

On Writing Abstracts

Abstracts are often written before the paper. Although this may put you into the position of having to eat your words later, it can also be helpful to delineate the project carefully because this will force you to stay course and stick to your main point.

I find it useful to divide an abstract into three paragraphs. The first paragraph states the main topic and idea, including a gist of the story you intend to tell or the main argument you will make. You need to grab the reader immediately and give a good sense of the importance and originality of your project (3-5 sentences). The second paragraph elaborates. Preview the main evidence you will adduce in support your claims. This is the place to be more specific and to help readers make sense of and assess your claims. Show that you have done your research; that you have control over the material; and that you are in dialogue with existing scholarship (8-12 sentences). The third paragraph summarizes the paper's outcome and states its significance (2-4 sentences).

The title is critical. Ideally, it will offer a capsule version of the paper, as with titles for books or articles: *Unheard Melodies*, *Beethoven Hero*, *Conceptualizing Music*, "Paths through *Dichterliebe*," "Wagner and the Origin of Evil." It can be useful to have a two-part title. Adding more information after a colon helps to narrow the topic down to a period or to specify a work that you will focus on: *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Smart); *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Feldman); "Opera out of performance: Verdi's *Macbeth* at San Francisco Opera" (Levin). Do not try to be cute or precious.

Abstracts are read and evaluated quickly, so everything needs to be right on the surface. This is not the genre to indulge in complex sentences. Avoid fillers and padding. Remove redundancy. Use your space wisely to convey information and communicate what matters. Concision and elegant simplicity trump obscurity and jargon. Stick to the word limit.

I include a sample abstract below. It's a bit shorter than what the AMS requires now, so the last paragraph is just a single sentence (admittedly a little on the longer side).

-Berthold Hoeckner (2/2011, rev.12/2013)

Film Songs and Things

Objects have meaning. Things are just things. Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" rests on this distinction. Objects assert their thingness to reclaim the magic of a pre-symbolic materiality. When films turn things into objects, music often serves as an accomplice by making their meaning transparent or by imbuing them with feeling. Yet film music may also help objects recover their thingness by upholding its own sonic materiality. And sometimes the music itself—like diegetic song—is the object that becomes a thing through performance.

I will focus on *memory* objects. Film music can access time beyond the plot by turning, for example, the shot of a photograph or an everyday item, into a window to the past. If underscoring may ease the transmutation of things into souvenirs, source music can catalyze the presence needed for the experience of thingness. In the title sequence of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the non-diegetic piano yields to a humming child inspecting the content of a memory box. This cut in the underscore (a decision made during post-production) allows the singing to present the memory objects as childhood things. If songs themselves serve as mementos in numerous films, recorded performances sometimes become the focus of their thingness. George Stevens's *Penny Serenade* (1941) chronicles a troubled marriage through an album of flashback-triggering records. The first one—"You were meant for me"—has a crack that loops the words "for you," which caused the couple to meet in a music store. The broken vinyl attests not only to the physicality of music's mechanical reproduction, but reclaims the song's thingness as a material memory.

Amid a growing interest of cinema and media studies in embodied spectatorship, thing theory elucidates how the invitation to "haptic seeing" in the movie theater combines with music's call to a "haptic hearing" (Laura Marks) to fashion film's new sensorium for audiovisual memory.

(316 words, w/ title)