

“Words, Songs and Cars: Title songs and movie credit sequences.”

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The driving credit sequence

By the mid--1950s, one could point to a recurrent *topos* in the cinemas of several nations. This *topos* was that of the credit sequence in which one or more human beings travel in a vehicle through a landscape, while a self-contained piece of music is heard. For want of a better term, I will call these “driving credit sequences.” These sequences were part of a broader transformation in the presentation of credits, as designers explored alternatives to the static title cards that had been common in most films of the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1960s, credit sequences had become longer, and this extended length served as a pretext for the use of title songs and for elaborate exercises in mobile visuality. The driving credit sequence would become one of the most fully realized results of this development.

Key bodies of films in which the driving credit sequence is prominent include American thrillers of the 1950s, such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955; dir. Robert Aldrich), stylish international romantic comedies of the 1960s, like *Two for the Road* (1967; dir. Stanley Donen), and 1970s Italian crime-horror films such as *Seven Blood-Stained Orchids/ Sette orchidee macchiate di rosso* (1972; dir. Umberto Lenzi) and *The Kidnap Syndicate/ La città sconvolta: caccia spietata ai rapitori* (1975; dir. Fernando Di Leo). The decline of the driving credit sequence since the 1970s is largely the effect of most credits being moved to the end of films, but the *topos* has

survived in the title sequences of television programs, most notably *The Sopranos* (Home Box Office, 1999-2007).

We may trace the beginnings of the driving credit sequence to a few dozen films of the 1940s and early 1950s in which human movement begins under a film's credits¹. One of the earliest examples is the 1942 Italian film *Ossessione* (dir. Luchino Visconti), whose credits unfold as we look through the windshield of a truck rolling along an Italian highway. Later examples of credits sequences featuring vehicular movement include Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* (1945), in which a bus approaches a roadside diner, and the 1953 film *Blueprint for Murder* (dir. Andrew L. Stone), whose credits are seen over the image of police cars racing to a crime scene. The impulse in these credit sequences, typical of the period, is to begin a story as quickly as possible, to enter the flow of narrative action sooner than was typical in the age of title cards and orchestral fanfares. This decade following World War II is one of experimentation with the relationship of music to film credits, as well: some credit sequences now lack theme music, so as to jump more quickly into the midst of narrative action. Others, like the aforementioned *Blueprint for Murder*, forsake the ceremonial opening music of earlier credit sequences and move in their opening seconds to include the genre-specifying background music of the 1950s thriller.

After describing three examples of the driving credit sequence, I will suggest discuss several issues which such sequences raise for the analysis of film and music. The first concerns the capacity of such sequences to produce a distinctive temporality, one shaped by the prescribed sequence of credits, the duration of a musical piece and a specific trajectory of human movement. The second issue is that of the functionality or non-functionality of the film credit sequence, particularly in the context of widespread changes in the design and content of credit

sequences from the mid-1950s onwards. The third issue raised by such sequences is their participation in the autonomization of the musical sequence within cinema more generally. This is a question that has assumed particular pertinence following the rise of the music video and of what have been called “jukebox” soundtracks in film. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which the overlaying of words, music and human movement typical of the driving credit sequence works to produce a distinctive sense of psychological interiority for the human figures (who are usually male) who are at their centre.

This essay follows two imperatives developed within literary theory of the last quarter century. One of these is Gerard Genette’s call for the study of “paratexts,” those features of textual form (like prefaces, covers and title pages in the case of literature) whose relationship to the main body of a text has always been the source of uncertainty and unease. The film credit sequence fulfils most definitions of the paratext. As with the literary paratext, shifts in the status and character of credits within important historical transformations of film style testify to the sense of variable purpose which has often surrounded themⁱⁱ. The second imperative guiding this essay follows Franco Moretti’s invitation to scholars to engage in the “distant reading” of cultural artefacts, to study many such artefacts from “afar” rather than remaining within the close analysis of any single one. To undertake a “distant reading” is to sacrifice the detail of individual examples in favour of the broader patterns that mark or differentiate a corpus (Moretti, 2005: 1). Credit sequences, whose conventions and variations take shape over dozens of examples in any given historical period, invite a reading that follows stasis and change across a broad corpus rather than confining itself to the complexities of any single example.

First examples: *Solo*, *The Italian Job*, *Come Fly With Me*

Jean-Paul Mocky's 1971 film *Solo* begins with a violent murder, as intruders massacre a group of people participating in a sexual orgy at the home of high-level French politicians. As this sequence concludes, with the image of dead, inert human bodies, we grasp its function as a prologue of sorts, and we expect the sort of pause that will allow the film to gather up, more slowly, its main characters, contexts and narrative lines. This gathering up begins with the credit sequence, in which police cars and ambulances move along a road seemingly on the edge of a town or city. The narrative urgency of this movement (of experts rushing to a crime scene) is undermined by the smooth passage of the automobiles, the picturesque qualities of the degraded, exurban landscape through which the vehicles move, and the presence of credits. In a stylistic conceit, the credits move in various directions: across the screen, from right to left, or into the image, from front to back, replicating or reversing the sense of movement provided by the vehicles themselves. Most strikingly, this scene takes place against a musical backdrop (a self-contained piece composed by George Moustaki) consisting of wordless vocals and plaintive instrumental music. The sounds of sirens weave in and out of this musical piece, while the visuals cut between master shots of the procession of vehicles and a frontal shot of two policemen sitting together in one of them.

While the credits to *Solo* follow a dramatic opening sequence retrospectively understood as the film's prologue, the credits to *The Italian Job* (1969; dir. Peter Collinson) begin more conventionally as the studio logo fades. In what is possibly a metonymic gesture, we descend from the mountain of the Paramount logo to the tops of Alpine peaks, then to a winding mountain road along which a solitary man drives a luxurious sports car. The sound of Matt Munro singing "On Days Like This" slowly overcomes the sound of driving, though never completely, and the credits move across the screen from right to left. The driver of the car,

middle-aged and seemingly self-absorbed, communicates nothing of his identity or his intentions. As the director credit appears and the song concludes, the car drives into a tunnel. We hear an explosion and see a flash of light, and neither the man nor the automobile appear again in the film. The screen goes black and the film begins the slower labor of setting in place its narrative program. Arguably, the sequence for *The Italian Job* is a mannerist exercise, in its lingering on what are meant to be the secondary properties of a film text, its credits. It is mannerist, as well, in the serpentine forms which it inscribes through the patterns of driving, and through a song which itself seems to wind around in circular fashion. It is as if the distance travelled by the man in the car gives the song the time it needs to unfold, just as the length of the song justifies the gratuitous exercise of showing him driving.

Our third example, the 1963 film *Come Fly With Me* (dir. Henry Levin) is a romantic-sex comedy, typical of its period and of a body of films in which the self-contained credit sequence with theme song was commonⁱⁱⁱ. Curiously, for a film about the romance of air travel, the credit sequence for *Come Fly With Me* is shot through the window of an ordinary bus travelling to “New York International Airport” (now John F. Kennedy International Airport.) Each credit opens up across the width of the Panavision screen, while we hear Frankie Avalon sing the film’s title song, composed by James Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn and better known from the recording by Frank Sinatra. This sequence forces attention to the words by roughly synchronizing their appearance to shifts in musical tempo: the words stretch across the screen as musical motifs unfold. The widescreen format embraces the road signs and architectural forms that are themselves part of the cosmopolitan 1960s modernity celebrated throughout the film. Following the bus’s entry into the airport complex, the credits and song conclude with its arrival at the departure terminal. *Come Fly With Me* joins a small body of films in which the drive

between city and airport, normally among the most banal of experiences, opens up a temporal gap in which a film may present its credits^{iv}.

Temporalities of the credit sequence

Much has been written about the profound historical relationship between cinema and technologies of human movement. The early cinema's embrace of train travel as the basis of narrative materials and aesthetic effects has received extensive examination in the work of Kirby (1997), Le Men (2005), Gunning (1995) and others. The cinema's complex relationship to the automobile, as Karen Beckman notes in her recent book *Crash* (2010), is widely acknowledged, but has been explored by scholars almost exclusively in relationship to the road movie. While the driving credit sequence is a familiar instantiation of the cinema's relationship to the automobile, these sequences are found just as often in films that have little to do with mobility as in those that make it a central theme. Nevertheless, the driving credit sequences offers a condensed confirmation of the cinema's capacity to evoke movement and its tendency to employ modes of transportation as pretexts for that movement.

One of the most immediately striking features of the driving credit sequence is its indulgence in the presentation of space. As vehicles move through city streets or extra-urban environments, following trajectories that often have little narrative importance, spectators are invited to contemplate that landscapes. In the 1960s, in particular, the driving credit sequence was regularly employed as a pretext for offering picturesque backdrops which exploited the ascendant use of widescreen filming and easily available colour processes. Nevertheless, while the driving credit sequence is an exploration of space, I would argue that it is shaped more profoundly by its capacity to organize cinematic time. By offering words, music and images of

human movement layered upon each other, the driving credit sequence authorizes an experience of duration detached from any obvious narrative purpose and typically distinct from the temporal rhythms more broadly characteristic of the film of which it is a part.

A key argument of Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps* is that cinema of the second half of the 20th Century was drawn towards the production of new experiences of time and duration (Deleuze, 1985). Distinctive kinds of image-sequences (like extended scenes of waiting or dialogue) became formal devices through which time was detached from action. Indeed, the notorious *longueurs* and *ennui* of European art cinema of the 1960s had much to do with its fixation on experiences of "inaction, waiting and exhaustion" (Flaxman, 2000: 6.) The driving credit sequence, however was as common in American as in European cinema, and may be seen as a popular, even vulgar instantiation of this detachment of time from action. Common in films outside the high modernist canon of European cinema, the driving credit sequence shared with such films the indulgence in new experiences of duration. The radicality of the driving sequence was limited, however, in one important way: while it produced a clear sense of duration usually devoid of narrative purpose, it also offered an experience of mobility rather than of stasis or entrapment.

The important role played by music in the driving credit sequence is key to the ambiguous status of such sequences within a history of cinematic experimentation. The inclusion of a theme song required that credit sequences be longer than in earlier periods of film history. The elaborate but narrative meaningless visuals that accompanied these songs undermined the conventional hierarchy of primary and secondary formal features (or of paratextual and textual elements), in what was a familiar gesture of avant-gardist subversion. At the same time, however, credit theme songs, through their association with rituals of opening

well established in popular culture (like the theme songs for recurrent television or radio programs, for example), reduced the strangeness of a driving sequence that possessed no obvious narrative purpose.

In the three films discussed earlier, there is a particular re-ordering of credits in relationship to space and time. The vertical lists of names characteristic of the classical film's title card give way to individual names and functions following each other in sequences that extend their duration. The extended length of the credit sequence, from the late 1950s onwards, was both a cause and effect of the opening up of credit sequences to include songs: musical themes require longer credit sequences to contain them, while the length of the theme song authorizes a slower passage of credits and a breaking up of the long lists of names that once filled the screen. At the same time, the stretching out of credits poses the question of the rhythm by which names and functions will appear and the threat of their possible monotony. In *The Italian Job* and, to a lesser extent, in *Solo*, we have a sense of vehicles moving faster (if only slightly) than the sequence of credits themselves, so that the latter seem more leisurely, less blatantly declarative. In the case of *Come Fly With Me*, as noted, there is the less elegant synchronization of credits to shifts in musical tempo, as if both must collaborate to produce a sense of rhythm central to the film's promise of tightly concocted pleasure.

In all three of these sequences, a sense of duration is produced through the interaction of three measurable entities: the time of human-mechanical movement (of people in vehicles), the time of a song (often, but not always, the 2-5 minute length of the popular song) and the time required for the prescribed sequence of film credits (whose duration may vary even if the prescribed sequence may not.) Typically, in these scenes, the arrival of vehicles or characters at their destination coincides with the appearance of the final credit ("Directed by . . .") and the

conclusion of the accompanying musical piece. In the overlaying and coincidence of these multiple forms of closure, the combination of the various expressive elements making up the driving credit sequence (live or animated action, extra-diegetic music and words) is made to seem natural.

The debate over functionality

Since the 1980s, extended credit sequences have largely (but not completely) disappeared from the beginnings of most films. They have been moved to the end of a film, often leaving only brief indications of studio, title and principal actors to appear at a film's beginning. As the frequency and complexity of film credits has declined, we have seen a rise in academic and theoretical treatments of film credits from a period now viewed as their Golden Age, from the late 1950s through the late 1970s. The richest theoretically-informed analysis of film credits has come from such European scholars as Valentina Re (2006), Alexandre Tylski (2008) and George Stanitzek (2009).

The most significant theoretical controversy over the film credit sequence concerns the extent to which it should be seen as functional or non-functional. In 1960, amidst the emergence of the extended, visually elaborate credit sequence, designer Saul Bass enumerated some of the functions credits might perform:

Normally the running of the title is a period during which the patrons leave their seats for popcorn, make small talk with their neighbours, or simply explore their seats for long-range comfort, and when the film itself begins, there is usually an initial 'cold' period. I have approached the titles with the objective of making them sufficiently provocative and entertaining to induce the theatre inhabitants to sit down and watch, because something is really happening on the screen. It then may become possible to project a symbolic foretaste of what is to come, and to create a receptive atmosphere that will enable the film to begin on a higher level of audience rapport (Bass, 1960: 209).

Two of Bass' key functions for credits – that of inducing spectators to change their behaviour in preparation of the spectacle to come, and that of specifying something of the character of the film to follow – will return as emphases in the more recent wave of academic writing on film credits. Indeed, most claims about the functional character of credits build on these two ideas. For spectators, it has been argued, credits are a time of transition, making possible the perceptual reorientation that takes audience members from the light-filled room of the cinema hall, with its multiple distractions, to immersion in a spectacle projected in a darkened room (see, for a discussion of these issues, the various articles in Innocenti and Re, 2003; and Re, 2006). At the level of the individual film itself, credits are said specify and condense key elements of the film text to follow (its moods, key generic elements and dominant graphic forms), offering a menu of ingredients whose shifting combinations will produce the ensuing film. Credit sequences thus perform the function of orientation at two levels, acclimatizing spectators to the general conditions of film viewing and preparing them for a specific category of textual experience.

The sense of credits as having a function is expressed in quite literal terms by the managers of present-day movie theatres. For them, the lengthy end credits of films are a way of smoothing the transition from a film's narrative conclusion to the shock that comes when lights are turned on and spectators are pressured to leave the cinema. The long credit sequences with which films now end are also a way of ensuring that everyone does not leave the cinema at exactly the same time, since spectators have highly variable levels of commitment to sitting through these credits. The stretching out of this "rituals of closing" over several minutes, and usually over one or more songs from a movie's soundtrack, ensures that people leave in steady but not overwhelming numbers.

An alternative to these arguments about the functionality of the credit sequence may be found in the writing of George Stanitzek (2009). In Stanitzek's nuanced analysis, the credit sequence is in important ways the very model of dysfunctionality, or, more precisely of an often contradictory multifunctionality: "its very purpose is to serve a whole array of functions: copyright law, economics, certification of employment in the context of careers, movie title, entertainment, commercials, fashion, and art" (2009: 46). Rather than allowing a film to establish itself, to assert its distinctive *mediality*, the credit sequence offers a rich, even confusing mix of forms that carry with them the risk of disorientation. Film credits may contain instrumental music, singing voices, spoken words, written texts. They offer up, for view, movements that are of little narrative importance, and landscapes that linger on the screen much longer than they are supposed to. Credit sequences, for Stanitzek, are moments of almost uncontrolled exuberance in film, celebrations of the medium's multiplicity. They constitute something of a garbage heap of voices and cultural forms from which a film must extricate itself in order to get on with things. As Stanitzek writes, of the credit sequence

This designated, dysfunctional space thus comes to stand in for an alternative kind of film. At the place where plot and live action should be organizational determiners—or perhaps there at their sides—there is an aggregate of representational moments in which film comes across as a mixed, heterogeneous medium (Stanitzek, 2009:

Stanitzek is sensitive to the ways in which the heterogeneous elements of the credit sequence (words, live action, graphic design) struggle to normalize their co-presence, though he has little to say about the role of music or the theme song within this heterogeneity. In the driving credit sequences discussed so far, I would suggest, we see the effort of titles, music and movement to naturalize each other, each element establishing a movement and sequence which

the other seems to obey. In the credit sequence for *The Italian Job*, the credits must last as long as the song, which must itself unfold until the words “Directed by . . .” have come and gone; the image of the man driving must continue, without dramatic interruption, until credits and song are over, even as the winding trajectory of this driving authorizes our prolonged exposure to both titles and song.

Credits, theme songs and the autonomization of music

The credit sequence is often discussed in terms of its autonomous aesthetic value, in relation to its possible “detachability” as an artistic work (Stanitzel, 2009: 50). This detachability is often most obvious in the case of those credit sequences employing graphic forms (like animation or series of photographs) which are distinct from the live action photography characteristic of the rest of the film in which they appear. Since the rise of the music video clip, however, the possible independence of the credit sequence seems more and more a function of the particular combinations of music and visuals which it offers. In hundreds of film credit sequences from the 1960s and 1970s, we see an exploration of variable relationships between songs, visual abstraction and human movement – relationships which are at the core of music video aesthetics.

To explore these variations, I will turn to two more examples of the driving credit sequence, both from the 1970s. In the credit sequence to *Tony Arzenta: big guns* (1973; dir. Duccio Tessari), the title character (played by Alain Delon) gets into his car and drives through a rainy night-time city. The sequence unfolds to the musical backdrop of . . . The unfolding of the film’s credits become the pretext for a gaze upon a hazy European cityscape that seems alternately luxurious and degraded. The theme song, I would argue, performs a double function:

it renders the landscape loosely metaphorical – slightly melancholic and vaguely romantic – and in doing so, binds the various elements of the credit sequence together within a consistent sort of affect. At the same time, the music, which bears some unspecified but undeniable relationship to the psychological interiority of the Alain Delon character, surrounds that silent character with the air of introspective depth. Music here performs the familiar function of inducing a sense of mood, but it is this binding function of music which seems to me most significant. Music is able to suggest that character and landscape possess an affective coherence and thus to justify the exercise in jumbled vision that is one characteristic of this scene. This very same combination of elements is repeated in the credit sequences of dozens of Italian thrillers and horror movies – films known in Italy as *gialli* – of the 1970s; these sequences usually constitute the most aesthetically ambitious (and often pretentious) feature of these films.

The binding function is even clearer in the opening to *Across 110th Street* (1972: dir. Barry Shear) a gritty New York crime film whose multiple points of view are conveyed both in the fragmented images of the credit sequence and in the ethnographic description that runs through the words of the song. The challenge of this credit sequence is that of orienting viewers with little direct experience of the film’s milieu to the world in which it will unfold. What interests me is how the tight rhythms of funk, usually understood in terms of their effect upon the individual, dancing body, are here cast outward, onto the body of the city, whose jumpy interconnections they express. (In the United States, the commercial rebranding of “black” music as urban music in the 1970s involved this projection outwards, from the “soul” of the performer to elements of the urban landscape more easily imaginable in visual terms.)

The driving credit sequence and the music video approach the question of music’s binding quality from opposed directions. For the makers of credit sequences, music must

provide a coherence for a variety of images which set in place a film's setting, generic affiliation, affective tone and something of the psychology of its principal character. A song authorizes a collage-like and wilfully kaleidoscopic array of visual elements, even as the act of driving further justifies shifts in visual perspective and multiple objects of vision. In the case of the music video, these imperatives are reversed, even if the effect is usually the same: a variety of images must provide a thematic and affective (and occasionally narrative) coherence for a song, whose own rhythms and repetitions it naturalizes in visual terms. In either case, in the process by which music and visuals bind each other within a self-contained coherence, the credit sequence and music video establish their autonomy.

In an influential argument, Simon Frith suggested that a key esthetic/cognitive function of music is its capacity to organize time in distinctive ways (Frith, 1987: 142). If, following Deleuze, we set the driving credit sequence amidst the efforts of post-1950 cinema to produce a new sense of cinematic time, we may further understand it in terms of Frith's argument about musical temporalities. The musical credit sequence (with or without driving) mitigates the strangeness of the avant-gardist cinematic *longueur* by invoking an experience of duration and sequence that has long marked viewers' familiarity with the three-to-five minute pop song.

Conclusion: Credit sequences and masculine interiority

It is typical of the driving credit sequence that the human figures within them, usually men, remain silent. This silence is often justified by the men's solitude – in most cases, we see a single man driving alone --but it is further enforced by the presence of music, which usually extended from the beginning to end of the credit sequence. (The credit sequence to *The Sopranos* offers a particularly striking version of this silence.) One way of speaking of these

sequences is to suggest that, within them, human figures are wrapped or enclosed within several forms. These figures are contained, first of all, in an automobile (and more rarely on a motorcycle or in some other vehicle), but they are also covered over, at least intermittently, by the words of the film's credits. Most importantly, given the theme of this volume, these sequences feature pieces of music that are at in the foreground of their auditory space and serve to banish most other sounds from the scene.

In her book *L'Image paysage: iconologie et cinéma*, Maurizia Natali argues that “no filmic landscape can resist, for very long, such things as montage, filmic time, narrative rhythm or the appearance of human characters” (Natali, p. 16). I would add that no filmic landscape can escape, for very long, the intrusion of music. A silent driving credit sequence cannot justify the extended gaze on a landscape whose duration thus becomes uncertain and whose degree of metaphorization remains minimal. Music, typically used in films to underscore a sense of action and mood, works within the driving credit sequence to bind disparate elements—text and image – together by rendering them subservient to an overall sense of mood or affect conveyed through musical conventions. However, the presence of music also strengthens the sense of purposeful sequence already implicit in the familiar order of credits and in the movement of human figures across space.

In this combination, we feel authorized to contemplate, at length, the image of a silent human figure who is usually male. The man's positioning, in an automobile, justifies his stillness, just as the passing of words and musical background naturalizes his silence. Indeed, we might see the driving credit sequence as one of the few cultural occasions organized around the extended display of an inert, masculinity. Typically, in such sequences, the man's silence suggests his own introspection, while his concentration on the act of driving permits him to

withhold easily legible clues as to his psychological interiority. In driving sequences like those which open *American Gigolo* (1980; dir. Paul Schrader), *The Pawnbroker* (1964; dir. Sidney Lumet) or *Les Tontons Flingueurs* (1963; dir. Georges Lautner), the image of a solitary man driving a car is central to the installation of a sense of enigma around each film's central character.

I will conclude with a discussion of a more contemporary driving credit sequence that suggests something of the very different place and role that credit sequences now occupy within the commercial cinema. That sequence is from the 2007 film *Michael Clayton* (dir. Tony Gilroy), and comes at the end of the film. The film's central character (George Clooney) sits pensive in a taxi which moves slowly through Manhattan, as non-diegetic music plays and the scenery outside dissolves into hazy abstraction. The text of the film's final credits blink for several minutes at the side of the screen. Automobile and music both function here to enclose the character, to remove him from the busy chaos of the street outside and register his escape from the narrative entanglements which filled the film's plot. What strikes me about this scene is that it repeats an effect that cars, words and music have performed in so many other films: that of rendering the silent, solitary man introspective, profound, as we contemplate his face and seek out clues as to his psychological state. Music serves here to banish most diegetic sound and human dialogue from what remains of the film. In doing so, music holds us in a contemplative relationship to George Clooney's face as it registers an almost imperceptible range of emotional responses. This face fills the screen for a period exceeding two minutes, in a departure from film convention we find acceptable only because we have seen some of the hundreds of driving credit sequences that came before it.

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ⁱ There are a scattered earlier examples, like *Picadilly* (1929; dir. Ewald André Dupont), whose credits appear on the side of a moving bus. One way of understanding the driving credit sequence is in terms of the movement, from the late 1920s onwards, to move credits into narrative, fictional spaces. I have discussed this tendency elsewhere (Straw, 2010).

ⁱⁱ At the same time, as I have argued elsewhere, while film credits resemble the literary paratext in important respects, they raise some of the same aesthetic-moral questions that have surrounded the status of the entrance or ornament in fields like architecture and design (Straw, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Other examples, among dozens of others, of the sex comedy with elaborate credit sequence (usually animated) are *Boy's Night Out* (1962; dir. Michael Gordon), *Man's Favourite Sport* (1964; dir. Howard Hawks), *Do Not Disturb* (1965; dir. Ralph Levy), *Pillow Talk* (1959; dir. Michael Gordon), and *The Wheeler-Dealers* (1963; dir. Arthur Hiller).

^{iv} Other examples include *Intent to Kill* (1958; dir. Jack Cardiff) and *A Fine Pair* (1968; dir. Francesco Maselli).