# *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* as Multimedia: A Critique of Nicholas Cook's Analysis*

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Nicholas Cook's *Analysing Musical Multimedia* undertakes the lofty task of creating "a generalized theoretical framework for the analysis of multimedia" (v), one that moves from music to other media (vi). The first half of the book sets out this theoretical framework followed, in the second half, by three analytical case studies: Madonna's "Material Girl," the *Rite of Spring* sequence from *Fantasia*, and Godard's sequence in *Aria* based on Lully's *Armide*.

Cook states that his case studies "do not illustrate the analytical approach in any literal way, but rather attempt to embed its results within the context of broader critical readings" (ix-x). One can therefore read his case studies as a presentation of theory, analysis, and criticism. The present essay focuses on Cook's treatment—theoretic, analytic, and critical—of *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* sequence.

The sequence exemplifies what Cook calls "music film": "a genre which begins with music, but in which the relationships between sound and image are not fixed and immutable but variable and contextual, and in which dominance is only one of a range of possibilities" (214). Cook further proposes viewing the *Rite of Spring* sequence "as the construction of a fundamentally new experience, one whose limits are set not by Stravinsky nor even by Disney..., but by anybody who watches—and listens to—'Fantasia'" (214).

This proposition, as fleshed out by Cook in the chapter, implies among other things that (a) *Fantasia*'s *Rite* is not defined by the music from which it originated, (b) the combination of visuals and music in *Fantasia*'s *Rite* creates a new entity, and (c) this new entity is worthy of the analytical attention that Cook devotes to it.

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* Nicholas Cook, "Disney's Dream: The *Rite of Spring* Sequence from 'Fantasia'," Chapter 5 in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 reprint of 1998 edition): 174-214.

I will qualify all three claims and, along the way, question certain of Cook's analytical observations and methodologies.

The claim that the *Rite of Spring* sequence provides a "fundamentally new experience" derives from a central thesis of Cook's book. Simply put, meaning *emerges* from the combination of disparate media (115). Attributes are transferred from one medium to another; the resulting combination is qualitatively different from its constituents (84).[1]

In the case of *Fantasia*'s *Rite*, Cook counters the assumption that the music is primary, and the visuals merely "the projection through ancillary media of an originary meaning" (214). Ironically, his argument rests in part on similarities between *Fantasia* and the original ballet production of *The Rite of Spring*. Pointing to the close collaboration between Nikolai Roerich, Stravinsky, and Vaslav Nijinsky during the ballet's genesis, and to the tight interlacing of ethnography, music, and dance during Stravinsky's compositional process, Cook argues for the intrinsic multimedia nature of Rite, and, by implication, for the validity of its new multimedia incarnation in *Fantasia* (198ff.).[2] He defends "Disney's realization of the music as the story of life" as "an alternative metaphor to that of the pagan celebration of spring" (206), and compares Disney's visuals to Stravinsky's choreographic annotations.[3] I find Cook's placement of *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* in the context of the original Stravinsky-Nijinsky choreography—particularly his comparison of *Rite*'s rhythmic structure, Stravinsky's choreographic annotations, and *Fantasia*'s visualization of the score on several levels—fascinating, and one of the strongest contributions of his analysis.

Yet Cook's contention that *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* sequence constitutes a new entity fails to persuade. Indeed, negative music-critical reaction to the film focused on the lopsidedness of its

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[1] Lawrence Zbikowski's review-essay in this volume describes the theory of "conceptual blending," which explores and formalizes this notion of emergent concepts.

[2] Others have presented evidence for the intertwining of ethnography, music, and dance in the creation of *Rite*. See, for example, Taruskin 1984, also Taruskin 1995 and Pasler 1986.

[3] As transcribed in Stravinsky 1969.

music and animation, on the failure of its two media to cohere. According to critic Olin Downes, "Stravinsky's 'Sacre' is a piece of music almost as difficult as that of Bach to visualize in any way that corresponds to the inherent quality of the score;" this in contrast to Fokine's choreography of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Schéhérazade*, which "magnificently companioned the music. The point here is that while the music was not slavishly followed, it was represented essentially by a companion creation of a parallel character which completed and did not belie the nature of the score."[4]

The notion of image and sound as a united whole has a long history in film theory. Rudolf Arnheim, for example, exploring questions of multimedia in 1938, emphasized both difference at a surface and unity on a deeper level: "...elements conform to each other in such a way as to create the unity of the whole, but their separateness remains evident." "...a combination of media that has no unity will appear intolerable."[5] A history of this "need for unity, totality, continuity, fusion of some form among disparate elements" is traced by Scott Paulin, who states that "in addition to the need to create the impression of internal unity within both the imagetrack and the soundtrack separately, the two tracks must also cohere so as to invite perception as a unified whole. Sound and image must bear some relation of appropriateness or 'realness' to each other...."[6]

*Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* sequence presents a wide chasm between music and image. Disney's animation and Stravinsky's score (or Stokowski's soundtrack) simply do not match well in terms of artistic quality and depth. Their juxtaposition creates, not a "fundamentally new experience," as Cook would have it, but an uneasy amalgamation of cartoon and sound. For those acquainted with Stravinsky's score, at least, the music looms large over the supposedly new creation that is *Fantasia*.

A slight aside is in order here about the music in *Fantasia*'s *Rite*. The soundtrack of *Fantasia*'s *Rite* departs from Stravinsky's intentions in several obvious respects. As Cook states, Disney's team cuts sections of the score, reorders it, and reorchestrates it in

[4] Downes 1940.

[5] Arnheim 1957: 207, 201.

[6] Paulin 2000: 63-64.

parts.[7] Conductor Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra depart significantly from Stravinsky's tempo indications.

I now turn to some details of Cook's analysis. My discussion focuses on Cook's application of three theoretical concepts: the association of accentuation with coincidence of visual and aural "cuts," Pieter van den Toorn's Type I and II rhythmic structures, and Andrew Imbrie's "conservative" and "radical" hearings of metric structure.

(1) Accentuation and coincidence of visual and aural cuts

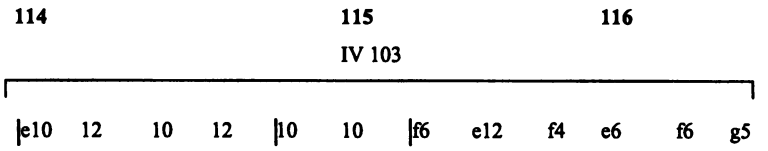
Cook's Figure 5.2 diagrams the *Rite of Spring* sequence from 104 to 117, showing blocks of musical material, larger groups of these blocks, and places where visual cuts align with beginnings of musical blocks. "...[T]here is a contrast between the groups that are characterized by cuts at the beginnings of blocks (I and III) and those that are not (II and IV); these coincidences establish what might be termed audio-visual downbeats. The result is that groups I and III create the effect of being accented as compared with groups II and IV, giving rise to a kind of large-scale downbeat-afterbeat pattern; group II constitutes a kind of prolonged afterbeat following on the initial group I, while the more extended group IV follows on from the composite downbeat formed by the second group I and group III" (184).

This analysis misses several important features. Cook's group IV segments into two parts, which I will call IVa (114) and IVb (115 to end of 116); the beginning of group IVb is clearly articulated by a change in orchestration at 115. Cook ignores this change, implicitly grouping all of 114 to the first measure of 115

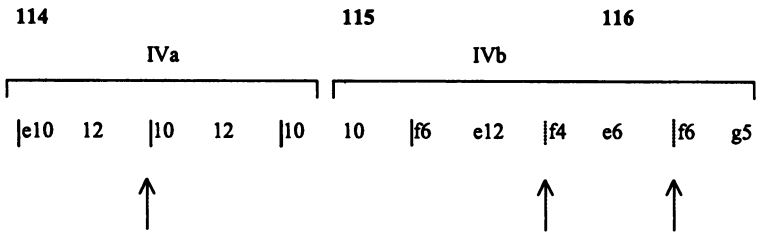
[7] Cook suggests a rationale for Disney's reordering of the score (176-177); it is interesting to note that the reordering also parallels the palindromic plan of the animation. Disney orders parts of Stravinsky's score as follows: Introduction to Part I—first part of Part I ("Augurs of Spring," "Ritual of Abduction")—most of Part II (all but the "Sacrificial Dance")—last part of Part I ("Kiss and Dancing Out of the Earth")—Introduction to Part I, corresponding roughly to the visual plan space—earth—life—earth—space. (Cf. Cook Figure 5.5.) Both plans are palindromic.

together, as "the six successive appearances of block 'e' from 114, ...enlivened by means of a relatively autonomous visual structure" (184). The visual structure is actually not particularly autonomous; it aligns with Stravinsky's alternating 5/4 – 6/4 bars (Cook's alternating e10-12). As shown in my version (Example 1b) of the end of Cook's Figure 5.2 (Example 1a), a visual cut that Cook misses at 114+2 completes a clear pattern of visual cutting at the beginning of every 5/4 measure (Cook's e10's).

*Example 1a. Cook's Fig. 5.2 "Analytical Overview of the Fight Sequence" (last line) (183).*




*Example 1b. Revision of Cook's Fig. 5.2 (last line).*




Furthermore, a closer look at group IVb shows that important visual changes occur at the beginning of every f block. At 115+1, as Cook notes, a visual cut marks the beginning of f6; but at 115+3 and 116+1, unmentioned by Cook, significant visual changes (Stegosaurus tail hits Tyrannosaurus, and Tyrannosaurus bites Stegosaurus and holds, notated in Example 1b with dotted vertical lines) coincide with the beginnings of blocks f4 and f6 respectively.

The latter two 'changes of scene,' while not cuts *per se*, accomplish functions analogous to cuts. By marking the beginning of each f block, they create the effect of an alternation of upbeats (e blocks) and downbeats (f blocks).

Thus, even accepting Cook's assertion that coincidence of visual and aural cuts results in "accented" groups,[8] a more consistent reading based on this criterion would be: I (accented) – II (unaccented) – I and III (accented) – IVa (accented) – IVb (somewhat accented?). Cook, however, wishes to divide the passage into two parallel sections I-II and I/III-IV; interpreting IV as unaccented supports the parallelism of his reading. Other features contribute to a sense of group IVa as unstressed—it has a lower dynamic level and lighter orchestration than preceding material—but any unstressed quality is not due to lack of coincidence between visual and aural cuts.

(2) Pieter van den Toorn's Type I and II rhythmic structures

In his monograph on the *Rite of Spring*, Pieter van den Toorn proposes two prototypical types of rhythmic structure. Type I consists of irregular or shifting meter, with alternations of contrasting material delimited by bar lines; all concurrent instrumental parts synchronize metrically. Type II displays foreground metric regularity (usually a steady meter), but superimposes two or more repeating motives whose periodicities differ from one another.[9]

Cook terms the opening of "Augurs of Spring" from 13 to 22 Type I, arguing that, rather than Stravinsky's notation in 2/4 meter with cross-metric accents, the passage could well be notated in changing meters (presumably 9/8 - 2/8 - 6/8 - 3/8 - ... ) (187-188). Several objections can be raised to this interpretation.

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[8] I would prefer a different term, since accentuation more precisely occurs at points in time, not over extended passages. Imbrie 1973: 52-54; Benjamin 1984: 379; and Lester 1986: 16 attribute accent to time points, rather than time-spans. Schachter 1987: 6; Hasty 1997: 16-17, 103-104; and Berry 1985: 30 attribute accent to events, but describe it as focused on a particular point within an accented event. Imbrie 1973: 54 suggests the term "weighting" for cases in which "an important downbeat accent ... impart[s] a generalized sense of greater heaviness to an entire rhythmic unit." See Leong 2000: 39 for further discussion of this issue.

[9] Van den Toorn 1987: 97-114; see especially 99-100.

Elsewhere, Stravinsky clearly emphasizes the significance of his notated meters, and the difference between his bar lines and accent markings;[10] renotating these cross-accents as changing meters alters their sensibility drastically. Furthermore, preceding, interspersed, and overlying material (12+8 to 12+9, 14 to 14+3, and 15+1 to 15+5 respectively) unambiguously articulates 2/4.[11] And subsequent material, at 16, displays characteristics of Type II structure: 2/4 in English horn and viola plays against an offset 2/4 in oboe and 3/8 in the lower strings. When a metric structure similar to that at 16 appears at 28, Cook calls it a "textbook example" of Type II (189). Thus Cook's labeling of the passage from 13-21 as Type I is questionable at best.

(3) Andrew Imbrie's "conservative" versus "radical" hearings

Cook's appropriation of Andrew Imbrie's terms "conservative" and "radical" suffers throughout from subtle misinterpretations of their meaning. According to Imbrie, a conservative listener maintains the established meter for as long as possible in the face of conflicting evidence; a radical listener "converts" quickly when presented with evidence of changing meter.[12] According to Imbrie via van den Toorn via Cook, "'radical' readings [are] based purely on surface rhythms," while "'conservative' readings [emphasize] underlying metrical continuity" (187). The main difference between radical and conservative listeners, however, lies not in their compliance with surface rhythm versus metrical structure *per se*, but in the *speed* with which they adapt to the changing metric implications of surface rhythms.

Two examples follow to illustrate the misunderstanding. The first continues our discussion of the passage from 13 to 22.

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[10] In Stravinsky and Craft 1959: 21, Craft asks, "Can the same effect be achieved by means of accents as by varying the meters? What are bar lines?", to which Stravinsky replies, "To the first question my answer is, up to a point, yes, but that point is the degree of real regularity in the music. The bar line is much, much more than a mere accent, and I don't believe that it can be simulated by an accent, at least not in my music."

[11] Van dan Toorn 1987: 69-70 describes 13 in terms of the continuation of the previously established 2/4 meter, its disorientation, and its reestablishment at 14.

[12] Imbrie 1973; see especially 65. The concept has been adopted by van den Toorn (1987: 67 ff.); and Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1996: 22-25); among others.

Beginning at 18, Stravinsky reinterprets the material beginning at 13: the eight measures of 18 repeat those of 13, but unlike the material at 13, which is followed by straightforward 2/4 meter at 14, that at 18 leads to 2/4 meter shifted by one eighth note at 19. Beginning at 19, the accented melodic entrances on the second eighth note of the measure, combined with the accompaniment accents and dynamic changes at the same metric position, make it extremely difficult for the listener to maintain the previously-established notated 2/4 meter. Even the most "conservative" of listeners would be hard put to avoid converting to the shifted 2/4 meter articulated by so many musical cues.

Disney's visual cuts make the same shift. From 13 to the end of 18, the primary visual cuts, as Cook notes, coincide with the downbeat of each new block. (I prefer to say that the cuts align with the beginnings of musical blocks, which happen to occur on downbeats.) At 19, the musical blocks shift, at least aurally, to begin on the second eighth of the measure. Here Disney follows the aural cues, aligning visual cuts with the aural cuts on the second eighth of the measure.

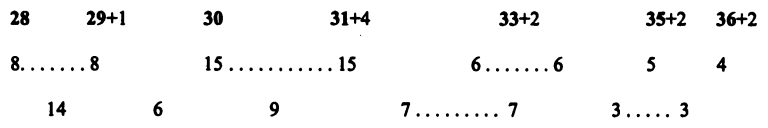
Cook calls the animation of this passage "predominantly 'radical'" (188), because of its alignment with surface patterning. This description is incorrect, because a radical reading implies shifting sooner rather than later, shifting on the basis of lesser rather than greater evidence. Disney's visual cuts shift to the second eighth note only when the musical evidence makes it difficult to avoid shifting; they follow the preponderance of musical cues, rather than anticipating them.

Cook's analysis of the latter part of "Augurs of Spring," from 28 to its end, displays a similar misunderstanding of Imbrie's terms. Essentially, Cook argues that visual cutting rhythms serve first to reinforce four-bar periodicity, and then to play against it. His Figure 5.4 shows cutting rhythms in the passage, and, as far as I can tell, is inaccurate. Examples 2a and 2b show Cook's Figure 5.4 and my revision of it.

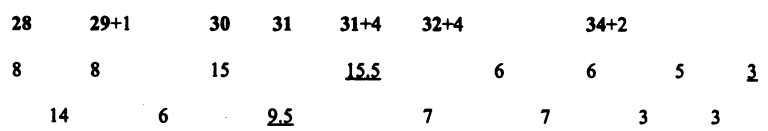
The inaccuracies do not alter Cook's argument much, except that the "cut on the hyperdownbeat at 31+4" actually falls an eighth after the hyperdownbeat, coinciding with the syncopated horn entrance, and there is an additional coincidence of visual cut and hypermetric downbeat, at 32+4. At 31+4 the cuts do start out

supporting the hypermeter (albeit one eighth late at the beginning), and then begin cutting against the music's four-measure units. But one cannot, as Cook does, describe this process as a conservative hearing migrating to a radical one. A radical hearing implies a shift in listening stance commensurate with changes in musical surface, from an established meter to a new meter, or from an established meter to changing motivic metric identities. After 32+4 the cuts do not follow musical metric, grouping, or motivic structure; they create their own largely independent rhythm. They cannot be interpreted as a visualization of a radical hearing of the music.

*Example 2a. Cook's Fig. 5.4 "Cutting Rhythms in 'The Augurs of Spring'" (190).*




*Example 2b. Revision of Cook's Fig. 5.4.*




In his description of methodology for the analysis of multimedia (133-146), Cook suggests experiencing each medium on its own, and comparing this effect to the medium's effect in the totality, or in pairs of media; when interpreting media pairs, he proposes inverting relations (reading from one to the other), reading for gaps, and using "distributional analysis." In this list of methodologies, Cook, though he mentions music-specific analytical methods such as Schenkerian analysis, makes no mention of visual-specific tools. This may be one result of his orientation from "music-to-other-media," his attempt to "extend the boundaries of

music theory to encompass...words and moving images..." (vi). Nevertheless, a music theorist would be rightly dubious of a film theorist making analytical claims about precise alignments of musical metrical structure and visual cuts without recourse to the musical score; and Cook, though he makes frequent reference to the score of *Rite*, makes no reference to frame-by-frame analysis or to other visual tools beyond simple viewing.

Furthermore, in his discussion of visual rhythmic structure, Cook relies heavily upon cutting rhythms. He makes little mention of rhythms articulated by analogous changes in visual content.[13] His discussion of the Tyrannosaurus/Stegosaurus fight scene, for example, as mentioned earlier, overlooks the rhythmic articulation created by visual changes (not cuts) in group IVb.

The *Rite of Spring* sequence features in Cook's *Analysing Musical Multimedia* as an illustration of his theory of multimedia. The connections between the theory and Cook's analysis are rather broadly drawn; some readers might wish to see more rigorous connections between Cook's explication of *conformance*, *complementation*, and *contest*, and his analytical chapter on *Fantasia*.[14]

The *Rite of Spring* sequence does illustrate *contest*, on a deeper level than that envisioned by Cook. The two media involved—Disney's animation and Stokowski's performance of *Rite*

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[13] I am speaking of changes akin to cuts, without actual filmic cutting. Cook does discuss alignments of surface musical activity with visual gestures such as shooting stars, volcanic puffs of flame, and Tyrannosaurus snaps, as well as with kinesthetic motions such as swooping pterodactyls and "jogging dinosaurs" (182). Furthermore, I am referring primarily to intermediate levels of rhythmic structure; Cook does explore large-scale form created by the chronological narrative and its symmetrical plan space-earth-life-earth-space, by color associations, and by camera or diegetic motion (193-196).

[14] See Cook (98-106) for his presentation of these terms. In a nutshell, *conformance* refers to media consistent with one another, without "differential elaboration;" *complementation* entails media similar to one another, yet differing in significant ways; *contest* "implies an element of collision or confrontation between the opposed terms" (102).

*of Spring*—juxtapose "popular" art with "elite" art. The two contradictory views come to the fore in statements by Disney and Stravinsky respectively:

> Stravinsky saw his *Rite of Spring* and said that that was what he had in mind all the time. None of that matters, I guess. This isn't a picture just for music lovers. People have to like it. They have to be entertained. We're selling entertainment and that's the thing I'm hoping *Fantasia* does—entertain.[15]

> When Walt Disney used *Le Sacre du printemps* for *Fantasia*, he told me: "Think of the numbers of people who will now be able to hear your music." Well, the numbers of people who consume music...is of no interest to me. The mass adds nothing to art. It cannot raise the level, and the artist who aims consciously at mass appeal can do so only by lowering his own level. The soul of each individual who listens to music is important to me, not the mass feeling of a group. Music cannot be helped by means of an increase of the quantity of listeners, be this increase affected by the film or any other medium. It can be helped only through an increase in the quality of listening, the quality of the individual soul.[16]

What is at issue, as emerges from Stravinsky's statement, is not so much "popular" versus "elite," as it is "the level" and "quality" of the artistic vision, its execution, and its reception.

Cook bases his models of multimedia on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's model of metaphor.[17] The defining feature is "a distinctive combination of similarity and difference" (98). Cook assumes a basic level of similarity which, if one is to follow his basis in metaphor theory, means that the constituent expressions must be close enough to "fit together," to form a metaphor. For some readers, the metaphoric link, so to speak, between Disney's animation and Stravinsky's score or Stokowski's performance may be quite tenuous.

In his development of the concept of *contest*, Cook writes that "each medium strives to deconstruct the other, and so create space for itself. Any IMM [instance of multimedia][18] in which...one or more of the constituent media has its own closure and autonomy is likely to be characterized by contest; IMMs that involve the

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[15] Walt Disney, quoted in Culhane 1983: 29.

[16] Stravinsky 1946: 35-36.

[17] Lakoff and Johnson 1980.

[18] Cook abbreviates his term "instance of multimedia" as IMM (100).

addition of a new medium to an existing production are a particularly rich source of examples" (103).

This description would seem to be *apropos* of *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* sequence. But Cook argues that the sequence's overall relationship of visuals and sound is one of *conformance.* He describes the close synchronization of image and music on the film's surface, the 'contrapuntal' relationships of cutting rhythms and hypermetrical patterns at intermediate levels, and the creation of "a single filmic gesture...which reaches from the opening space sequence right up to the dawn of life" (196) on a large scale. "The result of all this is that music and visualization stack up into a single hierarchy whose highest level is visual. And in this way, what might be called the background model of the *Rite* sequence from 'Fantasia' is an unambiguous conformance" (208).

Elsewhere Cook shows how conformant relations at more surface levels can contribute to conflicting relations at a deeper level (181-182). Although *Fantasia*'s *Rite of Spring* sequence can be seen as conformant on its surface and even deeper levels, the combination of Disney's particular choice of animation with Stokowski's performance is ultimately conflicted, in terms of aesthetic caliber.

Stravinsky describes the problem of surface conformance versus deeper compatibility as follows:

> The danger in the visualization of music on the screen—and a very real danger it is—is that the film has always tried to "describe" the music. That is absurd. When Balanchine did a choreography to my "Danses Concertantes" (originally written as a piece of concert music) he approached the problem architecturally and not descriptively. And his success was extraordinary for one great reason: he went to the roots of the musical form, of the *jeu musical,* and recreated it in forms of movements. Only if the films should ever adopt an attitude of this kind is it possible that a satisfying and interesting art form would result.[19]

And later in the same interview:

> ...my ideal is the chemical *reaction,* where a new entity, a third body, results from uniting two different but equally important elements, music and drama; it is not the chemical *mixture* where...nothing either new or creative [results]."[20]

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[19] Stravinsky 1946: 35.

[20] *Ibid.*

The *Rite of Spring* sequence in *Fantasia* forms not a "chemical reaction," but a "chemical mixture." For although, as Cook argues, *Fantasia* may be a "fundamentally new experience" that constructs new meaning through the combination of its constituent parts, it remains a combination and not a coherent whole; it remains aesthetically unsatisfying. And so, Cook's analysis, in its choice of IMM for analysis, must also be unsatisfying, in analyzing an IMM that conforms on many levels yet fails to cohere on the deepest, aesthetic level.[21]

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[21] Cook explains in his Preface (x) that he chose case studies largely on the basis of general availability. Another fairly obtainable "music film," and one that, I think, would provide a much more satisfying "chemical reaction" for analysis, is Chuck Jones' *What's Opera, Doc?* Like *Fantasia*'s *Rite*, this short takes a "classical" and originally multimedia work, Wagner's *Ring*, as a point of departure. Unlike *Fantasia*, it makes no claim to fidelity to the original, but freely snips, arranges, and adds sound effects, voices, and lyrics. However, the quality of the animation and the creative vision of the director in this example, unlike in *Fantasia*'s *Rite*, result in a truly new entity of image and sound.

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