Juvenalia,
or
How I came to own a Blu-Ray of *Point Break*

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I have an idea that I don't think I'll ever follow through on, but I like thinking about it a lot. It is to extend the montage sequence in Martha Coolidge's *Real Genius* (1985) that uses The Comsat Angel's "I'm Falling" to include the entire 108-minute film. There are a couple of reasons why I'll never follow through on this idea, one of which is that I don't think anybody besides me and a few close friends would find it interesting or funny. The primary reason is that I don't think it's possible. And that impossibility is an acoustic impossibility.

I suppose I should categorize what I mean by impossible. If I were able to source the original master tapes from Tri-Star Pictures or Sony or whoever has them and access the original dialogue and Foley tracks, I might be able to work things out, but I just don't think I have that kind of pull in Hollywood. Even if I did, the idea would still only be a reworking of a juvenile idea I have about a juvenile film, though a film that – like *Top Secret* (1984) or *Weird Science* (1985)– I would gladly watch again with anybody who is interested.

I know how much trouble scoring a recut film would be because I tried a similar project with Kathyrn Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991), another movie I saw at an impressionable moment in my life, and which I have also watched too many times. There are two skydiving scenes in *Point Break* that are structurally integral to the narrative, and they're both ridiculous. They go on way too long, have conti-

nuity issues, and are, also, acoustically impossible: people can't hear each other speak while falling at 200 km/h, yet the characters manage to have complete conversations with each other. I don't think pointing out the absurdities of commercial films is anything heroic, but I am often struck by how easy it is to absorb ideas from cinema, and to be disappointed when the reality is otherwise. I know that people can't have conversations while skydiving because I went skydiving as research for the project and couldn't even hear myself screaming while falling. And I was screaming as loudly as I could.

So: by "impossible" I mean that turning the entirety of *Real Genius* into a montage is not possible to do well with the technology, access, and energy that I have. I could recut the scenes and assemble them with a narrative logic, and score the new cut with a 108-minute loop of "I'm Falling," but that's not what a montage set to music is. A montage set to music has other sounds in it, incidental sounds that ground the viewer-listener (it's a problem that we so easily categorize film audiences as "viewers"). There might not be dialogue, but there are exclamations and other diegetic sounds that remain tucked into the sound design. For instance: in the "I'm Falling" montage (a rare case that uses the entire song), when Mitch, the fifteen-year-old math prodigy and college freshman is in his advanced math class, the professor's voice is absent but the sound of Mitch flipping through his notes is present; when Mitch is in the lab with Chris Knight (played by Val Kilmer in just his second film role [*Top Secret* was his first!]) and Prof. Hathaway, their conversation is muted but the rustling of blueprints and lab-notes is present; when Mitch is studying alone in the dorm room he shares with Chris, their closet door creaks open as Lazlo Hollyfield (a former math prodigy who suffered a complete nervous breakdown) emerges from it, and the sound of the dorm door opening and closing is there as he sneaks out of the room. We hear the door again as Mitch rushes to open it, hoping to discover where Lazlo is heading,

only to be met by his crush, Jordan, who wants to show him the page-turning machine she invented. We don't hear either of their voices, but we hear the whirr of the machine during the demonstration. In the next scene there is the sound of footsteps, which fall in and out of sync with the song's drum machine, and in the following scene there is the sound of Mitch rearranging his books in that same math class, where students are slowly being replaced by recording devices, including several oversized 80s ghetto blasters ("ghetto blasters"? Nice work, 1980s). The following scene includes the sound of car tires screeching and a horn blast, as Mitch and Chris's nerd nemesis, Kent, nearly runs Mitch over in a crosswalk, prompting him to drop the stack of books he had been precariously engrossed in. We don't hear Kent's laughter, despite the camera's close-up on his braced mouth smiling and shouting "C'mon!" When Mitch and Chris are in the lab, testing the laser they have committed to magnifying to five megawatts so that Chris can graduate, not yet knowing that they are building a satellite-based weapon for a shadow cabinet of the US military, we hear the buzz of the laser and the small fire it causes, and we clearly hear Mitch and Chris high-five each other, but no vocal eruptions. Cut to: Mitch reading while walking across campus, where we hear the sound of him dropping his books and then the sound of him hurriedly gathering them again after Lazlo, who emerges from behind the steps lit like Jesus, picks up one of the books and hands it to him. We hear the footsteps of students as Mitch rushes to tell Chris about an idea he has, only for Chris to silently yawn his response while simultaneously rolling quarters down the knuckles of each hand, a skill I can only imagine Kilmer convinced director Martha Coolidge to let him show off. In the penultimate scene, Mitch is in the lab by himself, and we hear a more powerful laser, one that burns through the safety wall, to Mitch's pleasure. And finally, as the rigid, almost mathematical post-punk-pop song comes to an end, we see Mitch walk into a classroom comprised entirely of recording devices in the places where students should be sitting, and a reel-to-reel at the front of the class.

[Fig. 11] Jordan shows Mitch her page-turning machine in *Real Genius* (dir: Martha Coolidge, 1985).

As the song fades out, the recorded voice of the professor rises in the mix, telling us that "...plus y equals zero." Behind the reel-to-reel, written on the blackboard, we can read, "Math on tape is hard to follow, so: Please Listen Carefully."

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Listening carefully is something I've never been very good at. In songs, I am drawn to lyrics over melody or beats. I never learned to play an instrument, despite buying a guitar and amp in my teens, believing – with the audacity of a suburban white kid – that I could teach myself (pre-internet). As a result, I have a guitar and an amp and some sounds that I can make but not with others. Whenever I have attempted to play music with people, they always have to follow me, because when they say something like, "Let's try this in D," I just stare at them with a blank shame. And then, when we do start playing, I have trouble distinguishing the sounds I'm making from the sounds they're making.

My fingers follow the other's rhythm, and things end up falling apart. I blame my parents, and their parents. I can't think of a single person in my extended family that knows or cares about music in any way that would require knowledge beyond being a fan of a song.

So, when I had the idea to recut the skydiving scenes from *Point Break*, it was literally a stupid idea: it was only made possible by my complete lack of understanding of how sound functions in film. I watched the scene, noticed there was a pretty manipulative musical soundtrack, and figured all it would take is a reorganization of that musical composition, something I could ask a friend to help me do. But when I started cutting the scenes and rearranging them, the other sounds in the scene announced themselves as a problem immediately. If I had known in advance how complex it would be to carry out the idea, which operates right on the border between joke and artwork, I don't imagine I would have pursued it.

My initial idea was to reuse shots within the skydiving scenes to extend the scenes, to point out the film's absurd masculinities, to stretch the already over-the-top suspense, and to illustrate how short our visual memories are, how easily we can be duped by cinema. It wasn't until I re-assembled some of the shots that I realized that it wasn't just the soundtrack that I would have to adjust, but the entire sound design. Assuming that dialogue, Foley sound, and soundtrack were in separate channels, I didn't think it would be too much of a challenge. But a few conversations with people who know about film sound later, I realized that there was no way to separate the dialogue from the Foley, and to separate both from the soundtrack. I even bought a Blu-Ray version of the film on the off-chance that the channels for surround sound would have the sound components separated. The sound wasn't separated, just a little clearer than my downloaded versions, and now I own a Blu-Ray of *Point Break*. At this point in the project I had done too much to abandon it. I had separated all the scenes and logged

them, and, most significantly, I had told a bunch of people what I was doing. The only way to make the piece work would be to re-record all the dialogue and to source and edit Foley sounds of rushing wind, parachute rustling, parachute deployment, and bodies landing in water and on land. I recorded all the dialogue by doing poor impressions of the actors: not only Patrick Swayze and Keanu Reeves, but the rest of the Dead Presidents bank robbers, too. I discovered something else through that process: my range as a voice actor is not great. And yet some people are still surprised to discover that the dialogue is not the original. They can hear it when I point it out, though, which makes me think that bad listening skills are more common than I had thought.

[Fig. 12] A still from "The Capacity for Joy Part One (First Jump)" by Jamie Hilder, or a still from *Point Break* (dir: Kathryn Bigelow, 1991).

So: re-cutting *Real Genius* into a single montage would not be impossible, but it would be way too much work for what it would end up being. It's probably less difficult than I'm making it out to be, simply because I could discard all the film's dialogue and just include some diegetic sound as punctuation. But just as I started

hearing things in the "I'm Falling" montage that I didn't catch the first several times I watched it, I imagine I would discover sounds in every scene that would require close attention. The sounds of footsteps or car horns are easy to find and fool ears with. The sounds of lasers and other lab equipment would be more difficult. And I'd have to re-record the screams of a student breaking under the pressure of exam studying that is included in the film's other montage sequence, set to Chaz Jankel's "Number One." At the end of all that, after re-cutting and arranging the hundreds of shots to construct a kind of music-video-movie, I would still only have an extended movie montage of a minor 1980s sci-fi teen comedy, and one that would have too close a relationship to a bland pop song by The Comsat Angels, a relatively minor post-punk band from Sheffield. It doesn't really hold up against the projects of Aleesa Cohene, or Christian Marclay, or even the *Point Break* piece, which all repurpose found footage to more coherent ends.

But the value of the *Real Genius* piece – the part that makes me like thinking about it so much – is not in its making, but in how the challenge of making it forces me to think about the way sound operates in film, and to recognize how bad I have been at listening.[1] I still consider film a visual medium, despite how obvious it is that sound plays just as much a role in my emotional response to it. That understanding was first challenged by being on film sets, and watching actors recite lines that would come across as stiff and empty if it weren't for a dramatic musical score, and comparing that experience to that of attending theatre performances where actors are forced to sonically command the space of the

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[1] I also have an idea to recut the final chase scene in *Annie* (1982), where Tim Curry and Carol Burnett's characters chase Annie up a raised train drawbridge, only for her to escape when Daddy Warbucks arrives in a helicopter, and his man-servant, Punjab (!) (played by Trinidadian actor and dancer Geoffrey Holder), unwraps his turban and offers it to Annie as a rope. This idea will likely also go unmade, since its primary interest for me is that that scene was the source of a recurring nightmare of mine from my early childhood until my mid-twenties.

theatre with only their voices. I know that there's a funeral scene at the end of Robert Townes' *Without Limits* (1998), film about the 1970s American mid-distance runner Steve Prefontaine, that makes me cry every time I watch it, and that those tears are not triggered by the images on screen (it's a pretty bare scene of just a podium in the middle of a small track-and-field stadium) but by the sound design. Donald Sutherland's voice cracks as he gives the eulogy, which is often enough for me, but it's the birdsong that sits low in the mix, paradoxically intensifying the silence of the assembled funeral crowd, that clinches it. When I went back to listen-look at it more closely (and to cry a bit) I noticed that there's even the sound of an analogue clock ticking down when a digital clock is shown, which I'm sure must have instigated a conversation among the sound de-signers about how acoustically dumb audiences can be. A friend of mine who used to work in post-production sound likes to tell the story of how one of the head engineers dealt with a particularly uptight director. The director was not quite satisfied with the mix and asked the engineer to adjust the bass. The engineer reached onto the mixing board and visibly turned a knob on a channel that wasn't included in the mix and the director said "Yeah, that's much better, let's go with that." I always laugh at that story, particularly my friend's impression of the engineer slyly rolling his eyes to the other sound mixers, but if there's one person in that scenario I can identify with, it's the director who can't listen.