, has conspicuously few musical artists in common with the other films. Despite this, it is evident that among most of the films a consistent musical collaboration is taking place. Wright clearly has some degree of investment in these artists, though whether that is an expression of his auteur personality remains to be seen.

The reader may argue that this consistent collaboration could be a happenstance of convenience; perhaps Edgar Wright has simply made some convenient relationships with musical performers. An article by Mark Andrews from *The Quietus*, titled "The Fabulous, Most Groovy: Director Edgar Wright's Favorite Albums" would indicate otherwise. In the article Wright lists *Midnite Vultures* by Beck, *Orange* by Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, and *Sheer Heart Attack* by Queen as some of his all-time favorite records. All these artists have musical pieces included in more than one Wright film, but the choices are particularly interesting in *Baby Driver*. Wright's newest film features songs drawn specifically from the previously mentioned albums. Those songs are: "Debra" from Beck's *Midnite Vultures*, "Bellbottoms" from Jon Spencer Blues Explosion's *Orange*, and "Brighton Rock" from Queen's *Sheer Heart Attack*.

Admittedly it seems that *Baby Driver* has received some special treatment with regard to Wright's musical preferences, but the article also yields several interesting pieces of information with regard to the other films. Notably, Wright discusses the album *The Kinks*

are the *Village Green Preservation Society* in relation to both *Hot Fuzz* and *The World's End*. The article details the specific role that the song "The Village Green Preservation Society" has within *Hot Fuzz* (we will return to this shortly as we examine Wright's "aggressive impact"). Wright himself says, "The title track 'The Village Green Preservation Society' and 'Village Green' are both used in *Hot Fuzz* to soundtrack the backward thinking, rose-coloured glasses-wearing denizens of Sandford" (Andrews, 2017). Wright also mentions that "my favourite track 'Do You Remember Walter?' directly inspired *The World's End*, as it tells a tale of the cool kid at school who all the girls fancied, who is not quite as cool now as he was then" (Andrews, 2017). This is not a unique phenomenon among Wright's films either; the title of *Baby Driver* is inspired by a Simon and Garfunkel song of the same name released in 1970.

We have established that music has a personal place in Wright's films, but why does this matter in relation to Wright's auteur status? The influence of the auteur-director's personality is key to the imprint that they leave upon their works. Wright chooses to include these artists because they are his favorites. *Baby Driver* and *The World's End* are both inspired in part by songs from these same artists. Given the relative dearth of information regarding Wright's personal life, we have utilized the musical decisions he made for his films (as well as the article detailing his favorite albums) to demonstrate that he imparted a deeply personal touch upon the films. Wright uses his films to feature and promote some of his favorite artists (he has also directed music videos for several of them). Music clearly plays an important role in Wright's personal life and this is reflected throughout his films.

Let us take a detailed look now at what is arguably the most musical film in Edgar Wright's oeuvre, *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*. The film, for those unfamiliar with it, is centered around the titular character of Scott Pilgrim, the bass guitar player in a band called Sex Bob-Omb. The function of that music in the plot of the film is of the utmost importance. A significant portion of the action scenes during the course of the film occur either simultaneously with the action of the film –with the action taking place during the performances of Sex Bob-Omb— or with fight scenes that double as musical performances (such as the intentionally cringey Matthew Patel/First Evil Ex fight at 31:00). Music, within the world of *Scott Pilgrim*, is a diegetic narrative element more often than not; the film has obvious parallels with the function of music within *Baby Driver*.

*Scott Pilgrim* also exhibits a variety of notable examples of Wright's capacity for "intricate detail"; detailing all such instances would be exhaustive, though we will delve into a few of the key examples. With regard to music coordination, similar to the coffee shop scene in *Baby Driver*, Wright makes use of the lyrics within the music to enhance the action taking place on screen. During Sex Bob-Omb's first staged performance the camera shots focus primarily on the members of the band (Kim, Steven, and Scott) before gradually shifting to shots of the characters in the audience. The careful observer will notice that Scott's roommate Wallace has been directing his attention, even in the background shots, to the character of Jimmy (the romantic partner, though not for long, of Scott's sister Stacey). As we begin to see shots of the audience the camera settles on a shot of Wallace turning towards Jimmy as Jimmy attempts, obviously with some discomfort, to keep his attention focused on the stage. The lyrics at this exact moment are, "You've just got to turn

the knob”; this is followed closely by “and maybe we’ll go, as far as we can” as Jimmy turns to make eye contact with Wallace. This scene, though it does not establish a key plot point of the film, allows us to explore the degree of Wright’s directorial competence. For this scene to have come together the music composition, subsequent editing, and pairing with the appropriate visual shots must have required a considerable amount of foresight and coordination. This brief interaction does serve the purpose of establishing a comedic moment in the following scene; we see Jimmy and Wallace passionately making out as the fight between Scott and Matthew Patel draws to a close, much to the chagrin of Stacey Pilgrim, portrayed by Anna Kendrick.

This scene also helps to illustrate the contrasting usage of diegetic and non-diegetic sound to create impact within the film. Midway through the performance of Sex Bob-Omb’s hit song “Garbage Truck” Matthew Patel bursts through the ceiling of the venue. This shot is punctuated by a loud crash (the comic script on-screen even reads “CRASH” 30:50) which is in turn immediately replaced by a rhythmic electronic beat reminiscent of the classic music from a “fighting game” (a video game sub-genre). The contrast as the film shifts from soundtrack (Sex Bob-Omb’s performance), to sound effect (the “crash”), to score (the electronic fighting music composition) is considerable, and rightfully so. Wright has managed to shift the tone of the scene from an initially tense performance which becomes relaxed as the song progresses into a dramatic and fast paced action scene in the space of roughly twelve seconds (30:50 to 31:02, with the delivery of the line “Consider our fight...begun!”). The result is intentionally impactful without straying into an unpleasantly jarring experience. Wright has managed to coordinate sound effects in such a way that the

result is an ultimately masterful execution. The fact that Wright pulls this off so well lends support to his status as an auteur if we refer back to Sarris's "First Circle." Despite the many challenges to Sarris's approach this aspect remains key to auteur status, competence is necessary.

The way that Wright engages with sound is essential to his style as an auteur. It is both a deeply personal choice and a carefully manipulated tool for producing a variety of effects. Wright's taste for music shines through in these films as a key component of his auteur persona. He uses his films to promote his favorite artists and this effectively shapes the progress of his films. We can see this stand out most distinctly when Wright arranges scenes such as the pool cue fight in *Shaun of the Dead* or the opening bank job from *Baby Driver*. These scenes were clearly filmed with these songs in mind, and those songs were chosen for their personal significance to Wright. In this way Wright's personality, his focus on these artists and songs, quite literally shapes the way the audience sees and hears the film. The other uses of sound in the film also stand out for Wright in particular. The creation of a soundscape is an enduring trend within his work and demonstrates another example of his "First Circle" competence. This is not entirely unique to Wright; however, the technique is far from common. Wright's consistent usage of atypical sound work demonstrates another aspect of the uniqueness that an auteur imprint must possess.

**Part Two, Section Four: Why Does This Scene (in an Edgar Wright Film) Seem Familiar?**

PC Butterman: “*Point Break* or *Bad Boys II*?”

Sgt. Angel: “Which one do you think I’ll prefer?”

PC Butterman: “No, I mean which one do you want to watch first?”

—Nicolas Angel, portrayed by Simon Pegg, and Danny Butterman, portrayed by Nick Frost

*Hot Fuzz*, 2007

Wright’s style, as with many of the commercialized auteurs, is steeped in a reverence for the films which came before. The whole of the Cornetto Trilogy plays with genre in various ways. This genre-mixing process produces several results that are a bit confusing on paper. *Shaun of the Dead* is a horror film and zombie flick in which the major characters, except Shaun and Liz, have graphic and bloody deaths, yet the film is ultimately a comedy. *Hot Fuzz* is a “buddy cop” action film, but also contains elements drawn from horror films, Westerns, and romantic comedies (though this last is rather subtle). *The World’s End* is a nostalgic film in which the protagonist struggles with his substance abuse while trying to reclaim his high school “glory days” ...it is also a comedic science-fiction film about alien invasion (in the same vein as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). All this is to say, Edgar Wright’s films are deeply interrelated to the classic films which preceded them, and the conventions of each distinct genre mentioned previously. Wright’s style, in this regard, is to make both subtle and overt references to other pieces of film throughout his own works. The simple usage of reference certainly does not belong to Wright alone. However, the way in which Wright uses pastiche is unique to his style. Wright consistently chooses to go beyond simply dropping a recognizable line. Instead he chooses to reenact whole scenes

from films in ways that fit organically within his own work. The Cornetto films, *Hot Fuzz* in particular, provide us with a myriad of examples of this which we will address shortly.

*Scott Pilgrim* and *Baby Driver*, on the other hand, are not so deeply involved with the conventions of genre as the Cornetto films are. These films do, however, contain the same levels of reference, homage, and reverence for film. Does this really distinguish a film beyond the normal levels of reference and intertextual interaction? Certainly, references within films and other devices that pay tribute to the classics of a given genre are commonplace. At this point in the cinema industry finding a film that does *not* contain a reference, however subtle, might be a more significant accomplishment than identifying one that does. I posit that Wright's films exhibit a much higher frequency of reference usage, especially subtle homage, than other such films. The references to other films and television are pervasive within Wright's works; they even feature overtly in several of his films, as we will examine with the movie clips contained in *Hot Fuzz* and *Baby Driver*. The references, as well as being pervasive, are also reverent in their approach to the source material. Wright's usage of these intertextual devices is not a simple vehicle for gags and laughs, nor is it an effort to criticize the source material. The references within his films ultimately pay homage to the source material, and for this reason their placement is distinct among other films that use similar devices.

*Shaun of the Dead* has the most overt reference of all of Wright's films, given that the title is itself a reference to the classic genre-defining zombie films of George Romero. Indeed, films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985) inform much of the film. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2017 Wright

described the relationship between the classic zombie flicks and his film with the following analogy: “if *Dawn of the Dead* was *Hamlet*, then *Shaun* could be its *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*” (Rabin 2017). Given that *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* is a parody, Wright’s comparison inevitably draws the idea that *Shaun of the Dead* is also a parody. It should be noted that the term does not denigrate either film. *Shaun of the Dead*, as Wright says tells it, is “a special film for me, and my valentine to George” (Rabin 2017). The article also mentions a personal connection that Wright has to Romero’s works— “When Wright was working on the cult British TV show *Spaced* in the late 1990s, he and star Simon Pegg bonded over their love of George Romero” (Rabin 2017). This ultimately led to writing the script for *Shaun of the Dead*.

*Shaun of the Dead*, more than any of his other works, is the ultimate tribute to a beloved director. Beyond this the film constitutes the first entry in the Cornetto trilogy, which remained cohesive enough to maintain an all-star cast (among British actors) for nearly a decade between the release of *Shaun of the Dead* and *The World’s End*. Wright’s consistent references to other films and usage of homage can be used to help develop the idea of his “auteur persona” (as Erin Hill-Parks put it) moving forward. Analyzing Wright’s usage of parody and film references is key to an analysis of his persona for many reasons, but one stands out among the others. The parody film is, in the parlance of a comic book character, his origin story. His first film, *Fistful of Fingers*, parodies Western films and the two films which followed, *Hot Fuzz* and *Shaun of the Dead*, are also definitively parody films. It bears mentioning that these three films are also ones that Wright chose to deliberately produce. To clarify, these are all personal projects for Wright (and Simon Pegg, who co-

wrote) and not films that Wright was contracted to make. These films are, in every sense, deeply personal creations and the inclusion of homage elements in all five films reflects specific and personal choices made by Edgar Wright. Moving forward we will examine the personal connection that the various references and tributes have to Wright himself.

*Hot Fuzz* has a particularly interesting relationship to elements of adaptation and pastiche. Firstly, it contains the most genre diversity among all the films. The film engages primarily with the buddy cop genre but also contains elements of Western and horror genres; the film chooses to make references to several classic pieces of film in all three of these genres. The buddy cop genre is certainly the most overt among the genres present, and the references to classic buddy cop films are equally prominent. Approximately fifty minutes into the film the two protagonists (Sgt. Angel and PC Butterman) watch the films *Bad Boys II* and *Point Break* together. The audience is treated to several short scenes from the respective films which ultimately interact with the narrative of *Hot Fuzz*. Specifically, the infamous line “This shit just got real” (delivered by Martin Lawrence’s character) from *Bad Boys II* is used to heighten the dramatic impact of an explosion that took place in the immediately preceding shot. We also see the famous scene from *Point Break* where Keanu Reeves’s character, as PC Butterman tells it, “fires (his) gun into the air and gone ‘arr.’” This particular shot, which the characters discuss early in the film and then watch together, is used by Wright to set up a reenactment for Nick Frost’s character.

In the finale of the film PC Butterman fires his gun up into the air and belts out the obligatory “arr” to avoid shooting his own father, who is fleeing from the protagonists. The function of setting up this scene is twofold. First, it contextualizes the act. PC Butterman

does not want to shoot his father because he “loves him so much.” The setup also allows Wright to pay homage directly to the source material. Furthermore, the mere fact that Wright went to the effort of paying dues for the usage of these film clips clearly shows that tribute is being paid (literally, in this case) to key films within the genre.

The other genre references within *Hot Fuzz* are rather less overt than the *Point Break* and *Bad Boys II* tributes. However, they are not what would be described as “subtle” in any regard, and they are certainly not infrequent. Simply cataloging the various references within *Hot Fuzz* could be the topic of an entirely new essay. However, doing so would be exhaustive and needlessly repetitive. For this purpose of this auteur analysis, we shall only pick out a few notable examples from *Hot Fuzz* (and from the other films as well). Sgt. Angel’s oft mentioned and remarked-upon “Japanese peace lily” features throughout the film and is likely a reference to an identical plant cared for by the titular character in the action film *Léon: The Professional*. With regard to the horror genre, the film borrows a multitude of genre conventions but has few, relative to the ones drawn from action and western films, references to horror films. The best example of this is likely a line delivered when Sgt. Angel approaches the desk at the hotel where he lodges for the course of the film. The lighting for this scene is dim, and in the background faint, scratchy, classical music can be heard playing (I suspect from a record player), punctuated by several muffled thunderclaps. Angel approaches the desk and says “I was hoping to, uh, check in.” The clerk responds to Angel without looking up, “Check in? But you’ve always been here.” This is a subtle, though distinct, reference to Stanley Kubrick’s film *The Shining*. The function of this

reference, and the setting, is to heighten the dramatic effect of the scene as well as allow the film to pay tribute to the source material.

References to the Western genre enter the movie rather late in the game, in a scene that takes place roughly an hour and thirty minutes into the runtime. The audience is treated to characteristically “Western” vistas of the surrounding countryside—I suspect this is a joke given the quaint setting of the small British village—as Sgt. Angel rides into town astride a white horse. The shots in this scene are meant to parallel scenes taken from Sergio Leone’s spaghetti Western films (specifically *A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*); the score for this particular scene is also an obvious attempt to emulate music composed by Ennio Morricone for those same Leone films. The purpose here is, again, twofold. First and foremost, Wright is using the platform that *Hot Fuzz* affords him to create an homage to works that he personally treasures. He is also using the conventions of a Western, which many film-literate viewers doubtless recognized, to prime the audience for the immanent shootout scene. Neil Archer, in his book *Studying Hot Fuzz*, tells us that the usage of familiar techniques in this way creates a “dialogue with the viewer” which takes place “between the film and the viewer’s familiarity with cinema and its conventions” (Archer 38). Wright’s auteur status is demonstrated through this dialogue. Wright is clearly a movie buff, the references themselves demonstrate that. The key here is that including these references creates a special experience for viewers who share Wright’s love for these films. Pastiche is used as a method for communication between Wright and the audience. This is the specific personal imprint that he has left on the film.

Before we depart from examining *Hot Fuzz*, let us take a moment to revisit the connotation issue surrounding the word “parody.” We have already established that both *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* are “parodies”; I fear that contemporary examples of parodies (*Epic Movie*, *Ridiculous Six*, *Vampires Suck*, etc.) may lead the reader to the conclusion that parodies must ridicule their source material. This is not the case in Edgar Wright’s films. Archer refers to this situation as being “Parody Without Criticism” and contends that “parody need not be critical in the way it identifies and plays with other films, styles and genres” (Archer 45). *Hot Fuzz*, in contrast to many contemporary parodies, is clearly an effort to pay homage to the films that inspired its creation. This distinction, though a slight digression from our topic, reinforces the concept that Wright chooses to include references to other films as a way to engage in a positive intertextual interaction.

Concerning homage and references *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is a slightly different kettle of fish than Wright’s other works. By this I mean that the film deviates slightly from the trend of venerating films, instead choosing to pay tribute to two other forms of media, video games and comic books. For a bit of background, *Scott Pilgrim* is an adaptation of a comic book of the same name written by Bryan Lee O’Malley; for this reason, the term reference is rather difficult to use when referring to the film, as it is not referencing the source material per sé. There is also a fair amount of difficulty in identifying the references within the film that can be attributed to decisions made by the movie itself, as the comic itself is also rife with references to video games as well as a variety of aspects of “nerd culture.” The film makes frequent references to common video game tropes as well as familiar staples of the industry; Scott learns “the bass line from *Final Fantasy II*,” he

repeatedly relates an anecdotal quote about *Pac Man*, and the film features several scenes in an arcade where Scott and Knives play *Ninja Ninja Revolution*. However, these examples cannot be firmly established as belonging to the film alone, and therefore cannot concretely support an analysis of Wright's filmmaking choices.

There are examples of references, related to the shot composition and audio editing, that we can safely place within the territory of Wright's filmmaking. The first notable instance, occurring at 1:35, is a chiming sound effect borrowed from the *Legend of Zelda* franchise that indicates the discovery of a treasure. The sound effect is timed with the first shot of Knives Chau; this perhaps indicates to the video game-literate viewer that she is herself a treasure. Other notable examples include the "K.O." text card (35:20) used when Scott deals the final blow to Matthew Patel and the classic Tony Hawk Pro Skater speed readout appearing when Lucas Lee (portrayed by Chris Evans) skates to his ultimate demise (50:47). In each of these instances we can safely assume, based on the presentation, that the inclusion in the film is independent from the comic book. Thus, the credit (as tricky as that term is) can be safely applied to Wright's choices.

The preceding examples constitute only a sparse few of the instances within the film, but they sufficiently establish that Wright has made a concerted effort to develop an inter-medium dialogue. But how does this relate to Wright's auteur persona? Finding evidence that Wright has a personal connection to both video games and comic books is a simple matter of examining interviews which he gave. With relation to comics, an article titled, "50 Essential Comic Book Movies with Edgar Wright" (Myers 2010) details Wright's personal connections, suffice it to say they are extensive, to every entry in the article. Comic

books, according to the article, were a formative part of Wright's childhood; making *Scott Pilgrim* must have been an ideal project for Wright. Wright's relationship to video games can be inferred simply from the titles of the following interview. The article is titled "*Scott Pilgrim* Director Edgar Wright Sees No Difference Between Video Games and Heroin". This piece, published by *Vanity Fair* in 2010, details that Wright has been a lifetime lover of games and reportedly struggled with what he terms "a stage with the PlayStation in the late 90s, which was pretty much like being addicted to heroin" (Spitznagel 2010). Clearly Wright made the decision, with directing *Scott Pilgrim*, to engage in a film that provides a great intersection for his personal loves.

With every one of Wright's films the viewer can make use of the references within to parse his personal connection to the film. Wright makes use of these intertextual interactions to pay tribute to the films he loves and the personal connections he has to the source material. Homage, within Wright's films, is an avenue for the expression of his auteur persona.

*The World's End* does not engage with direct references as frequently as the other films in the Cornetto Trilogy or Wright's Hollywood films, but pastiche is certainly still a very present element. For example, the film samples several infamous voice lines from *The Wild Angels* (1966) in the first scene after the opening. One particular line, delivered by Peter Fonda, is "And we want to get loaded. And we want to have a good time" (5:44). This almost exactly echoes a line that the teenage Gary King delivers upon being asked what he wanted to do with his life in the opening scene. Gary's response is, "to have a good time" (1:47). The parallel here is clearly intentional, especially given that the delivery of these

lines occur so closely together. As with *Hot Fuzz*, Wright is clearly weaving references from other films into the narrative of his film.

The most notable thing to examine in *The World's End* is the pervasive nostalgia. The best example is the opening song of the film, which intentionally samples from a children's tv show. This is an effort to foreground nostalgia for the listener, and this effect is compounded when Wright makes use of classically 90's neon fonts (similar to *Saved by the Bell*) to introduce names for each of the main characters. The intentionality of this choice is further reinforced when we meet the characters again in modern day and their names again displayed. Instead of maintaining the neon font from earlier, we are instead presented with a modernized font with simple white lettering. Now the question becomes, how does the font relate to the usage of pastiche in the film? Wright's choice, in this regard, likely relates more to the motivation behind his fondness for pastiche than anything else.

Wright's style, as we have established, relies upon pastiche to form a connection with films which have personal value for Wright himself. Nostalgia is a key part of this equation. Wright's nostalgia, I posit, is the driving force behind his obsession with references. Support for this can be drawn from the earlier section regarding *Shaun of the Dead*. Adapting a zombie film to honor Romero is clearly a nostalgic effort for both Wright and Pegg, as they both profess a deep love for Romero's films. References are not always nostalgic of course, but a degree of nostalgia is clearly at play when a reference is made in tribute to the source material. In this way the other Cornetto films, both homages to genre works that Wright has personal connections to, are both nostalgic works. The narrative content of *The World's End* is a direct approach to this nostalgia. The protagonist, Gary King,

introduces the flashback at the film's onset as "the best night of your life" (0:35) and spends the entirety of the film attempting to relive that night. This is an overt expression of the nostalgia present throughout Wright's filmmaking and constitutes the best example of his fondness for the past. Wright's references are not simply connections drawn between his films and the source material; they are often reenactments of that same source material. Much like Gary King's efforts in *The World's End*, Wright seems to be attempting to relive some of his favorite moments from film by bringing them to life again in his own works.

**Part Two, Section Five: Conclusion, Why Would I Care About Edgar Wright's Films?**

Scott Pilgrim: "Hey! Hey, mind if I tag along?"

Ramona Flowers: "You want to come with me?"

Scott Pilgrim: "Yeah, I thought maybe we could try again."

Scott Pilgrim, portrayed by Michael Cera

Ramona Flowers, portrayed by Mary Elizabeth Winstead

*Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, (2010)

More specifically, why would the reader care that Edgar Wright is the director of the film they are viewing? Does it matter, ultimately, that the director behind a film has left a fingerprint of themselves on their work? I contend that it does. The critical view of auteur theory has merit, and an auteur examination often strays into dangerous territory that attributed every positive aspect of a film to the director alone. However, when we have a director like Edgar Wright to examine, who chooses projects he feels an obviously personal connection with, there is room for the auteur in a critical dialogue. Projects such as these allow the director room to develop a personal style that is distinct. Wright's personal style has three key components that we have addressed thus far: the composition of his opening scenes, the usage of sound within the films, and the pervasive inclusion of pastiche. The composition of the opening scenes reveals Wright's tendency for a structured approach, in each of his films the opening is nearly identical. The film's openings are also exceptionally detailed and intricately linked to the entirety of the film. These openings demonstrate that careful planning is essential to Wright's filmmaking style.

The arrangement of action to fit sound and sound to develop perspective both demonstrate Wright's competency as a director. The musical choices and the inclusion of references to his favorite films demonstrate that Wright is creating a personal work. As Wright himself has been shaped by his favorite artists and films, so too have his own works been shaped in turn. Scenes from famous films inspired reenactment scenes in Wright's movies, and whole films were shaped according to the lyrics within one single song. The references and reenactments convey a certain sense of nostalgia in Wright's works, best exemplified by *The World's End*. His films explore the past by refitting old scenes and musical pieces to bold new scenes. Wright is creating works that tell us what he cares about and, if the viewer finds his films compelling, introduces us to things we should care about too.

At a time when media is becoming more and more homogenized for broad appeal, unique works of art are few and far between. Pauline Kael's criticism of this approach still rings true, the auteur theory has the potential to venerate bad films simply for the sake of uplifting the director behind the movie, but an auteur analysis is no longer a work of archaeology. The modern auteur is a commercial figure by means of necessity; an auteur film can be unique, but it must be marketable. In examining a director as an auteur, we can isolate consistent elements from films and draw conclusions about their style. Wright's style, as we have seen, is both intricately arranged and deeply nostalgic. Studying a director such as Edgar Wright as an auteur allows the critic to examine the unique imprint left behind on a film and to develop a theory of that director's personal style.

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