

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Reading Queer Performance in Post-Production Code Film Musicals (1970-1980)

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Doctor of Philosophy

September 2021

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a postgraduate research degree of the University of Winchester

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Millie Taylor and Professor Laura Hubner, for their invaluable support, questions, guidance and encouragement over the last six years. I would also like to thank my husband, family and friends for their patience and understanding.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis focuses on how the abandonment of the Motion Picture Production Code in the late 1960s and the impact of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 affected approaches to the presentation and reading of queer and potentially queer characters and narratives within Hollywood film musicals released between 1970 and 1980. It argues that the film musical was vital during this period in portraying characters that can be read queerly as having an active and visible role in society. My thesis therefore investigates ways in which performances and storylines in four popular mainstream Hollywood film musicals released within the early years following the demise of the Production Code can be read as queer. It suggests that familiar features of film musicals, such as numbers, performance, narrative and spectacle contributed to and enhanced queer readings. The thesis explores the significance of queer readings of characters and narratives of mainstream film musicals of this decade as a way of assessing some of the shifts and changes taking place in society within the United States at that time.

Keywords: Musicals, Film, Queer, Hollywood, Performance, 1970-80

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Reading Queer Performance in Post-Production Code Film Musicals (1970-1980)

Introduction

The film musical has been an established, popular, and versatile genre since the inception of the sound film in the late 1920s. *The Broadway Melody* (Harry Beaumont, 1929), for example, a film Richard Barrios describes as ‘the first true musical film’ (1995: 59), won an Academy Award for Best Picture. And, according to Nigel Ward (2017), ‘since Dorothy left Kansas, it has been a genre defined by escapism.’¹ The Hollywood film musical has also attracted the involvement, both on screen and working behind the scenes, of members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) communities.² As noted by Raymond Knapp, ‘the contributions and perspectives of gays must at the very least occupy a prominent position in the story’ of the American musical’s history (2006: 6). However, in the early days of Hollywood, actors who were not heterosexual generally had to camouflage their sexuality in public, while characters on screen were presented – at least overtly – as heterosexual. The end of the Production Code was almost contemporaneous with what have become known as the Stonewall Riots (1969), which were the catalyst for positive changes for LGBTQ+ communities in the United States (and beyond). Social and cultural changes since the late 1960s have opened up space for the more overt depiction and development of formerly marginalised or veiled characters on screen, and queer narratives in film musicals.

My research focuses on how the abandonment of the Motion Picture Production Code in the late 1960s and the impact of Stonewall affected approaches to the presentation and reading of queer and potentially queer characters and narratives within Hollywood film musicals released between 1970 and 1980. The thesis therefore explores ways in which performances and storylines in four selected mainstream Hollywood film musicals released in the early years following the demise of the Production Code can be read as queer. I explore how familiar features of film musicals, such as numbers, performance, narrative, and spectacle, contributed to and enhanced queer readings. The research therefore includes the analysis of lead or prominent characters, alongside the relationships between characters, and the implicit or explicit queer content of storylines, as a way of evaluating this form of popular culture as a barometer in the construction and representation of social norms. If film musicals’ storylines and representations became more overt, these changes may have been instrumental in bringing many of societal inequalities to the fore both

¹ See Nigel Ward, ‘Welcome back to La La Land – musicals, nostalgia and escaping reality,’ (20.01.17) <http://theconversation.com/welcome-back-to-la-la-land-musicals-nostalgia-and-escaping-reality-71368> (accessed 4 October 2017)

² The ‘Q’ in LGBTQ+ can also stand for Questioning. There are additional initialisms used within the queer community, but I will use LGBTQ+ as it is currently most widely-used.

narratively and through numbers. No comprehensive scholarly research has focused on this topic – a gap that my thesis aims to fill.

Given that song and dance are important features of musicals, I will consider how the male and female body is depicted within the films I have chosen. Such analysis will involve consideration of gaze theories and how the male body in particular is displayed in a specific way within musical numbers. This will also allow me to examine theories of performativity with regard to gender portrayals, including topics such as the exploration of gender as a social construction and the representation of different masculinities within the films. Additionally, I consider the traditional (for classic Hollywood film musicals) themes of the utopian ideal and the quest for a better life, as represented by characters and narratives that can be read as queer. Brett Farmer proposes that escapist readings ‘explicitly suggest that gay men use their spectatorship of the Hollywood musical to articulate and shape their innermost fantasies and desires’ (2004: 76). Also, Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell argue that, at least in part, ‘the distinctive power of the musical is in its investment in utopias or else utopian moments’ (2000: 2), thus viewing these elements to be characteristic of the musical genre. I therefore explore such arguments more fully, particularly given Keith MacKinnon’s suggestion that ‘[T]he power of yearning for a better place, often expressed in song and / or dance... may help to explain the importance of the musical to minorities who are marginalised in their social experience’ (2000: 40). MacKinnon’s focus is on space and freedom, and his proposals provide a springboard for addressing the trope of utopianism in musicals and whether this ideal is still present in film musicals released following the demise of the Production Code. With regard to the concepts of space and freedom, I consider the possible relationship between queerness, freedom and licensed spaces within film musical narratives of the period. To do so, I examine the notion of the carnivalesque with particular reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on François Rabelais (1968/1984) and the extent to which queerness is more overtly represented in specific spaces in the film musicals I analyse.

In addressing such themes, the thesis will enrich and augment the (currently limited) existing research in this area of musicology and film studies. The aims of the research are therefore to critically engage with how far:

- socio-political changes during this period allowed the narratives of film musicals to explore more wide-ranging and challenging areas in relation to LGBTQ+ issues;
- the characters in the film musicals being investigated can be read as queer personas;
- characteristic aspects of studio-era musicals such as utopianism are still present and linked to queerness;

- licensed spaces and aspects of the carnivalesque play a crucial role in portrayals of queerness;
- ideas about gender as a social construct, and performativity, impact on wider and normative gender portrayals;
- theories of the gaze impact on the portrayal of protagonists in film musicals;
- aural and visual elements of numbers, including dance, reinforce opportunities for queer readings.

To carry out my investigations, I analyse representations of queerness in four varied, but well-known, mainstream Hollywood musicals released between 1970 and 1980 – a significant decade, as it encompasses the early years of the Production Code’s demise, but is prior to the impact of the AIDS pandemic on the queer community in the early 1980s. The musicals I examine are *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) and *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980). As noted by Barry Keith Grant, there are different views as to what constitutes a film musical. I am following his definition with regard to my choice of musicals, namely, ‘films that involve the performance of song and/or dance by the main characters and also singing and/or dancing as an important element’ (2012: 1). In selecting which films to explore, I have selected a cross-section of mainstream musicals that would have been familiar to a majority of the general public at the time of their release, as well as currently, due to their popularity and regular showings on television.

The film musicals of the Golden Age were associated with the studio system, whereby studios controlled all aspects of film production. For example, major stars of musicals were associated with certain studios, such as Warner Brothers or MGM. However, the studios fell into decline in the 1950s and 1960s. The rise in television sets in homes initiated a decrease in cinemagoers and, as noted by Sean Griffin, ‘a severe slump at the box office in the early 1970s led to various conglomerates buying up a number of major Hollywood studios’ (2018: 280). The demise of the Production Code also gave filmmakers greater freedom, and the decade became known for the movement often referred to as ‘New Hollywood,’ due to the release of many gritty and innovative movies such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973). However, the era also saw the emergence of big-budget, successful blockbusters. Indeed, the highest-grossing films of the 1970s were the ‘blockbusters’ *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), both of which later generated numerous sequels (and prequels in the case of *Star Wars*). However, even though fewer musicals were being released, two appeared in the

top ten listings, namely *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) in fourth place and *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) in ninth position.³

Despite the emergence of ‘New Hollywood,’ Vito Russo (1981/1987) suggests that, where gay male characters were included in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1970s, they were portrayed as ‘newly visible gay stereotypes,’ because ‘the exploration of gay issues onscreen was not big box office’ (186), with queer or potentially queer characters being portrayed negatively. He argues that ‘not one gay hero emerged on the movie screen’ during the decade (226), but does suggest one exception – Al Pacino’s Sonny Wortzik in the ‘New Hollywood’ movie *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975) – stating that the film’s narrative ‘gave evidence that a sexually ambiguous character could also be a likeable hero’ (230). Whether or not Wortzik is actually a ‘likeable hero’ is, of course, open to debate in view of the movie’s storyline.

A number of films of the decade were deemed to include more ‘realistic’ social and political content. However, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004) argue that, although ‘during the 1970s... queers began to lobby the entertainment industries for better, more well-rounded representations of themselves’ (10), there was little variation in this respect, such that ‘representations of queers in Hollywood films did not initially change very much’ (10). Indeed, they suggest that, with the exception of *Cabaret*, ‘which presented heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual leading characters, most mainstream Hollywood films shied away from the topic altogether’ (10). However, the fact that film musicals have consistently been popular with queer audiences indicates that such texts have always been open to queer readings, even where characters were not ostensibly queer. Given that it does indeed include characters that overtly offer a diversity of sexual orientations, I have thus chosen *Cabaret* as my starting point for analysing queer representation in Hollywood movie musicals. However, as I suggest, film musicals of the decade did provide a vehicle for queer representation and queer readings in movies of the period in a way that differed from the generally covert manner of earlier films. This was enabled in part due to the grittier verisimilitude of filmic narratives facilitated via the demise of the Production Code. Although the quantity of film musicals being made was declining during this time, nevertheless, as shown in the table below (Figure 0.1), there was still a large number being released.

NAME	DIRECTOR	YEAR
<i>Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory</i> **	Mel Stuart	1971
<i>Bedknobs and Broomsticks</i> **	Robert Stevenson/Ward Kimball	1971

³ ‘The 15 Highest Grossing Movies of the 70s (Worldwide)’ (15.04.18/27.08.20) www.imdb.com/list/ls026560159/ (accessed 5 October 2021)

<i>Fiddler on the Roof</i> **	Norman Jewison	1971
<i>The Boy Friend</i>	Ken Russell	1971 (USA/UK)
<i>Cabaret</i>	Bob Fosse	1972
<i>Oh! Calcutta!</i> **	Guillaume M Aucoin/Jacques Levy	1972
<i>1776</i> **	Peter H Hunt	1972
<i>Man of La Mancha</i> **	Arthur Hiller	1972 (USA/It)
<i>Godspell</i> **	David Greene	1973
<i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i>	Norman Jewison	1973
<i>Mame</i>	Gene Saks	1974
<i>That's Entertainment*</i>	Jack Haley Jr	1974
<i>The Little Prince*</i>	Stanley Donen	1974 (USA/UK)
<i>Funny Lady</i>	Herbert Ross	1975
<i>Nashville</i>	Robert Altman	1975
<i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i> **	Jim Sharman	1975 (USA/UK)
<i>Bugsy Malone</i> **	Alan Parker	1976 (USA/UK)
<i>A Star is Born</i>	Frank Pierson	1976
<i>A Little Night Music</i> **	Harold Prince	1977 (USA/Ger)
<i>New York, New York*</i>	Martin Scorsese	1977
<i>Pete's Dragon*</i>	Don Bluth/Don Chaffey	1977
<i>Saturday Night Fever</i>	John Badham	1977
<i>Grease</i>	Randal Kleiser	1978
<i>Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band</i> **	Michael Schultz	1978
<i>The Wiz</i>	Sidney Lumet	1978
<i>Hair</i>	Miloš Forman	1979
<i>The Muppet Movie</i>	James Frawley	1979 (USA/UK)
<i>The Rose*</i>	Mark Rydell	1979
<i>All That Jazz</i>	Bob Fosse	1979
<i>Fame</i>	Alan Parker	1980

<i>The Blues Brothers</i>	John Landis	1980
<i>Xanadu</i>	Robert Greenwald	1980
<i>The Jazz Singer</i>	Richard Fleischer/Sidney J. Furie	1980
<i>Can't Stop the Music*</i>	Nancy Walker	1980

Figure 0.1 As listed on the IMDb website (accessed 28th September 2021). *Additionally listed by Rick Altman; **Not listed by Rick Altman.⁴

When selecting the four films to analyse, I sought to explore movies that include overtly queer characters, but also films with characters that clearly demonstrate the potential for queer readings by audiences. All four musicals include characters that fit into these categories. While *Cabaret* includes openly queer characters, I suggest that Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli) also offers a possible queer reading. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* presents numerous queer characters within its narrative. The two later films I consider, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame*, both include a main character that offers opportunities to be read queerly by audiences, with the latter film again incorporating a character, Montgomery (Paul McCrane), that is overtly queer.

Furthermore, with *Cabaret* as my starting point, given that it is set in the Berlin of the 1930s, I next selected for analysis a film that is mainly situated in a seemingly futuristic world. Yet the main character of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry), echoes *Cabaret's* Sally Bowles through costume and links to Marlene Dietrich as Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (1930).⁵ In addition, *Cabaret* includes openly queer characters in a triangular sexual relationship, while *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* similarly shows queer characters engaging in relationships with others, regardless of gender. I then chose to analyse two films with a contemporaneous setting, namely *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame*. The body of the leading character in *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony Manero (John Travolta), is put on display in a manner similar to that of Frank-N-Furter, while the latter movie references *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* through its 'film-within-a-film' scenes featuring the number 'The Time Warp.' It also links to *Cabaret* through hinting at a potential triangular relationship between some of the featured characters. The narratives of the two later films are ostensibly grittier and more 'realistic' through being set in contemporary New York.

I believed that it was important not to duplicate stars or directors, hence the omission, for example, of *New York, New York* and *All That Jazz*. Furthermore, the selected movies offer a mix of diegetic, non-diegetic and meta-diegetic numbers. I also considered it important to select four films that are still popular with audiences today, partly through the familiarity of the songs, but also due

⁴ See *The American Film Musical* (1987), pp. 377-378.

⁵ See, for example, Gaylyn Studlar (1989: 10)

to the characters and narratives.⁶ Examination of these key, popular, mainstream films released between 1972 and 1980 will enable me to trace how the demise of the Production Code facilitated the presence of characters that may be read queerly by audiences as the decade progresses, as well as the extent to which queer characters were becoming more visible on screen, thereby presenting a more accurate image of society. These are areas of research currently lacking in existing literature.

I am mindful of the fact that the meaning of language can alter over time, and specific words experience semantic changes, such that current terminology may have carried different meanings when used in the past. The word 'gay,' for example, has had a variety of meanings over the years, including happy, a female prostitute, and a male homosexual (see, for example, Stewart, 2003: 375). Similarly, the word 'queer' has had various connotations. Whilst on the one hand meaning odd or strange, the word was also used pejoratively to describe people identifying as non-heteronormative. However, since the 1990s in particular, it has been reclaimed in a positive fashion by many in the queer community. It is now generally used as an umbrella term for people who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender, encompassing those on the non-normative identity spectrum.

The word queer was not therefore necessarily employed collectively during the 1970s in the manner that it is mainly used currently, such that 'gay' could be used to connote 'queer' in its contemporaneous meaning, i.e., to challenge societal binaries regarding sexuality and gender, and the stability of identities. I will be using the term queer in this thesis in its meaning as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+. However, I also employ the words 'gay' and 'homosexual' at times where this is specific to the context of an author's text, or due to the fact that these terms were used during the 1970s and are still employed, dependent on a person's self-identification. The word queer is now generally used with pride rather than in a disparaging manner, but it is important to note that scholars writing prior to this changed usage often used other terms. Today, someone identifying as queer, or the denotation of queerness, can imply something different from pre-Stonewall, and the years immediately following the riots.

The Impact of the Stonewall Riots: Lead-up and Outcomes

The Stonewall riots have become symbolic as a turning point in queer visibility and as a springboard for LGBTQ+ campaigns for equal rights. They are often seen as a milestone in the gay liberation movement, and their impact helped in the struggle to attain equal rights. Scott Merriman and James Ciment argue that the United States 'emerged from World War II as the most powerful nation on

⁶ This is evident in part through versions of all four musicals regularly touring as stage shows. It is also noteworthy that the recent successful television show *Glee* (2009-15), aimed at a teenage/young adult demographic, had complete episodes dedicated to both *Rocky Horror* and *Saturday Night Fever* (*The Rocky Horror Glee Show* and *Saturday Night Glee-ver* respectively), and included songs from *Cabaret* and *Fame* in other individual episodes.

Earth’ – partly due to possession of the atomic bomb – but still felt threatened by communist countries such as China (2006: 587). This fear resulted in anyone thought to have communist sympathies being viewed ‘as antisocial deviants, a characterization long associated in American culture with homosexuals’ (Merriman and Ciment, 2006: 587). Because of this attitude and the resultant suspicion of anybody who could be termed unconventional or different, ‘laws aimed at homosexuals became... harsh’ in the 1950s (Carter, 2004: 14). Homosexuality was recorded as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” by American psychiatrists in their first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) published in 1953 (Reilly, 2014: 118), and discrimination was thus deemed justifiable in many quarters (Eisenbach, 2006: 224). As a result, gay men and lesbians often tried to hide their homosexuality, particularly in the workplace, as otherwise they could be at risk of losing their jobs due to their sexual orientation; there was a view that being homosexual equated to being unstable – and, thereby, untrustworthy.

Those identifying privately as queer were consequently reluctant to be open about their sexuality or gender. During much of the 1960s, consenting adult gay men and women were risking prison sentences if discovered having sex, even in the privacy of their own homes. Indeed, in two states, California and Pennsylvania, they faced confinement in institutions for the mentally ill (Carter, 2004: 15).⁷ As late as 1970, a psychiatrist at the American Psychiatric Association’s convention, which was being held that year at San Francisco, was still promoting the use of ‘aversion therapy’ that involved ‘electric shocks and nausea-inducing drugs’ (Kuhn, 2011: 96), although he was, as a consequence, heckled by some of the attendees for his outdated views. It was not until 1973 that homosexuality was no longer deemed to be a mental illness, when the trustees of the American Psychiatric Association voted in favour of removing homosexuality from the DSM (Eisenbach, 2006: 246).⁸ This decision was widely reported (Kaiser, 1999: 238). It may be argued that the Stonewall riots were at least one of the turning points for such changes, as more of the general public became aware of the discrimination being faced by members of the LGBTQ+ communities.

Pre Stonewall

In 1950, Harry Hay founded an organisation named the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, the intention of which was to campaign for gay rights. Branches of the society were formed in various other American cities and Dick Leitsch became the president of the New York division in 1965. Leitsch was particularly concerned that the police force was deliberately employing some plain-clothed officers to snare members of the male gay community in bars, although this was denied by

⁷ Amy Lind and Stephanie Brzuzy note that, in 1962, ‘Illinois became the first state to legalize same-sex acts between consenting adults’ (Lind and Brzuzy, 2008: 293).

⁸ See also Reilly (2014: 118) and Lind and Brzuzy (2008: 296).

the Chief Inspector of Police during a gathering held in Greenwich Village early in 1966. However, it led to a meeting in which the city's Mayor stated that any such practice would be stopped. Even so, '[T]hough entrapment ended, officers continued to hassle gay men on Village streets' (D'Emilio, 1983/1998: 207). Many people experiencing such discriminatory practices wished to make knowledge of this kind of harassment more public.

In 1965, the New York branch of Mattachine decided to demonstrate on the 4th July (Independence Day) in front of the Independence Hall in Philadelphia (Carter, 2004: 40; Duberman, 1994: 113). The campaigners handed out leaflets and carried placards to highlight the discrimination being experienced by members of the gay community. There was agreement afterwards that such a demonstration should take place every Independence Day and the march became known as the Annual Reminder. The second march in 1966 received some local press and television news coverage (Eisenbach, 2006: 40). Members of the branch believed that if it were not for these marches, 'the crucial Greenwich Village explosion at the end of the decade might never have occurred' (Kaiser, 1999: 142). The visual representation of Otherness to the wider public was therefore an important issue in creating change.

There was some confusion regarding the legality of serving gay men and women in bars (D'Emilio, 1983/1998: 212). Problematically, this meant that people were reluctant to run establishments favoured by the LGBTQ+ communities. Eisenbach notes that, in New York, '[T]he State Liquor Authority closed dozens of bars in 1959 alone just for serving homosexuals' (2006: 10). Such targeting 'allowed the Mafia and corrupt police officers to muscle in on gay bars' (Echols, 2010: 44); members of the Mafia saw their involvement as a lucrative way of making easy money. However, in 1967, members of the Mattachine Society of New York were successful in obtaining 'a very significant ruling' that meant that the State Liquor Authority 'could not revoke a license on the basis of homosexual solicitation' (Carter, 2004: 53). This led to a change in tack from the Mafia, as they were 'making too much money' to completely turn their back on 'the city's gay nightlife' (Eisenbach, 2006: 47) and thus decided to focus their attention on managing private clubs open to the LGBTQ+ communities. Such clubs were 'immune from State Liquor Authority control' (Eisenbach, 2006: 47) and therefore provided a way to continue to increase finances.

One such Mafia-run establishment was the Stonewall Inn, on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, New York City. Here, the Mafia, to circumvent any legal issues because they did not have a licence to sell drinks, allegedly ran the Inn as a private 'bottleclub.' As Carter explains, such clubs were ostensibly for members only, who 'could bring their bottles and leave them at the club with their names on them' (2004: 68). Genuine bottle clubs were not allowed to sell drinks, but the bar at the Stonewall Inn did 'cash business just like any other bar' (Duberman, 1994: 184).

However, customers were being sold 'liquor that had been stolen or obtained from bootleggers' (Carter, 2004: 72). The doormen chose who to admit, and patrons then paid a small fee, which could be exchanged for a ticket that enabled them to receive a drink (Carter, 2004: 69).

There were rumours that the Mafia was giving money to corrupt members of the police force so that they would turn a blind eye to the fact that bootleg alcohol was being sold on the premises and thereby allow the bar to remain open. This led to specific difficulties for the Inn's patrons. For example, the owners were in such a position of power that they could serve watered-down drinks and operate with no running water behind the bar, such that the reused glasses were unhygienic.⁹ In addition, there were suggestions that some regulars were being blackmailed by the Mafia in order to keep their true sexuality under wraps (Carter, 2004: 99-100; Eisenbach, 2006: 86). Despite these issues, however, the Stonewall Inn was popular with members of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly because there was a back room where customers could dance together to music played on a jukebox.

In the early hours of June 28th, 1969, the Stonewall Inn was raided by police, led by Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine, commander of the New York Police Department's vice squad. This, in itself, was nothing unusual. Indeed, there had even been a raid on the Stonewall Inn earlier in the same week. Often, bars were given 'tip-offs' by corrupt police to alert them in advance of their visit. This gave establishments time to put the lights on to forewarn customers that a raid was imminent, and also for employees to hide any takings from behind the bar and mingle as patrons (Carter, 2004: 82-3). However, this raid was different; Pine had been given instructions by his Commanding Officer to close down the Inn following information from Interpol that suggested that the owners were corrupt and engaging in extortion (Carter, 2004: 102-103; Eisenbach, 2006: 87). Detectives in New York had discovered 'that the Mafia had been acquiring large numbers of bonds by blackmailing gay employees of New York banks' (Eisenbach, 2006: 86). The trail led to the Stonewall Inn (Carter, 2004: 103).

The Riots

The reasons why the Inn's clientele and others in the area at the time rioted following a raid on June 28th is much debated. Suggestions include: it was the weekend and a hot night; the raid took place in the early hours of the morning, i.e., at a time when the bar was very busy; there was general upset following the funeral of gay icon Judy Garland on the 27th; back-up police vehicles to take away those who were going to be arrested were slow to arrive; and simply that people had had enough. When customers were eventually allowed to leave the Inn, rather than going home quietly

⁹ It has been suggested that one of the outcomes of this was a hepatitis epidemic within the gay community in 1969 (Duberman, 1994: 181).

as they usually did, the clement weather meant that they loitered nearby (Kuhn, 2011: 69). In addition, a number of people who were walking in the area stopped to watch what was happening. This meant that a large crowd began to gather outside the Inn. Eventually, the situation became so unstable that Inspector Pine ordered his officers to barricade themselves inside the Inn for safety reasons. A journalist for the local newspaper *Village Voice*, Howard Smith, who was observing the fracas, also retreated inside on police advice.

There were further disturbances the following evening and then, after some relative calm, another night of major disorder took place on Wednesday 2nd July, seemingly following publication of the latest edition of *Village Voice*.¹⁰ Two eye-witness accounts were included on the front page – that of Smith, and a young journalist named Lucian Truscott IV, who happened to be in the area and observed the riots from the street. Smith, calling the disturbances “‘gay power’” riots, described the tension experienced by those barricaded within the Stonewall Inn; Truscott discussed the mood on the streets both on the first and second evenings of the riots. Readers were said to be unhappy about some of the language used in the articles and decided to voice their disapproval.¹¹ The riots ‘made international news, creating a surge of LGBT visibility’ (Lind and Brzuzy, 2008: 294). A number of prominent gay activists began to plan a day to commemorate the riots. In addition, many newly-formed Gay Liberation organisations ‘took advantage of the almost daily political events’ taking place in America, such as anti-war rallies (D’Emilio, 1983/1998: 233); campaigns for change were ubiquitous at the time. Those involved did not want to lose momentum.

Post Stonewall

Although the Annual Reminder was attended by around only 75 people (Kuhn, 2011: 81), this yearly event was to become superseded by a march to commemorate the disturbances around the Inn, initially known as Christopher Street Liberation Day, the first of which took place on 28th June 1970. The parade enabled members of the LGBTQ+ community to celebrate, rather than hide, their sexual orientation.¹² Changes were afoot. During the 1970s, a number of American states ruled that it would be illegal not to hire someone because of their sexuality (Kuhn, 2011: 100). Furthermore, in 1975, ‘the US Civil Service Commission announced it would no longer exclude homosexuals from government employment’ (Wong, 2010: 140). In addition, not long after the Stonewall riots took

¹⁰ See Carter (2004: 201-202), Duberman (1994: 208-209) and Kuhn (2011: 78). The newspaper’s offices were in Greenwich Village.

¹¹ The two articles were reprinted in full online in *Village Voice* in June 2019. See <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/stonewall-at-40-the-voice-articles-that-sparked-a-final-night-of-rioting-6394112> (accessed 3 October 2015). Also, Truscott revisited his experience in an article published in the *New York Times*, also in June 2009. See http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/opinion/26truscott.html?_r=0 (accessed 3 October 2015)

¹² Commemorations are now referenced as Gay Pride marches, with June being Gay Pride month in remembrance of the riots.

place, a number of states repealed the laws that prohibited sex between male adults (Frank, 2014: 47).

The early post-Stonewall era also saw advances in the way that non-heteronormative men and women were portrayed on television. For example, in 1972, a gay male couple were the protagonists in a 'made-for-TV' film entitled *That Certain Summer* (Lamont Johnson) (Kaiser, 1999: 208; Eaklor, 2008: 140), and were represented sympathetically. In 1973, an innovative reality series called *An American Family* focused on the everyday lives of the wealthy Loud family who resided in California; it was additionally 'groundbreaking' as it included 'eldest son Lance's onscreen coming out' (Tipton, 2005: 13) while presenting him as part of an 'all-American' family. Popular television programmes of the early 1970s also occasionally featured gay or lesbian characters, and the decade saw a change from their portrayals as 'tormented gay malcontents (or even psychopaths) to the personal friend who challenges the homophobia of the central character' (Ullman, 2014: 347-8). In 1977 Billy Crystal took on the role of homosexual Jodie Dallas, a regular character in the popular comedy series, *Soap*. Jodie was one of the more stable characters in the programme, which included some absurd storylines. Ullman describes *Soap* as '[O]ne of the first television programs with a central, positive gay character' (2014: 348).¹³

The Stonewall riots have become emblematic as the instigator of positive changes for LGBTQ+ communities. Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Cragge debate the reasons why the disturbances at Stonewall became so significant in symbolising the start of the gay rights movement, given that there were earlier occurrences when homosexuals and drag artists fought back during police raids. They argue that one of the reasons is that, 'while Stonewall was not the first riot, Stonewall activists were the first to claim to be first' (Armstrong and Cragge, 2006: 725). This resulted in the riots being commemorated the following year, an important reason, they argue, as to why the riots were recollected so strongly. They claim that the proposal that Stonewall was a turning point 'was a movement construction – a story initiated by gay liberation activists and used to encourage further growth' (2006: 725). It was also significant that activist Craig Rodwell alerted the press to what was happening during the riots, as this led to much coverage in local daily papers the next day.¹⁴ He also designed leaflets for distribution which claimed that this was the first time that people had protested in this way (Armstrong and Cragge, 2006: 738).¹⁵ However, Eisenbach argues that the riots received a lot of media coverage because of where they took place – New York. He proposes that, '[H]ad the first gay riot taken place in any other city, it would not have achieved

¹³ The character was more accurately bisexual in the series, as he also had relationships with women.

¹⁴ See, also, Carter (2004: 265). Carter suggests that Rodwell did 'his utmost to keep the riots going and to publicize them.'

¹⁵ The words on the relevant flyer are reprinted in their article.

legendary status so quickly' (2006: 101), noting that both *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines featured articles about what took place at the Stonewall Inn over those summer evenings.

Armstrong and Cragge conclude that the suggestion that the Stonewall riots prompted the gay rights movement is a myth that is oft-repeated, a story enhanced by the annual commemorative parade; this belies the fact that there were protests prior to Stonewall, as well as the fact that there were also gay activists in other US cities. They propose, therefore, that 'the Stonewall riots did not literally spark gay liberation,' but recognise that 'they were important to its growth' (2006: 744). D'Emilio suggests that, despite the various myths that have grown up around it, only 'a fool would dispute the historical significance' (1983/1998: 148). Duberman's view is that the riots 'are now generally taken to mark the birth of the modern gay and lesbian political movement' (1994: xvii), while Gregory Woods and Tim Franks suggest that the riots gave 'spectacular birth to the gay liberation era' (2006: 158). Whatever the myths that have developed around those evenings in the summer of 1969, and whilst accepting that there were earlier attempts by various groups to highlight their oppression, there is general agreement that the Stonewall riots were symbolic for LGBTQ+ communities in the United States and a springboard for continuing to demand equal rights. In the United Kingdom, however, moves were afoot as early as the 1950s to consider decriminalising male homosexuality, in part because of the high number of homosexual men in prison as a result of being convicted of gross indecency.¹⁶

The Wolfenden Report

In 1954, the British government asked Sir John Wolfenden to chair a group that was to be set up to examine the existing laws on homosexual activities. The committee submitted their recommendations in 1957 and proposed that private homosexual acts should be decriminalised, as long as the men involved were over the age of 21. This led to the formation of the Homosexual Law Reform Society (Simon and Brooks, 2009: 75). Notably taking ten years, the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee were approved within England and Wales via the Sexual Offences Act, which was passed in 1967.¹⁷ At this time, the only state in America in which sex between consenting homosexuals was similarly deemed legal was Illinois (Kaiser, 1999: 164).

The British film *Victim* (Basil Dearden), released in 1961, was influential in helping to change the law and perceptions of homosexuality and queerness in the UK. The film's storyline focuses on a

¹⁶ Aaron Day reports (15.07.13) that, 'At the end of 1954, in England and Wales, there were 1,069 gay men in prison for homosexual acts.' See <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/07/15/the-pinknews-guide-to-the-history-of-england-and-wales-equal-marriage/2/> (accessed 2 December 2017)

¹⁷ See <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexuality20thcentury/> (accessed 3 May 2019). The law did not change in Scotland until 1980.

married, but bisexual, barrister who becomes aware that a group of people are blackmailing individuals who have to conceal the fact that they are homosexual. He assists the police in catching the gang involved, even though this means that his own queerness will inevitably be revealed publicly, ending his career. As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin suggest, the movie's narrative 'argued that social prejudice against homosexuals was wrong' (2004: 8). Kaiser argues that the film 'had a dramatic effect on the political debate about homosexuality' in the United Kingdom (1999: 154), while Richard Barrios similarly proposes that the film provided 'a genuine public service, railing against and eventually helping to overturn Britain's archaic laws against male homosexuality' (2003: 301).¹⁸ However, *Victim* was not given general release in the United States and was therefore only shown in a few art house cinemas (Kaiser, 1999: 154-5; Barrios, 2003: 304). The fact that such a topic as hidden sexual preference was being aired in film can thus be seen as being reflective of, and contributing to, changes of policy in the United Kingdom. Societal changes in the United States, meanwhile, were to have an impact on the demise of the Motion Picture Production Code in that country.

The Motion Picture Production Code

The Motion Picture Production Code, also sometimes referred to as the Hays Code, was created 'largely by Catholics' (Barrios, 2003: 131) for the major studios in the US in 1930. The aim of the Code was to outline to filmmakers what was deemed morally acceptable (and not acceptable) in terms of narrative content. In 1934, the Catholic Church came down heavily on Will Hays, who was in charge of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), because they believed that the Code was not being properly enforced. As a result, a lay Catholic named Joseph Breen was put in charge of the Production Code Administration (PCA), and all scripts had to be approved as suitable by this organisation (Black, 1989: 167). There was often much negotiation between the PCA and the scriptwriters, with the aim of ensuring that films maintained a high moral standard (Maltby, 2012: 241). The Code not only 'forced Hollywood to be ambiguous' but also meant that those watching 'learned to imagine the acts of misconduct that the Code had made unmentionable' (Maltby, 2012: 245). It is notable, therefore, that coded queer images, such as 'the effeminate pansy' who 'was widely known as a homosexual for the 1930s spectator' (Lugowski, 1999: 5), were understood by cinemagoers during the early years of the Code's enforcement. As David M. Lugowski suggests, the 'effeminate men and mannish women in an age that conflated gender performance with sexuality were Hollywood's representations of queer men and women'

¹⁸ Vito Russo quotes Dirk Bogarde as stating: 'It was the first film in which a man said "I love you" to another man. I wrote that scene in. I said, "There's no point in half-measures. We either make a film about queers or we don't."' Quoted in *The Celluloid Closet*, 1981: 126.

(1999: 7). Whilst it may have been the case that such coded queer images were understood, nevertheless, it was not possible for characters or narratives to be openly queer, a situation challenged by the Production Code's demise, and one I explore with regard to film musicals of the 1970s.

Concepts of Space in Film Musicals

From their earliest days, film musicals presented the notion of space as being a significant theme within the genre, such as in many of the implausible scenes choreographed by Busby Berkeley in the 1930s. There are various concepts of space present within movies, however, whether indoors or outdoors, actual or fabricated, and these are illustrated and characterised in multiple fashions, such as via the specially-created representations of Venice in *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935) or the real Salzburg locations featured in *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965). Such diverse spaces may at times interact with one another, but there can also be notable differences between them. Movies themselves are often watched within a designated space, the cinema, in which the house lights are conventionally lowered when the film begins, such that audience members can focus more easily on the screen in front of them.¹⁹ The cinema is therefore a dedicated space for filmgoers. Film musicals can additionally utilise the techniques available in making movies to differentiate them from stage musicals through variations in the ways that space may be presented, used, interpreted and consumed in terms of performances.

The early backstage film musicals were able to take advantage of the subject matter of their storylines to justify the inclusion of musical numbers, which were ostensibly rehearsals for a forthcoming show, or performances in a theatre. However, the numbers choreographed by Busby Berkeley, such as those in the 1933 movies *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy), generally start on a theatrical stage but expand and devolve into a space that is fantastical.²⁰ In most of Berkeley's choreography, the physical area of the stage stretches metaphorically to increase beyond the realistic confines of the theatre. Even though these numbers are often purportedly part of a real show in the narrative, they thus take on a surreal element that emphasises spectacle and foregrounds what is possible in film as opposed to theatre, including specific close-ups, lavish, oversized props and futuristic sequences.

Berkeley's camerawork included the creation of complex geometrical patterns only visible from above, something that would be impossible in reality for theatre audiences to witness. Part of the spectacle comes from the choreographed visual aspects of the movements, rather than from

¹⁹ Films are also viewed at home, though this is again often in specific spaces.

²⁰ Martin Rubin describes Berkeley's work as being linked to the 'spectacle-oriented, nonintegrative tradition' of film musicals (1993: 14).

dance. Martin Rubin suggests that such numbers 'render[s] the space accessible to spectacular expansions and distortions that can be clearly in excess of the narrative without necessarily disrupting it' (2002: 56), thereby highlighting the Elysian feeling of the numbers, which arguably take audience members temporarily to a 'better' place, something particularly pertinent during the years of the Depression. Richard Dyer, discussing *Gold Diggers of 1933*, proposes that these types of numbers are "'just" escape, "merely" utopian' (1992/2002: 28), because they are presented in such an implausible manner. Although viewers recognise that it is impossible for such numbers to have legitimately taken place within the confines of the stage, they accept the illusion and separate them from the main plot because of the manner in which they are constructed and the elation of the spectacle they create.

Later, non-backstage Hollywood film musicals often employed the concept of a dreamlike or imaginary space as a way of presenting numbers that take place in a liminal place within and without the storyline. One such example is the 'Miss Turnstiles Ballet' number from *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1949), in which one of the sailors, Gabey (Gene Kelly), fantasises about the woman on the 'Miss Turnstiles' poster he sees on a train.²¹ The ballet sequence is clearly studio-based and thereby provides a visible, otherworldly contrast to the 'real' urban, invigorating spaces that the movie's male stars, who are aiming to see the main sights of New York in 24 hours, occupy for the majority of the film.²² However, the scene also comically foregrounds an illusory 'ideal woman' that is totally fabricated. Another example is the lengthy 'Broadway Melody' sequence from *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952), which is an interpolated piece that centres on Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse. In the film's narrative, Don (Kelly) is supposedly describing what the number will be like to R.F. Simpson (Millard Mitchell), while the filmic audience actually witnesses the finished product, reinforcing its imaginary quality, especially as Charisse is not a character in the film proper.

Narratives of film musicals often include licensed or safe spaces for certain characters. Emily Petermann asserts that music is used to signify a 'safe space' within the 'dream ballet' sequence (2016: 230) that forms part of the film musical *Oklahoma!* (Fred Zinnemann, 1955). She argues further that the characters of Laurey (Shirley Jones) and Curly (Gordon MacRae) 'use duets as an unreal space for exploring romantic fantasies' (2016: 229) in the movie, thereby suggesting that it is the imaginary place that offers possible solutions to their predicaments. Songs as well as dances can thus offer a means through which to express emotions in musicals outside of dialogue, and provide a

²¹ Jane Feuer states the number 'adds to the film a dream register' (1993: 80). 'Miss Turnstiles' is the character Ivy Smith (Vera-Ellen).

²² Martha Shearer notes that *On the Town* 'was... unusual for incorporating relatively extensive location shooting in a studio-era musical' (2016: 2).

safe space in which to do so; music, dance and song can allow characters to express and reveal their true feelings safely without the need for the spoken word. This is shown, for example, in *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961), in a scene in which the background space magically changes from one place to another. Strangers Maria (Natalie Wood) and Tony (Richard Beymer) catch sight of one another across the gym during a local dance. The fact that they only have eyes for each other is indicated through the characters who are dancing the mambo becoming blurred as the two protagonists walk towards one another, clearly oblivious to everyone else present as they do so. Eventually, the other dancers disappear from screen altogether with the exception of a few couples, who engage in stylised dancing in the background. When Tony hears that the girl he has just met is called Maria, he walks from the gym in a trance-like state. The background transitions seamlessly from the walls of the gym to the city, and then to the playground, as he sings the number 'Maria' to nobody in particular, expressing his emotions through song while his surroundings indicate that the spaces in which he is singing in his reverie have a universality that complements the idyllic emotions of the song.

The idea of two different worlds or spaces, one real and one utopian, is perhaps illustrated most memorably in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), a movie that Tison Pugh notes 'displays a queer sensibility that countless viewers adore' (2008: 217). Jacqueline Nacache suggests that the film is an exemplar of the motif of 'transworld travel' that was a topos of many Golden Age Hollywood musicals, as 'the boundaries between dream and reality constantly overlap' within the narratives (2013: 452). Nacache argues that the film's 'Land of Oz brings to mind ideas of fantasy, escape and freedom, whereas the grey of Kansas suggests an idea of imprisonment' (2013: 453). After Dorothy (Judy Garland) is hit on the head by a flying windowpane, the dreamlike, utopian sequence begins. She opens the front door that leads her from her sparse, sepia existence into the vibrant, busy, technicolour world of Munchkinland, seamlessly moving from one space to another without looking back. In doing so, Dorothy enters into a wondrous and enticing new universe, albeit an unknown and somewhat dangerous one, in which she experiences friendship and respect, even though she is an outsider. Yet, despite the glitz and glamour of Emerald City, Dorothy decides that she does not want to stay in her new world – she wants to come home. And this suggestion is such an important theme in the musical that 'there's no place like home' is the mantra – along with the ruby slippers – that takes her back to Kansas. However, given that her dog, Toto, is still under sentence of death in her 'real' world, and the home she wants to return to is still the same sepia-tinted farm where she is lonely and ignored – and from which she wanted to escape in the first place – this pronouncement perhaps seems more unrealistic than the alternative, fantastical space of

which she has been a part. Somehow, her wish to return from Oz to the farm in Kansas seems unconvincing.

It can be argued, therefore, that the concept of space is an important characteristic of film musicals. Kenneth MacKinnon suggests that space in musicals is often linked to the theme of escapism, a suggestion that fits with the narrative of *The Wizard of Oz*. He acknowledges the possibility that the 'most important message' of movie musicals is 'that there is space beyond humdrum, burdensome everyday reality, and that that space belongs to the underprivileged, those who experience discrimination in the "real world"' (2000: 44). This hypothesis suggests the presence of a utopian, queer space in film musical narratives. Although MacKinnon's proposal applies mainly to movies released during the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood, nevertheless, it is generally true of most film musicals that 'characters are able to satisfy their desire or at least to feel better by dancing or singing' (Grant, 2012: 46). While numbers often take place in an existing physical space, whether it be outside in the hills of Salzburg in the opening of *The Sound of Music* or the streets of New York in *On the Town*, the fact that this space can also be deemed 'charmed' (Grant, 2012: 2) reinforces the escapist, euphoric and dreamlike quality of many numbers in film musical narratives.²³

These safe, or licensed, spaces can be portrayed in numbers in different ways, including via private or clandestine sequences. In her essay discussing some of the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers routines, Sue Rickard examines the move from public to private spaces in the numbers 'Night and Day' and 'Cheek to Cheek' from *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, 1934) and *Top Hat* respectively. She argues that such moves give viewers 'a sense that we are privy to a situation that is becoming ever more intimate' (1996: 84), thereby ingeniously challenging the censorship that was in place when the films were made, to evoke a licensed space for the couple to express their love for one another privately through the medium of dance. At other times, licensed spaces may be more communal, such as public performance spaces that enable singers and/or dancers to express themselves in a shared, but protected, environment. Such spaces can thus be read as significant for those deemed marginalised; as I will propose, they are equally as vital within film musicals released post-Stonewall as those of the 'Golden Age,' often portraying repressed or potentially-repressed desires that can be expressed openly in these safe environments.

As argued by Dereka Rushbrook, 'the creation of explicitly gay places has been an important part of the evolution of the gay community in the West' (2002: 190). However, these spaces are not necessarily truly 'safe.' For example, Wayne D. Myslik suggests that, while '[Q]ueer spaces are generally perceived as safe havens from... discrimination and violence,' they can actually 'often serve as destinations of choice for "gay bashers"' (1996: 157). The history of the term 'safe space' is

²³ Richard Dyer says of *On the Town* that 'it shows people making utopia rather than just showing them from time to time finding themselves in it' (1992/2002: 31).

explored by Moira Rachel Kenney in her study of gay and lesbian activism in Los Angeles. She notes that the term originated primarily via the women's movement of the 1960s/1970s (2001: 24) before being adopted by gay and lesbian groups engaged in 'place-claiming strategies' (2001: 198/9) during the 1970s and 1980s. However, while she notes that 'the notion of safe space implies a certain license to speak and act freely,' she also highlights that 'even safe space can become the place for conflict' (2001: 24), thereby noting the potential contradiction present in the term 'safe.' This suggestion is expanded upon by the Roestone Collective. They argue that trying to create a safe space 'entails continually facing, negotiating, and embracing paradoxical binaries' such as 'safety/danger, inclusivity/exclusivity, public/private and so forth' (2014: 1355). Indeed, Myslik concludes that '[Q]ueer spaces are not, in fact, safe havens from the threat of violence that follows gay men throughout their lives' (1996: 168). The term 'safe space' is thus, at least in part, sometimes a misnomer.

While the presence of 'safe spaces' was gaining importance during the years central to my thesis, given that it is acknowledged and accepted that such spaces can still be places of discord, danger and divergence, I will be using the term 'licensed' as well as 'safe' when discussing the topic in the movie storylines I discuss. The licensed spaces I identify in these narratives are sites of security, but at times also places of resistance and/or solidarity in which characters can, or aim to, express their queerness without fear of reprisals, and as such offer the possibility of a different, enhanced, and discrimination-free reality. Dyer argues that '[A]lternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better' (1992/2002: 20), and these emotions, as shown in the examples given, are often expressed via musical numbers. The dreamlike, utopian and performance spaces separate and combine in the film musical narratives I analyse to provide at times licensed spaces for the characters I suggest are open to queer readings.²⁴ These spaces aim to offer those who are part of historically-marginalised groups in wider society a place where they can feel secure and respected without fear of violence and harassment. The theme of licensed spaces provides a thread that links my chapters together, as I will demonstrate via the films that I analyse. Although these licensed spaces may differ from film to film, they still offer places wherein characters that can be read as queer feel secure, a fact that audiences can recognise and appreciate, with each film offering different moments and opportunities for freedom of expression. I therefore explore how certain diegetic spaces are being used by characters in the movies I analyse and question the role of song and dance in terms of licensed spaces and potential transgressions of expectations in wider society. In doing so, I will examine whether these spaces are public or private, internal or external, and differences between perceived real and fantasy or utopian spaces.

²⁴ Christina B. Hanhardt suggests that '*[S]afety* is a key term in LGBT politics' (2013: 30). Italics are in the original.

Literature Review

Topics pertinent to my research encompass texts that focus on either Hollywood film musicals or queerness; these cover a wide range of perspectives and contexts. Consequently, I identify and consider here some of the main texts and theories that I believe are most relevant to my arguments and analyses. I discuss:

- writings about the Production Code and the film musical narrative during the studio era, as they provide useful background information upon which to draw;
- characteristic aspects of the studio-era musical, such as camp, artifice and utopia, as these are areas I examine in relation to the later musicals that I investigate;
- the topic of the carnivalesque, as this will impact on my discussions about licensed spaces;
- theories of performativity, which are crucial to my examination of many of the characters I analyse;
- gaze theories, which are important in relation to the ways in which men and women are connoted in film musicals;
- varied representations of masculinities, and how or when these can be read as queer; and
- shifting definitions of queerness and their application, to indicate recent and ever-changing theories in relation to LGBTQ+ studies within academia and beyond.

Silent Films, Early Sound Films and the Production Code

The overt/covert representation of gay characters in film, as well as the influence of the Production Code, are areas addressed by Vito Russo (1981), Richard Barrios (2003) and also Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin in their edited collection (2004). In his landmark text *The Celluloid Closet* (1981/1987), Vito Russo discusses representations of queerness in silent and sound films. He notes that the early musical *The Broadway Melody* 'featured the most explicitly homosexual sissy of the pre-Code years – the unidentified "costume designer" for Zanfield's hit Broadway musical' (16). He suggests that, prior to Production Code enforcement, '[B]y 1933, censor-proof insinuation had become an art form and the explicitly homosexual sissy flourished' (40). The main purpose of Russo's book is to consider representations of queerness in movies in general, rather than specifically in musicals.

Barrios's book, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*, provides a comprehensive history of the depiction of gay characters in film from the silent days to the late 1960s, particularly with regard to the ways in which homosexuals were represented on film in terms of dress and gesture. When considering the earliest representations of gay and lesbian characters in films, Barrios argues these were generally clichéd and stereotyped in nature – men as 'sissies' and

women as 'tough' (9). However, he suggests that such representations were in many ways no different from the racial stereotypes being portrayed on screen at the time, such as Irish policemen and Italian gangsters. Discussing silent films in general, Barrios details many depictions of arguably gay characters and also explains that cross-dressing characters were often included. He notes that depictions of the latter often 'had more to do with masquerade and buffo than it did with sexuality,' but suggests that, even so, 'putting drag in front of a close-up camera made for a different dimension, heightening the ambiguity as it weakened the illusion,' creating a 'sexual duplicity' that complicated notions of gender (19). Female impersonators were very popular in early movies. It is useful to note that such gender opacity was considered acceptable in film in the early part of the twentieth century.

Like Russo's book, although some musicals are mentioned, the purpose of the text is not to focus on this genre primarily, but on movies in general. In addition, the book does not cover films released post 1970, apart from a brief mention in the final chapter. However, Barrios does consider some early (backstage) film musicals, and suggests that they generally featured 'Xeroxed characters and stock situations' such as 'the harried producer' along with 'the gay designer' (38). Interestingly, he argues that, '[B]ecause of musicals, gay male characters... were more evident than they had ever been' (38) in these early days, albeit that such characters were generally represented as effeminate, with distinct speaking voices, clothing and mannerisms. But, as he suggests, they were often portrayed in a positive way. Indeed, he argues that the period from early sound to the enforcement of the Code in 1934 'was a freewheeling age for movies' (55) in this respect. For example, he states that in Marlene Dietrich's first American film, *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg; 1930), the actress not only performs a song as the character Amy Jolly while in male attire at a club, but afterwards kisses a woman in the audience on the lips. It is of note that this could be interpreted as an early example of a film scene that questions the concept and interpretation of gender.

Barrios is particularly complimentary of the fact that non-normative characters were included in early sound films at all, stating that '[T]here were, in fact, more visibly gay and lesbian characters onscreen at this time than at any other point in American cinema until the late 1980s' (10). However, he explains that such representations, along with coded words, such as 'lavender,'²⁵ stopped with the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934. The Production Code Administration (PCA) decided that, from July 1934, 'all mainstream films would be given PCA seals to show their fitness for public exhibition' (125). Barrios decries the enforcement of the Code, albeit

²⁵ Barrios calls lavender 'the great gay granddad of code words' (10). It is interesting that one of the songs composed by homosexual Cole Porter for the 1929 revue *Wake Up and Dream*, 'I'm a Gigolo', contains the line 'of lavender, my nature's got just a dash in it'; Porter hid his true sexuality from the general public through his marriage to Linda Thomas.

that the main concern of those implementing it in the early days was not so much the representation of homosexuality, but rather the glorification of crime and violence. He explains that the Code's stricter application had a significant impact on what could and could not be shown on screen and therefore meant that the way gay people were portrayed in film became 'toned down' (147); the 'once flamboyant gay men and women became, basically, dowdy spinsters and nervous bachelors' (10). There were still characters and situations where homosexuality was hinted at, but these had to be implied rather than overt in order to navigate past the censors.

Sue Rickard (1996), in 'Movies in Disguise: Negotiating Censorship and Patriarchy Through the Dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers,' explains that once a film was passed as suitable for viewing by the PCA, then 'it had a moral stamp of approval' (74). This meant that, if audience members were to interpret a scene as 'indecent' (75), then filmmakers could deny that such a reading was intentional. Rickard therefore argues that those implementing the Code 'helped further develop the double life of overt denial and covert signification,' enabling viewers to 'repudiate and enjoy certain pleasures simultaneously' (75). She proposes that the film musical was well-matched to this 'double life,' in part because the song and dance of the numbers 'allowed a break from the realism of the narrative' (75). Focusing on 'Night and Day' and 'Cheek to Cheek' from *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, 1934) and *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935) respectively, Rickard argues that 'it is not difficult to interpret many of the Astaire/Rogers dances as displaced sexual activity' (75). This proposal suggests that musicals and musical numbers were open to different readings during the time the Code was being enforced. Moreover, it indicates that audience members are attuned to this fact and how to read certain narratives queerly post-Production Code.

Barrios notes that '[C]ode vigilance was growing more lax' (248) by the mid-1950s and proposes that, by the early 1960s, the narratives of a number of films were completely out of touch with both real life and what cinemagoers wanted to see. This led to a change in the Code in late 1961. Barrios quotes the amendment: 'In keeping with the culture, the mores and values of our time, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion and restraint' (302). However, in reality, this meant that the censors allowed gay characters to be included as long as they were negatively portrayed. As Barrios explains, it was only a matter of time before the Code would be abolished, as it was no longer relevant in the society of the late 1960s, and its 'formal end came on November 1, 1968' (340). Given this fact, I consider what bearing the abandonment of the Code had with regard to representations of LGBTQ+ characters in film musicals after this date.

The impact of changes to the Production Code in 1961 is an area discussed by Benschoff and Griffin, editors of *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. They argue that characters ascribed as gay within

the narratives of American films at this time were often ridiculed or condemned within the storylines. They suggest that, from the 1970s (namely once the Code no longer applied), there was an increased interest in queer cinema by academics. They propose that, gradually, some experimental/independent filmmakers featured homosexual characters more sympathetically than had previously been the case, such that 'queer audiences don't have to search as intensely as they once did to find evidence of themselves' (14). But in other areas, too, the effect of the Production Code lingered. For example, Matthew Kennedy (2014) is dismissive of the fact that, in the filmed version of the musical *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse, 1969), Charity's real profession as a prostitute is still camouflaged. Given that '[T]he Production Code was dead, nudity and adult themes were exploding on the screen,' he wonders why 'Universal Studios was afraid of an all-singing, all-dancing hooker' (171), but this approach was soon to change with Fosse's next musical, *Cabaret* (1972), a film that I analyse in Chapter One. In the main, however, the film musical was still a genre considered to be family viewing, a legacy of the golden days of the American musical (1930s-1950s), which were part of the studio era. I investigate whether the demise of the Production Code allowed the 'family-friendly' genre of the film musical to be more representative of the differences in society hitherto hidden within many narratives.

The Musical and the Studio-Era Narrative

The Golden Age is the period on which Rick Altman focuses in *The American Film Musical* (1987), as he analyses a number of the studio-era/classic film musicals of the 1930s to 1950s. He suggests that audience members are well attuned to the format of such musicals, noting that their plots are often very similar. The main thrust of his work centres on what he terms a 'dual-focus narrative' (19), a storyline built around the two main characters in the film, a male and a female, such that they are often shown in separate, but parallel, scenes. Generally, the two protagonists have different ideas and values. However, the issues between them are settled by the end of the film, leading to 'harmonious unity through the device of marriage' (24). The musical for Altman is thus 'a genre built around a romantic couple' (104) who seem destined at the end of the movies to live 'happily ever after.' Like Altman, Jane Feuer states in the first edition of her book *The Hollywood Musical* (1982) that numerous studio-era musicals end with a wedding or embracing (heterosexual) couple, but suggests this 'celebrates the ongoing relationship between film and spectator as much as it celebrates the union of the couple' (82). These are constructive points for consideration with regard to non-heteronormative audience members and how they relate to narratives that foreground heterosexual normativity.

Rather than provide an historical overview of the musical, or consider films depending on who directed them, or which studio produced them, Altman instead identifies three subgenres of the Hollywood film musical, which he entitles folk, fairy tale and show. He then explains what he believes to be the characteristics of each of these subgenres; each one 'concretizes a particular kind of make-believe' (127), although films may 'combine two modes' (127). He states that, in the fairy tale musical, the heroes often travel to mysterious lands and narratives evoke the trope of the princess and her knight, thereby inducing fantasy and the idea of wishing to be somewhere else. He describes show musicals as generally having a backstage environment and narratives in which a positive outcome in (heterosexual) love is linked to a successful performance, such that real life and art become fused. The folk musical is based around ideas of the American past, and therefore it is often set in the country's mythical yesteryear. The suggestion in these films is that singing and dancing were a natural part of everyday life, and there is a noticeable sense of community spirit and nostalgia present in the storylines.

Although his emphasis is on studio-era musicals, Altman also categorises post-Production Code musicals within his three sub-genres in the table at the end of his book, including therein well-known film musicals released between 1927 and 1983. The list incorporates 32 film musicals released between 1970 and 1983 and, for example, he labels *Hair* (Miloš Forman, 1979) as a fairy tale musical, *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) as a show musical and *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) as a folk musical. Yet none of these film musicals really correspond to the outlines of his sub-genres given their plots; neither do they encompass the dual-focus narrative centring on successful heterosexual relationships ending in marriage that Altman writes is fundamental to film musicals' storylines. For example, *Hair* debates political issues and tensions around counterculture and the war in Vietnam; *Cabaret* does not conclude with success in performance being linked to a successful heterosexual relationship; and *Saturday Night Fever* does not promote community spirit, but exemplifies an environment of family/peer pressure and flight. These differences exemplify the changes in narrative dynamics of many post-Production Code musicals.

In his introduction to *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, editor Steven Cohan (2002) argues that the musicals of the studio era are now remembered with fondness and a sense of nostalgia. In similar fashion to Altman, he suggests that the classic musical portrays 'show business as the perfect embodiment of communal values and social coherence – the quintessential expression of Americanness' (14). But he also argues that they were about more than entertainment, illustrating this in the book's chapters, which focus on aspects of genre, gendered

spectacle, camp interventions and race. In other words, even films of the studio era were open to multiple and diverse readings.²⁶

In line with this observation, Barrios discusses some musicals of the early 1950s in which he believes storylines/numbers were open to being read in a variety of ways. One of these movies is *Calamity Jane* (David Butler; 1953), which features characters in drag, and includes the song 'Secret Love,' a number that could be open to interpretation lyrically if applied to love between homosexuals that could not be openly expressed at that time. As also noted by Farmer in the chapter 'Queer Negotiations of the Hollywood Musical' (2004), another film open to different readings is *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks; 1953), particularly with regard to the seemingly homoerotic number 'Ain't There Anyone Here For Love.' The number is sung by Jane Russell while she is being ignored by a group of male athletes who are engaged in their training exercises. In discussing this number and others open to similar alternative readings, Farmer argues that they 'frequently offer images and sequences that can be read as homosexual or, at the very least, homoerotic' (81) and proposes that the Jane Russell number spotlights 'the male body as erotic spectacle' (81).²⁷ Farmer suggests other instances of potentially diverse readings as well; he notes the 'male trio' routines discussed by Alexander Doty,²⁸ and mentions amongst other examples 'the athletic cowboy dancing routines in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*' (Stanley Donen, 1954) and 'the "Greased Lightning" number in *Grease*' (Randal Kleiser, 1978) (81), which he believes sexualise the male body. He argues that such numbers 'all provide instances of a spectacular eroticization, if not homoeroticization, of the male image that is quite unusual in mainstream cinema' (81-2). Such readings are well-founded when considering possible alternative interpretations by audience members, a fact I consider in relation to gaze theory when applied to portrayals of male dancers in post-Production Code musicals.

Facets of the Musical: Camp, Artifice and Utopia

Though not intended to be comprehensive with regard to typical characteristics of film musicals, my focus here is to highlight some traits of the genre up to the late 1960s that may still be present in musicals released post-Production Code and that arguably enhance suggestions of queerness. Farmer (2004) discusses the 'musical as excessive text' (79). He identifies in this respect the genre's combination of realism (via the spoken word) and fantasy (characters breaking into song and dance)

²⁶ This is an interesting perspective and one explored by Andrew Britton (1994) in relation to *Meet Me in St Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944). Britton (2009) argues that the film contains 'ambiguities of nostalgia' (158) and 'suggests a myth of the organic community in a lost Golden Age' (164).

²⁷ Farmer states the song is named 'Is There Anyone Here For Love'.

²⁸ See Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 10-11.

which he states is linked to the musical number's interruption of the storyline's flow. Numbers thereby offer displays of freedom and desire that are not necessarily present in the characters' actions outside of these song and dance routines. Cohan (2002) similarly notes the 'excessive spectacle' (103) of musicals of the studio era, and suggests that this means they are often described as camp. Although he argues that it is difficult to define the term camp, he believes that such an approach 'takes an ironic stance toward gender normality, parodying it through excessively aestheticized, overly theatricalized style' (103). He posits that, in this era, 'camp was the self-reflective style of gay men' (103), given that openly homosexual characters were not permitted on screen, although some sections of the audience would appreciate this artifice.

One of the earliest attempts to delineate the term camp was undertaken by Susan Sontag. Her suggestion that camp is a sensibility led to her describing it as 'love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration' (275) in her 1964 text entitled 'Notes on "Camp,"' included in the 1966 collection *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*.²⁹ She provides a numerical list of what, in her view, is or can be described as camp, one of which is an affinity for androgyny. This is a useful perspective to consider with regard to post-Production Code musicals, as she discusses this point in terms of 'going against the grain of one's sex' (279), an idea allied to artifice while anticipating the views of Judith Butler with regard to performativity and gender. Sontag discusses 'something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms' (279). To illustrate this point, she names some well-known film stars of the time, such as Gina Lollobrigida, Jane Russell, Steve Reeves and Victor Mature. With regard to the females mentioned, she highlights their 'corny flamboyant femaleness'; for the males, 'the exaggerated he-man-ness' (279), thereby implying a sense of irony.³⁰ In a 1975 interview, Sontag expands on these ideas. She suggests that '[M]aking something corny of femaleness is one way of creating distance from the stereotype' (1983: 339). She purports, for example, that Mae West was an 'impersonator' of a 'sex queen' and 'a sort of parody' of this concept of femaleness (339). In relation to this suggestion, and using Barbra Streisand as his example, Ralph Willett (1996) believes this indicates that such exaggeration means 'that there are only *performances* of femininity' (52).³¹

However, in 'Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp' (2004), Moe Meyer suggests that Sontag's article was too complex when trying to explain the meaning of the term. He defines camp as 'the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity' rather than an ironic stance or a sensibility. He concludes that, rather than there being different types of camp,

²⁹ Steven Cohan states that this text is 'still the most regularly cited piece on the topic' (2005: 6).

³⁰ It is of note that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show's* Frank-N-Furter suggests watching some movies starring Steve Reeves, and also that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, co-starring Jane Russell, is discussed, as noted above, by Brett Farmer in relation to diverse readings of musical numbers.

³¹ Italics in the original.

there is merely one, and that it is 'a product of queer agency' (148). Steven Cohan discusses camp particularly in relation to the MGM musicals of the studio era in his 2005 text *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical*. Arguing that 'camp was the code and custom of the closet' (9) during the period from the 1920s until the end of the 1960s, he suggests it 'allowed for the ironic self-reflective style of gay men passing as straight' (1). One element of this was drag, and he posits that homosexual performers pretending to be heterosexual were thus engaged in 'a gender impersonation' (12). This suggestion can be explored further with regard to post-Stonewall musicals and the views of Judith Butler.

Whilst camp is a term that is problematic to define, it is, as noted by Cohan, one often applied to musicals and musical numbers of the studio era and, as Sontag argues, there are views that it suggests a gay sensibility. Feuer (1993) remarks upon the 'cult interest' (139) in Judy Garland for gay male audiences, but proposes that the predominance of homosexual men working with Arthur Freed at MGM 'enables us to conceptualize musicals as gay male texts created by and addressed to gay men' (140), even if, as also noted by Cohan, the films were made for family viewing. She therefore argues that the essence of camp (demonstrated via stars such as Carmen Miranda) incorporates a gay sensibility and these readings lead to 'an emphasis on numbers' (141) rather than storyline. Similarly, Cohan (2002) suggests that, in the case of many studio-era musicals, numbers mattered more than plot (11), and therefore, with regard to some of the film musicals I analyse, I investigate certain numbers from a camp perspective.

Given that the number is central to the musical, it is thus worthy of exploration, both with regard to its place within the narrative, and the topic of artifice. Feuer discusses the fiction of spontaneity in numbers – such as performers integrating into their numbers items that apparently just happen to be lying around – as well as the myth of unrehearsed, flawless performances. She states that such artifices give the impression to audiences that anyone can sing and/or dance in a professional manner, and further suggests that the supportive approach adopted by characters in backstage musicals also allows audiences to feel more involved and part of the show. In general, 'when the performance is a spontaneous one taking place in the realm of the narrative', then 'we may experience a strong desire to sing and dance... ourselves' (31). Such involvement of audience members with the genre through its numbers is significant in terms of their appeal, giving the ability to 'relive' the experience through song away from the films themselves, as well as offering a sense of community with kindred spirits.

Importantly, musical numbers can allow a space for experimentation with regard to the acceptance of non-heteronormative gender identity. As Farmer (2004) suggests, since the early days of sound, there have been numerous examples of cross-dressing in numbers that could indicate a

breakdown in the simplistic straight/queer divide. He also notes the 'butchness' of the title characters in *Annie Get Your Gun* (George Sidney; 1950) and *Calamity Jane* (1953), along with the 'effeminacy' of the male lion in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). He argues that such 'gender transgression' suggests 'a profound current of sexual subversion at play in the musical number' (82). It is noteworthy that consideration of gender identity is a debate within these earlier well-known musicals, as many audience members would have been receptive to cues suggesting queerness.

The musical number is also addressed by Heather Laing, who explores the topic of songs as vehicles for characters to communicate their feelings in her chapter 'Emotion By Numbers: Music, Song, and the Musical' (2000). Like Feuer, she notes that characters seemingly sing spontaneously, and suggests that musical numbers take place either when the characters need to express their thoughts and emotions, or, alternatively, in order to progress the storyline. She explains that the songs in film musicals are generally AABA³² in structure, and, thereby, the form is predictable and uncomplicated for a filmic audience to follow. The characters appear sincere to the audience in her view not only because they seem to communicate to them directly, but also because of 'the commitment to their performance that often takes over their whole body in either a particularly intense singing style or, of course, dance' (11). For Laing, then, numbers in film musicals offer a powerful, emotional outlet that allows a character's personal thoughts and feelings to be 'heard and understood by others' (12) when sung rather than spoken, an area that can also be explored from a queer perspective in post-Stonewall film musicals. Feuer, similarly, suggests that direct address to spectators in musicals helps audiences to feel part of the action, but also helps 'to affirm the tradition of entertainment' (47), both of which apply in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which includes direct address to camera by Tim Curry's Frank-N-Furter. Another approach in her view that enables audiences to associate with the film is the inclusion of the dream sequences that often feature in later studio-era musicals. She purports that, in these sequences, problems are often resolved, a suggestion perhaps being referenced by Frank-n-Furter's proposal, 'don't dream it; be it.'

Farmer (2004) confirms that the musical has been a very popular genre for the gay population and sets out to discover why homosexuals have engaged so closely with the genre. He first proposes that it is because musicals are often described as having an escapist quality. As he advises, such readings 'explicitly suggest that gay men use their spectatorship of the Hollywood musical to articulate and shape their innermost fantasies and desires' (76). Farmer wonders whether such views are simply based on the 'trope of escapism' that is linked to gay men (77). Altman suggests that 'music creates a utopian space' (69) and 'ideal realm' (77), but, as Farmer posits, the escapist argument does not really explain what it is about musicals that particularly

³² This form is common in popular songs of the period. The 'A' lines are in essence the same, whilst the 'B' section (sometimes called a 'middle eight' or 'bridge') offer a contrast in words and melody.

appeal to the non-heteronormative population, especially given that ‘the utopian idylls’ presented in film musicals ‘are almost universally heterosexual’ (77). He therefore suggests that homosexual spectators may interpret the narrative in a different way, namely one that matches their own lifestyles. Thereby, they ‘refashion it to support the articulation of gay-identified fantasies and desires’ (79), particularly with regard to the concept of excess.

Kenneth MacKinnon’s (2000) discussion of space in the Hollywood musicals, entitled “‘I Keep Wishing I were Somewhere Else’’: Space and Fantasies of Freedom in the Hollywood Musical,’ also focuses on the utopian ideal. He argues that the theme of escape occurs in many film musical narratives, and proposes that the ‘power of yearning for a better place, often expressed in song and/or dance... may help to explain the importance of the musical to minorities who are marginalised in their social experience’ (40). To elucidate his views, MacKinnon proposes that there are often solo numbers which, in contrast with the group numbers, take place in large spaces or in the countryside – or variations thereof. He describes the rooftop song of Charity (Shirley MacLaine), ‘There’s Gotta be Something Better Than This,’ as such a number, just as much as Maria’s opening number in *The Sound of Music* which is performed in a wide, open space.³³ He argues that such numbers suggest ‘there is a space beyond the humdrum, burdensome everyday reality, and that space belongs to the underprivileged, those who experience discrimination in the “real world”’ (44). The wishes of the characters are revealed to the audience members, who thus become ‘inmates with whom a secret is shared in song’ (45), and can react in a way that is personal to them. For MacKinnon, it is not the storyline’s conclusion that is crucial; indeed, he suggests that ‘key moments of certain musicals centre on that which has been removed from the narrative,’ such that ‘[M]inorities unaddressed in the overt content of musicals recognise in the longings and absences an appeal to their experience’ (45). He gives as examples Judy Garland singing ‘The Man That Got Away’ in *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor; 1954) and Barbra Streisand’s ‘My Man’ in *Funny Girl* (William Wyler; 1968), which take place after both women are left on their own. MacKinnon concludes that, although characters in the films seek but perhaps do not always attain utopia, still, ‘[I]n their glimpses of discontent with prevailing social structures and the passion of the conviction with which a better place is fantasised, musicals can speak of oppression and speak to the oppressed’ (46). Whilst his focus is on colour and race, much of his discussion and analysis could also apply to the topics of gender and sexuality, even though he does not comment upon this area directly. For example, Farmer (2000) posits that ‘many gay spectators strongly identify with figures... of racial/ethnic difference’ (89), such as Carmen Miranda and Rita Moreno, as they are similarly

³³ Charity performs the number with her friends Nickie (Chita Rivera) and Helene (Paula Kelly).

Othered, something that could also apply to the Italian-American Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* and the African-American dancer, Leroy, in *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980).

Many of the arguments made by the writers discussed in this section can be usefully applied to post-Stonewall film musicals in terms of identifying queerness. Aspects of camp and artifice, albeit sometimes incorporated in a more deliberate and knowing way, such as in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, encourage a plurality of meanings beneath the surface. Similarly, the customary, time-honoured concept of a utopia expected in the narratives or numbers of film musicals from the Golden Age, even if not necessarily present every time, can be viewed as queer in later film musical narratives via their familiarity and/or unattainability. These are areas I investigate with regard to queer readings, including via musical numbers and the characters performing these numbers as well as the storylines.

Utopia and the Carnavalesque

In the book *Rabelais and His World*, originally published in Russian in 1965, Mikhail Bakhtin explores the sixteenth-century texts of François Rabelais, including the topic of carnival. Bakhtin suggests that carnival provided an opportunity to invert hierarchies, and offered a 'second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance' (1968/1984: 9). The 'utopian realm' described therein can be compared with the utopia of the film musical for those marginalised in society, and similarly offers 'freedom' and 'equality' at certain points within the storyline, with narratives moving in and out of carnivalesque spaces. Indeed, there may be different 'utopian realms' or spaces within a film musical's storyline – interludes that come and go, during which situations are overturned for the better, albeit sometimes temporarily. Jean-Loup Bourget (1977) proposes that escapism or the portrayal of a utopian world can be used in films to show an audience 'that his own society is far removed from such an ideal condition' (64). Furthermore, he argues that a film musical, 'like a court jester, is allowed a Saturnalian freedom' (68). Such a freedom can express a liberty that is not possible outside of the utopian world represented within a movie, albeit that this 'utopian realm' is only present for the length of the film.

Roberto da Matta discusses hierarchical reversals in Brazilian Carnival in his book *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma* (1991), noting the importance of song and music to signify equality. He explains that samba music arose among the poor, but is important during Carnival (109). He also argues that '[T]hrough singing simple songs, everybody becomes equal and understands each other' (110). João Luiz Vieira (2012) discusses the *chanchadas*, musical comedy films made in Brazil that were contemporaneous with Hollywood's Golden Age. As he explains, these movies 'incorporate the social inversions typical of Carnival and

develop, like Carnival itself, an implicit social critique' (142). Furthermore, the narratives aim to present 'a belief in a better place and society' (142), a topic similarly suggested in many Hollywood musicals' utopic ideal. The idea of the carnival and a carnivalesque space are topics that are also relevant to Hollywood musical narratives for those designated as Other, including film musicals released after the demise of the Production Code.

Bakhtin explains that Rabelais's description of carnival suggests a world in which things are inverted or turned upside-down. This turnaround can include performances of gender, as noted, for example, by Vincent Robert-Nicoud in his study of Rabelais. He describes carnival as 'a periodical occurrence based on social, generational and gender reversal' (2018: 103). Cross-dressing was often practised during carnival, often involving the wearing of masks; for example, Sarah Carpenter explains that '[T]he earliest allusions to festive masking from the fifth century already refer to cross-dressing as one of the common disguises' (1996: 13), with masks thus symbolic of different gender identities for the wearer.³⁴ As A. David Napier asserts, masks 'testify to an awareness of the ambiguities of appearance' (1986: xxiii). The carnival space thus offered opportunities for people to perform different gender identities, but also presented the possibility of an alternative, utopian, and communal world in which people were, albeit temporarily, equals. This idea can be exemplified in film musical narratives.

Performativity, Performance, and Drag

As the theme of gender as a social construct is a suggestion that I examine in my thesis, it is useful to explore Judith Butler's significant theories on the topic. In her 1990 preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she advises that discussing the subject of gender as socially constructed could be troublesome for feminists, as they may see her proposals as impacting negatively on their feminist cause. However, she proposes that women should not be seen as an homogenous group. Butler argues that gender is a reiterated performance and proposes that drag destabilises the gender binary. She debates whether, if someone is in drag, he/she is really imitating a person's gender, or simply replicating the gestures associated with what is generally deemed to be typical of the male/female persona. Butler critiques the topics of 'phallogentrism and compulsory heterosexuality' (xxx) and how these areas impact upon notions of female identity. She discusses what the term 'women' means when considering feminism and the sex/gender difference, and also debates the influence of language with regard to gender and assumed heterosexuality. She examines various approaches to the 'incest taboo' (xxxii-xxxiii) and the ways in which gender identities and identifications tend to be discussed in relation to heterosexuality.

³⁴ See, also, Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (1995: 135).

In her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler reconsiders her original writings and explains that her main intention was to appraise the fact that feminist theory at the time focused on implicit heterosexuality and thereby was exclusive instead of inclusive in terms of sexual orientation. She states that she wanted to challenge and expose assumptions that gender meant just male or female. She acknowledges that much of her discussion was based on work of various French theorists, but also feminist theory, to question the supposition that all lesbians must be feminists. Given heterosexual domination, Butler questions what womanhood means and believes this topic is even more important given the growing categories of gender, such as transgenderism. She also discusses the idea of a gender sexual hierarchy and gender discrimination as methods of safeguarding heterosexuality and so-called gender norms.

Butler argues that performativity actually involves 'repetition and a ritual' (1999: xv) rather than a one-off act; she thus proposes that gender is performative. Butler argues that drag is a good example of the difficulties inherent in defining gender. For example, she questions the argument that, if a man is dressed as a woman, the person is essentially a man in women's clothing, seeing the relationship between gender and sex as unstable. Although one may assume that the person's appearance is 'artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion' (xxiii), she argues that such an assumption is not necessarily correct; these postulations are based on the clothing being worn, or on anatomy. Yet these suppositions become very complex if someone is transsexual or transitioning. She suggests that this opens up the question as to what gender actually is; initial assumptions can be incorrect, and drag exemplifies this.

In her 2013 essay 'Critically Queer,' Butler attempts to clarify her views on performativity and drag previously outlined in *Gender Trouble*. She states that when someone is in drag, performance, 'is, of course, *the sign* of gender, a sign which is not the same as the body it figures' (26).³⁵ She discusses the instability of identity formations and the power of citation and repetition as forces that connect identity categories, despite their innate instability. Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman (1995) purport that 'most women dress up as "women" every day and yet, like us, frequently feel they are in drag' (40). With this in mind, they argue that 'all sexuality is a construct' (40) and that gender should be considered fluid. Jodie Taylor (2012) discusses the history of drag, noting that some drag queens masquerade as well-known singers or actresses popular with male homosexuals, such as Judy Garland (91/2).

In his 2007 text, *Performativity*, James Loxley focuses on the history of the term from its use by English philosopher John Austin in his Harvard lectures during the 1950s. Austin argued that utterances are performed, even if what is said is false or does not happen; the utterance can be

³⁵ Italics in the original.

described as a speech act. Loxley notes that Butler uses the concept of performativity to elucidate her arguments about gender and identity, and that she proposes that there are repeated 'conventional gestures, movements and styles which produce us as gendered' (119). Those 'performances' that reinforce the heterosexual binary are encouraged, whilst those that do not are stifled. He also explores her discussion of drag and how this challenges public perception of gender. He posits that 'the kind of performance usually associated with theatre matters. It has effects, it shapes societies, it is the very stuff of our ordinary lives,' and thus is not illusory (154). These ideas point to the political aspects of gender binarism and also the power of performance to impact on and change people's views and way of life.

The performance of gender is an area examined by Chris Straayer (1986/2012), who analyses some mainstream films that feature characters in drag in her chapter, 'Redressing the "Natural": The Temporary Transvestite Film,' suggesting that these are 'gay films' (484). She also proposes that 'the temporary transvestite film' is a specific filmic genre, and that such movies 'offer gender as a construction' (484). She references Esther Newton, who, she states, argues that the transvestite 'attempts to pass as a member of the opposite sex,' while the cross-dresser 'exaggerates the opposite sex's assumed gender codes,' so that a 'male cross-dresser appears not as a woman but as a *man in woman's clothing*' (489).³⁶ These are pertinent views with regard to the main character in one of the films I analyse, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Straayer argues that, in this particular 'genre,' characters in the film are often fooled by simple disguises. However, she proposes that there has to be an "'unmasking'" (492) at the end of the narrative so that a heterosexual relationship can be established/re-established, a view that can be explored further with regard to post-Production Code film musicals and the topic of queerness. In her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber (1992/1997) also discusses 'cross-dressing' films, such as *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982). She argues that the film is 'not a film about a woman, or a man pretending to be a woman. It is a film about a transvestite' (6). She suggests that the character of Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) as Dorothy Michaels is presented as 'more attractive, even seductive, in some ways, than any other character in the film' (7), although this suggestion is open to debate.

Representations of drag in film can also be included to emphasise the biological sex of the actor. For example, in her chapter 'The New Queer Spectator,' Michele Aaron (2004) similarly discusses what she calls 'cross-dressing films.' She defines such movies as those that 'feature a central character disguising him- or herself as the opposite sex' (188), for example in the film *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). She suggests that such movies have narratives that include comic

³⁶ Italics in the original. See also Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972)

situations that arise as a result of the disguise, but that they eventually reveal a character's "true" identity (189). In these types of movies, audiences are reminded of characters' real biological sex in the narratives in a variety of ways – for example, the disguise is poor (although it may easily fool other filmic characters), or there are scenes that show the characters in their real identity at times for the benefit of those watching the film. Aaron believes these strategies 'reinforce the essentialism of gender even if the protagonists' (relatively) easy disguise confirmed its performativity' (189). Furthermore, she argues, 'these disruptions to passing... both deny and acknowledge, contain and permit, the queer by-products of crossdressing' (189). These are pertinent points that I will debate in relation to aspects of the essentialism and constructedness of gender and performance with respect to some of the characters that I analyse.

The Gaze and its Queering

Laura Mulvey's 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is an oft-quoted text. In this article, Mulvey explains that she wishes to adopt a psychoanalytical approach to discussing the depiction of women on screen. She argues that women represent the 'male other' within a 'patriarchal culture' (7). Within such a society, she posits, feminists are naturally frustrated at being thought of as second best. She argues that the main aim of Hollywood mainstream films of the Golden Age was to portray women on screen in a way that provided visual/erotic pleasure for male viewers. Focusing on Freud's theory of scopophilia, Mulvey discusses the suggestion that people derive pleasure from looking at and being looked at. She suggests that audiences are led to believe they are observing 'a private world' when watching films, thereby becoming secret voyeurs. She states that cinema links with these pleasures through its 'illusion of reality' (11).

Mulvey argues that there is a division between males as active and females as passive in film. Thus, a woman is presented as sexual object, resulting in a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that 'plays to and signifies male desire' (11). The woman is shown on film as spectacle both for the male characters within the film and the men watching in the audience. However, men in films are not passive and their role is to move the narrative forward. They represent figures with whom the audience can identify as active and powerful. Contrary to this, a woman regularly plays a character constructed to fall in love with the male lead 'and becomes his property' (13). Mulvey suggests that there are 'three different looks associated with cinema' (17) and that they all privilege the male; first, the way in which a camera records a scene; second, the look of those watching the film; and third, the film's characters looking at one another. But because women are presented as 'a castration threat,' they are merely 'an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish' (18). Mulvey

concluded in 1975 that mainstream Hollywood films, 'from Ziegfield to Busby Berkeley'(11) represented woman as spectacle, and that change needed to take place to rectify this.

Mulvey followed this article with 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema"' inspired by *Duel in the Sun* published in 1981, in which she acknowledges some of the criticism she received in respect of her earlier article with regard to the female viewer. In this subsequent text, she states that she wants to examine: a) female spectators and b) women as film protagonists as a result of such critical comments. Mulvey proposes that the Western genre is a useful one on which to focus in relation to Vladimir Propp's text *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, in which stories end with marriage, a convention it is assumed women want, equivalent to being a fairy tale princess. She states that, for male characters in Westerns, they may go along with marriage or may not – it is acceptable for the men to ride off into the sunset and still remain heroic. She notes that there are often two male characters in Westerns who represent these different perspectives. She states that this scenario is the case in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (John Ford; 1962), in which the main female character follows the expected path in choosing the marriageable man (and thereby the route of the princess). Mulvey suggests that there can, however, be other types of narratives in the Western, such as when the focus is on the female character's subjectivity whereby the film is, in reality, a melodrama. Her example is *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946).³⁷ Here, the story centres on the woman's struggle between two factors, namely her 'passive' feminine side and the regressive 'active' masculine side suggested by Freud. The protagonist is torn between a strong, reliable character and a rough outlaw type (Lewt) with whom she can behave like a tomboy. She wavers between the two, but in the end is 'not allowed' to fully show her masculine side and she and Lewt kill one another. Mulvey states that a similar trajectory occurs in Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937). In conclusion, Mulvey purports that female spectators may identify with the masculine side of female characters, but these characters are not acceptable within a film's narrative. This identification has to be repressed; it remains just a fantasy – a female in men's clothing.

Since Mulvey's landmark article, a number of writers have deliberated as to whether there can be a gay or queer gaze, and whether men can also be object of the gaze. Steven Drukman (1995) considers this topic through exploring the impact of certain pop music videos in his text 'The Gay Gaze, or Why I Want My MTV.' Drukman discusses the impact of Laura Mulvey's 1975 article, with its focus on the male gaze, from the perspective of gay men being both makers and bearers of the look. As he argues in relation to her theory, when visiting the cinema, 'if one is not a male heterosexual spectator, why pay the price for the ticket?' (84). He proposes that MTV videos may offer something mainstream cinema does not, as they grant 'freedom to the gay (re)-visioning of

³⁷ Mulvey dates the film's release as 1947.

Mulvey's gaze' (89); a pop video 'exposes identities as necessary fictions' (88), as they permit artists to adopt various different guises. Indeed, he suggests, this allows them to be read as camp. Drukman argues that, with regard to cinema, theatre, or television, 'camp is a primary hue through which the gay gaze is filtered' (87). He agrees with Sontag's notion (1996: 276) that camp "'converts the serious into the frivolous'" (87), but also discusses Jack Babuscio's suggestion that camp can be something defiant, such that it can have a serious as well as a comic purpose. Drukman concludes that camp offers 'a "means" or a "method" for the gay gaze' (88), a proposal that is a useful springboard for examining queerness in film musicals.

There is debate as to whether or not there is a queer gaze, and the extent to which the gaze is centred on supremacy and control. In their essay 'The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing,' Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman (1995) make it clear that they 'do not want to make the case for the "queer gaze"' (45). Instead, they propose two models of gaze theory. They note Michel Foucault's hypothesis that the gaze is controlling, which 'posits a relationship between power and knowledge' (15). They explain that John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), similarly discussed the concept of the gaze in visual culture, introducing the terms "'surveyor and surveyed'" (17), primarily in relation to looking at women in paintings, but also at women in general. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (1995) discuss both Sigmund Freud 'the father of psychoanalysis' (2), and his theories relating to the ego, narcissism and spectatorship ('Mirror Phase'), as well as Mulvey's 1975 article. They suggest that 'belonging to a sexual minority lends one an outsider's viewpoint which... does make for different ways of seeing' (5). Evans and Gamman explain that, prior to Mulvey's work, Christian Metz, in *The Imaginary Signifier*, introduced 'the model of spectatorship based on identification rather than power' (21). They state that 'the degree of objectification of men in cinema has become more overt than ever before' (31), and propose that this objectification has not just impacted on film, but also on fashion and advertising. Mulvey's theories are also discussed by Nikki Sullivan (2003) in her book *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, but she also debates more recent suggestions that male bodies, too, are 'objectified in cinema' (198), a proposal I discuss in relation to some of the films that I analyse.

Masculinity and the gaze is an area explored by Paul Burston (1995) in his chapter, 'Just a Gigolo? Narcissism, Nellyism and the "New Man" Theme.' Burston suggests that popular culture enables queer readings because 'cultural texts do not have simple meanings' (120). He analyses nominally heterosexual representations of men in two mainstream films – Richard Gere in *American Gigolo* (Paul Schrader; 1980) and Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* (Tony Scott; 1986), arguing that, although the stars' bodies appear to be 'on display' (111) for female viewers to admire, men might also view them erotically. This is a view that has been applied towards male stars in Golden Age Hollywood

musicals. Paul Willemen (1980/1999), for example, suggests that, in classic American musicals, 'the display of the male body is at least as significant as the female body, perhaps even more so (for example Astaire, Kelly)' (182), while Steve Neale (1983/1999) argues that musicals are 'the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way' (286). These are views that I will explore further in relation to male dancers in post-Stonewall musicals such as *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame*.

Mulvey's main arguments about the gaze in cinema centre on her belief that female characters on screen are represented as 'passive' and on the way they are perceived in her opinion by male audience members. Her premise is therefore that the men viewing the films are heterosexual. She does not comment on the representation of queer characters or queer spectators, nor does she comment on film musicals specifically. Nevertheless, her theory of the gaze raises questions about representations of characters that may be read as queer in post-Production Code musicals, especially given the views of Willemen and Neale.

Differing Masculinities

Given Mulvey's views about male hegemony and the gaze, it will be useful, therefore, to consider gaze theories and the display of the body in relation to the objectification and homoeroticisation of the male in musicals, and how such musicals may thereby be queered. In her book on the topic of Masculinities, R. W. Connell (1995) argues that "'[M]asculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity' (68). Suggesting that gender is a social practice, she asserts that there are many masculinities, and one needs to consider elements such as race and class in discourse around the topic. In her discussion on hegemonic masculinity, she states the importance of recognising 'the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men' (78) in society, such that gay masculinity is viewed to be inferior.

Hegemony is an area also addressed by Mike Donaldson, who asks 'What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?' in his article from 1993. He argues that '[A] fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity... is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men.' However, masculinities are different and diverse. Judith Halberstam proposes that, although masculinity 'conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege' (1998: 2), there are different masculinities, including masculine women. Furthermore, the rise of the 'metrosexual' man in the 1990s blurred boundaries regarding sexual preferences, and led to more discussion about a multiplicity of masculinities.

The pertinent topic of the construction of gender roles in films is discussed by Marion Gymnich. She argues that 'in genres such as the Western or the action film... the aggressive

behaviour displayed by many male characters tends to be presented as the norm of masculinity' (2010: 7). As suggested by Amanda Howell, male characters in classic Hollywood films were traditionally measured against 'the strong but silent type' – and 'found wanting' (2015: 1). Men in musicals could still be categorised in this way – for example, Gordon MacRae's Curly McLain in *Oklahoma* – but the fact that men were engaging in more 'feminised' activities such as dance problematised their representation. Yvonne Tasker (1993) discusses the performance of masculinity in her chapter 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice, in Contemporary Action Cinema.' She argues that the male body became more marketable in films of the 1980s, but proposes that 'the male body and its commodification as spectacle' (237) in action movies can also be presented humourously, such that the male leads do not just have muscles, but also comical lines, offering 'heroism as a costume' (242). I will analyse constructions of masculinities, including stereotypes, in some of the film musicals that I analyse, referencing the different ways in which male characters may be read queerly.

Defining/Describing Queer Identity, and Intersectionality

Queer theory began to surface in academia in the 1990s. As Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street (2007) explain in their edited collection *Queer Screen: A Screen Reader*, academic study on this topic advanced around the same time that Ruby Rich laid claim in 1992 to an emerging new queer cinema. The authors propose that the movies themselves (rather than other queer texts/theorists) were the starting point for pertinent research in the area of film studies, with mainstream films being as important as independents in this regard. Indeed, they argue, '[F]or queer scholars such as Richard Dyer, Alexander Doty or Andy Medhurst, popular culture has always been of interest as a queer space' (6). Noting that the term 'queer theory' was first used by Teresa de Lauretis when she edited a special issue of *differences* in 1991, Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (1996) suggest that queering texts such as films allows audiences to 'challenge the dominance of heterosexist discourses' (165) through reading such texts from a queer perspective. This is a methodology that is important within my analyses of the film musicals I have selected.

In their text *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (2006), Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2006) include a discussion of film musicals. They argue that they can be 'easy to read as queer' because, in the West, 'music, dance, grace, beauty, and emotion' are viewed as "'feminine" traits' (72), areas I will debate further in my analyses of diverse masculinities. In addition, they suggest, the genre offers 'fantastic utopian escapism' (72), and propose that there are many facets of the musical that appeal to gay men, such as characters cross-dressing, and mistaken identities. Indeed, the latter is a theme employed in early musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger

Rogers, such as *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, 1934). Brett Farmer (2000) confirms that the musical has been a very popular genre for the gay male population, such that 'the term *musical* has long been used as a coded reference to homosexuality' (74). Graham Wood (2002/2008) goes as far as to say that 'an expression of interest in musicals can be virtually synonymous as coming out as gay (at least in American culture)' (312). These views designate film musicals as a genre that is popular within queer communities.

Nikki Sullivan (2003) proposes that 'there is no single correct way to queer popular culture' (189) but, using Alexander Doty's suggestion that 'texts assumed to be heteronormative may contain queer elements' (191), she argues that it is important to acknowledge that an audience may interpret certain texts as queer even if that was not the original intention. In other words, it is not necessarily the texts themselves, but how they are interpreted, that is relevant with regard to queerness, an approach I will be focusing on in some of my analysis.

Defining the term queer has proved difficult and various descriptors have been proposed. For example, Jodie Taylor (2012) calls queer 'a slippery term' (13), Stacey and Street (2007) suggest that it 'in many ways... defies definition' (1), and Judith Butler (2013) describes the term as 'expansive' (21). David Halperin (1995/1997) argues that the word queer is sometimes still used as if synonymous with gay, whilst at other times it is utilised in an all-encompassing derogatory way. However, he does offer a definition, stating that queer references 'a positionality vis-à-vis the normative' which is 'available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices' (62). Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004) also offer a definition, stating that queer encompasses 'any sexuality not defined as heterosexual procreative monogamy... queers are people (including heterosexuals) who do not organise their sexuality according to that rubric' (1). Therefore, people or artefacts described as queer may be wide-ranging.

There are also different and changing viewpoints as to what is encompassed by the word itself. A number of writers acknowledge that queer was used historically in a derogatory fashion (e.g. Stacey and Street [2007: 1]; Taylor [2012: 13]) until being upturned to be used in a positive manner. David Savran (1998), in his discussion of the historical meaning of the word, states that it 'has been reclaimed, inverted if you will, as a form of resignification' (282), although he suggests that some older homosexuals prefer to be called lesbian or gay. Beemyn and Eliason (1996) similarly explain that the word is not popular with everyone, given its previous historical utilisation, suggesting that 'no one term or phrase can satisfy everyone' (5). Alongside this is the fact that the word's common usage as an umbrella term is similarly not universally popular. For example, although Steven Angelides (2013) states that queer is a useful 'umbrella category for the sexually marginalized' (60), particularly those who identify as bisexual, Halperin (1995/1997) proposes that

the term can give a 'false impression of inclusiveness.' Sullivan (2003) similarly argues that there is some danger in using queer in this fashion, because this promotes only 'sexuality as a unified and unifying factor' (44), thereby ignoring issues such as a person's race, age, etc.

The term queer implies a politics of difference; as Taylor argues, queer is often employed as 'a term of resistance' (14), and thus with a political resonance. She argues further that queer 'is not a monolithic category,' but rather that 'it seeks to disrupt or trouble all boundaries and identities' (30), challenging dominant discourses. She proposes that '[Q]ueerness is sustained through its perpetual challenge to normalising mandates' (14) and hegemonic power and control. Rosemary Hennessy (2013), too, suggests that to identify as queer is to challenge the 'normative power' (135) of heterosexuality, proposing that queer theory is 'a site of struggle' (135). Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (1995) similarly suggest that queer theory is political as well as cultural, as it aims to challenge what sexuality actually means (1), while Annamarie Jagose argues that 'queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal' (1996: 99).

Queer also destabilises the suggestion that identities are binary. Taylor proposes that queerness 'marks a flexible space of expression and signification' (35) that confronts the idea of essentialism. Savran (1998) argues that queer 'also represents a different way of conceptualizing sexual identity' (282). In other words, it undermines the customary binary opposites, thereby 'designating a wide range of sexual and gender dissidents' (282) such that it can be used equally by anybody to describe their gender. Stacey and Street (2007) explain the term queer promotes 'the multiple perversities of so-called "non-heteronormative sexualities"' (2). Similarly, Jack Curtis Dubowsky (2016), in *Intersecting Film, Music, and Queerness*, states that he construes the term 'broadly... to encompass all types of non-heteronormative and non-homonormative sexualities and gender,' including 'heterosexuals whose partnering, fetish, or lifestyle interests fall beyond dominant patriarchal paradigms' (2). He also explains that his understanding of queerness incorporates 'people of all sexual persuasions, interests, and genders, anyone bullied or cast outside for who they "are" or might be presumed to "be"' (15). This ties in with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's proposal in *Tendencies* that '[A]nyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else' (1993: 9). As can be seen from these different perspectives, queer is not a monosemic term, instead offering a plurality of interpretations.

The view that identifying as queer is not just 'anti-heteronormative' but also 'anti-normative' (426) is championed by Sara Ahmed (2013). Ahmed argues that the 'norm' is that someone will be attracted to a person of the opposite sex and will then reproduce, otherwise it can be 'a threat to the social ordering of life itself' (423), and thereby suggests that identifying as queer, or indeed as Other, can be viewed as a threat. She suggests that heterosexuals are therefore

comfortable in the world, while those who identify as queer 'may feel uncomfortable' (425) as they do not fit the expected 'norm.'

Notions of intersectionality with regard to queerness have gained momentum in recent years. This will be a noteworthy area for exploration in relation to one of the characters in *Fame*, namely Leroy (Gene Anthony Ray). In her article 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who is credited with coining the term intersectionality, explains the importance of a person's 'intersectional experiences' (167), including their class, in the fight against racism and sexism. In her 2018 article 'What Is Intersectionality and Why Is It Important?: Building solidarity in the fight for social justice,' Anne Sisson Runyan (2018) proposes that 'intersectional thinking has also opened the way to more inclusive and coalitional social movements and agendas... movements informed by intersectionality remain flexible and forward-looking.'³⁸ Drawing on Crenshaw, Stacy Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris (2019) argue that the term intersectionality demonstrates 'how oppressive institutions, attitudes and actions in cultures including racism, xenophobia, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, religious and spiritual fundamentalism, ageism and ableism are connected and mutually influencing' (2). These are important considerations with regard to those who are marginalised, including those identifying as queer.

James Joseph Dean (2010) explains that '[I]ntersectionality scholarship... views identity categories as forming a subject's multiple positions in an overlapping and interdefining manner' (123). Ruth Goldman (1996), in her essay, 'Who is that *Queer* Queer? Exploring Norms and Sexuality, Race, and Class in Queer Theory,' addresses the importance of intersectionality, that is, the inclusion of discussions about race, class, etc., rather than just gender or sexuality, when considering queerness. She quotes from Elisabeth Daümer, who proposed that 'to be queer implies that not everybody is queer in the same way' [from *Hypatia* 7, 1992:100] (170). As noted by Doug Meyer (2012) in his considerations of violence against those identifying as queer in the US, '[I]ntersectional theory contends that social phenomena are often best understood by examining the overlap of institutional power structures such as race, class, gender, and sexuality' (850).³⁹ Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) explains that when a person describes themselves as queer, this can have a different meaning from somebody else, as identity encompasses various factors, not just gender (e.g., ethnicity). In their discussion about queerness and intersectionality, Erich N. Pitcher, Scotty M. Secrist and Trace P. Camacho (2016) propose that intersectionality considers 'the ways in which social inequality and

³⁸ See www.aaup.org/article/what-intersectionality-and-why-it-important#.YUsICuySncc (accessed 22 September 2021)

³⁹ Taylor (2012), too, whilst primarily focusing on gender and sexuality in her book, acknowledges that the term queer needs to incorporate other aspects of identity.

differences manifest in the lives of individuals and can make visible the effects of interlocking systems of oppression' (331). Beemyn and Eliason (1996) argue of queer theory that identity politics is lacking, because it does not take account of other attributes or beliefs, e.g., it excludes race, class, etc. Such approaches acknowledge the multiplicities present in debating queer theory and applying queerness to aspects of popular culture such as film.

Conclusion

The review of the relevant literature discussed covers a number of themes that are pertinent to my thesis. These include: characteristic facets of the film musical genre; ideas of utopia and freedom; theories of performativity, incorporating gender as a social construct and the notion of masking; theories of the gaze; representations of masculinity and the male body in musicals; and definitions of the term queer. The use of the term queer has altered in more recent years, changing from a derogatory term of abuse to one used with pride and self-assurance. The word is most often employed with reference to gender and sexuality, and also adopted as anti-essentialist to illustrate that gender is constructed. Queer can be used as an umbrella term that includes those who identify as bisexual, transgender and intersex as well as people identifying as homosexual and lesbian, and is thus anti-binary in scope, and I will be employing the term in this manner in my thesis. There have been moves to adopt a more intersectional approach with regard to queerness in more recent years, thereby considering other aspects of someone's identity, such as age, race and class. It has also been recognised that heterosexuals may identify as queer, depending on their lifestyle and sexual practices. Being queer can be viewed as being anti-normative, therefore – an identity that confronts hegemonies and challenges common expectations. Furthermore, it is recognised that characters and narratives may be read as queer even if other readings are possible, a fact that I explore in greater detail within my chapters.

I have selected for analysis four well-known, mainstream Hollywood films that were released at different points through the decade, so that I can take a chronological approach to documenting the changing landscape in relation to the noted themes. This will enable me to trace any major socio-political developments alongside representations of queerness in these film musicals. Pivotal to my exploration of queerness in the four films I analyse are the topics of licensed spaces and the carnivalesque, as I determine how the filmic narratives offer or include a 'safe' space in which the queerness of characters can be read or expressed more clearly. Such spaces may vary, but will contrast with life beyond these licensed spaces, as they may offer opportunities for the carnivalesque, a 'turning upside down' of how the world presents outside such spaces. Characters that can be read queerly may thus behave and act differently or change within these utopic,

dreamlike spaces, offering the characters a type of utopia – a time and place where queerness is endorsed and where there is a greater acceptance, albeit for a limited period.

Chapter One of my thesis considers a female musical star as queer persona in one of the first major musicals to be released after the Stonewall riots and demise of the Production Code, Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*. 'Place, Space and Queer Iconicity: Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (1972)' examines the historical context in which the film was set, including the emergence of the 'New Woman' in Germany after World War One. It also explores possible links between Minnelli's performance as Sally Bowles and those of recognisable queer female icons from the past, namely Louise Brooks, Marlene Dietrich and Judy Garland. Using Richard Dyer's evaluations as to why Garland is/was a gay icon, namely, her ordinariness, campness, and androgyny, I apply these factors to explore whether Garland's ghosting presence haunts her daughter's performance as Sally Bowles. Given that all of Minnelli's numbers take place on the cabaret stage, I investigate how this environment offers a licensed space for queer performance that is not possible in the world outside the club.

In Chapter Two, "'Just a Sweet Transvestite"? Representations of Queerness in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975),' I analyse the topics of queerness and queer space to establish ways in which the castle presided over by Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) offers a licensed space for the celebration of non-normative sexualities. I focus in particular on the performance of Curry to consider whether there are numerous facets to the character of Frank, with his transvestitism being only one of these. Curry consciously looks directly into the camera on many occasions to acknowledge being the subject of the gaze, thereby appearing to engage directly with the filmic audience. Referencing Heather Laing's suggestion that audiences can feel that they are kindred spirits with performers through song, I explore how Curry's deliberate interactions with the filmic audience in his numbers and beyond challenge portrayals of normative gender and accentuate an acceptance of queerness in wider society, such as via the audience participation that has evolved around this cult film. Furthermore, the narrative's references to kitsch and camp, with its deliberate flamboyance and excess, bring queerness into critical focus.

As with Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, Tony Manero (John Travolta) in *Saturday Night Fever* is keen to improve his lot and escape his humdrum life via his talent – although this time as a dancer rather than a singer. In Chapter Three, 'Dualities of Masculinity: John Travolta and Queerness in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977),' I examine theories regarding both the gaze and masculinities to explore whether, although seemingly representing overt heterosexuality and hypermasculinity, Travolta is filmed and presented in a way that potentially makes him the object of the gaze for homosexual men as well as for heterosexual women. In addition, I question whether this musical offers filmic audiences opportunities for queer readings via the popular music sub-genre of disco, with the disco

setting itself potentially offering a utopic, licensed space in which Tony is able to display a freedom that is impossible to express outside the futuristically-named 2001 Odyssey. Given that scholars such as Ken McLeod (2006) observe that disco music in the United States was originally popular within a number of communities that could be deemed marginalised, I consider ways in which the incorporation of disco songs enhances grounds for queer readings.

The narrative of Alan Parker's *Fame* centres on a number of students who also could be deemed to be 'outsiders.' In Chapter Four, 'Performing Queerness: *Fame* (1980),' I consider in particular the queerness of two characters, Leroy (Gene Anthony Ray) and Montgomery (Paul McCrane). Importantly, the film features a gay male character, Montgomery, whose 'unmasking' as homosexual is via a 'coming out' monologue at the school he attends. I investigate how his close friendship with Doris (Maureen Teefy) signifies her as 'fag-hag,' and also the way in which his friendship with Ralph (Barry Miller) can be interpreted. With regard to Leroy, I explore the theme of masculinities in terms of how this character is presented throughout the narrative. I also consider Leroy as a Black performer, especially given Brett Farmer's argument that 'many gay spectators strongly identify with figures and images of racial/ethnic difference' (2000: 89). I also question whether the school offers the students a safe haven from their unusual or dysfunctional home lives.

In taking a chronological approach to analysing the films selected, the thesis considers the extent to which the narratives may or may not be progressive in their representations of queerness as well as the ways in which such representations are manifested. *Cabaret* is set in a time and place in which there were opportunities to express one's queerness quite openly in particular settings, albeit that this was to be short-lived. It is therefore noteworthy that it was released at a time when various gay liberation groups were becoming more visible. The storyline of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* presents queerness in an overt way, but within a fantasy-type setting, merging past and futuristic worlds. The final two films analysed are both set in New York during the time of their release. *Saturday Night Fever* allows for various readings of the main character, but presents him in a way that strongly suggests a queer subtext. *Fame* again includes a character that offers audiences the opportunity to read him as queer, but additionally incorporates a character whose homosexuality is explicit. Although he is presented in a manner that mixes stereotypicality and originality, nevertheless, his portrayal suggests that openly queer characters were beginning to be presented sensitively and sympathetically.

CHAPTER ONE - Place, Space and Queer Iconicity: Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (1972)

Introduction

Cabaret (Bob Fosse, 1972) was one of the first successful Hollywood film musicals of the post-Stonewall era,⁴⁰ released at a time when the Gay Rights movement was becoming more prominent. The Gay Activists Alliance, for example, was formed in the United States at the end of 1969, and the first Gay Liberation Day March took place in New York in 1970, leading to greater public visibility of those identifying as LGBTQ+. It is innovative for the filmic subgenre of musicals that the narrative of a movie from this time incorporates characters of ambiguous or non-normative sexual orientation, such as the Emcee (Joel Grey), Brian (Michael York) and Elke (Ricky Renee), thereby overtly suggesting that the text, and a number of its characters, are open to queer readings.⁴¹ Indeed, Alan Lareau proposes that the film 'put the breakdown and inversion of traditional sexualities in the foreground' (2005: 16). The movie therefore enhances queer visibility at a time when activists identifying as non-normative were promoting and seeking equality.

In this chapter, I investigate the degree to which *Cabaret* is a film that can additionally be read queerly due to the presence and performance of Liza Minnelli in the role of Sally Bowles. Given that all of Minnelli's numbers take place on stage, I explore the cabaret, called the Kit Kat Klub, as queer space, through it being infused with the spirit of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work on François Rabelais. I discuss the extent to which the venue offers a safe space for those inside the Klub – including Sally – that contrasts vividly with the growing political restlessness in the city outside, thereby questioning whether the cabaret is a queer space that is also a licensed space for rebellion and diversity. To explore these ideas further, I debate the degree to which Sally's performances in the club add an additional layer of queerness to the character, via the cabaret's embracing of the 'world inside out' of the carnivalesque that Bakhtin describes (1968/1984: 11).

I also consider the extent to which Minnelli's performance as Sally can be read queerly through possible links to queer icon Marlene Dietrich, alongside allusions to Louise Brooks and the independent 'New Woman' prominent in Weimar Berlin, thereby illustrating a diverse representation of womanhood that challenges expected gender norms. In addition, I investigate whether Minnelli is further designated as queer due to the lingering, haunting presence of her mother, gay icon Judy Garland, when she is on screen. To debate this latter proposal, I analyse how Minnelli's performance as Sally exhibits facets of the three qualities that are referenced by Richard Dyer in his influential investigation, through the prism of 'white urban male gay subculture'

⁴⁰ The film won eight Oscars and received positive reviews.

⁴¹ Kevin Winkler argues that '[M]aking the leading male character in an American film bisexual was indeed daring in 1972' (2018: 154).

(1986/2004: 3), into the reasons for Judy Garland's gay iconicity. The three qualities he names in this regard are 'ordinariness, androgyny and camp' (1986/2004: 151). I discuss to what extent Minnelli's Sally also exhibits these qualities via the embodiment of a number of the mannerisms and characteristics typical of Garland, such that it is possible to read Minnelli in the film as a superimposed version of her mother as palimpsest.

Cabaret's Beginnings

Cabaret started life as the text *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), written by Englishman Christopher Isherwood, with its stories based on the time the author spent in the city between 1929 and 1933. One of the characters featured is Sally Bowles, an English woman who performs at the Lady Windermere bar. She is described as an artist who 'sang badly, without any expression, her hands hanging down at her sides' (1939/1990: 38). The text provided the basis for John van Druten's 1951 play *I Am a Camera*, which was adapted for the screen (Henry Cornelius, 1955) with Julie Harris, who had starred in the stage version, reprising her role as Sally.⁴² Playwright Joe Masteroff explains that the suggestion to turn *I Am a Camera* into a musical came from Harold Prince, who went on to produce and direct the stage version of *Cabaret* (Guernsey, 1985: 135). Prince employed John Kander and Fred Ebb to write the songs, as he was impressed with the score they had composed for a recent Broadway production named *Flora the Red Menace* (1965).⁴³ *Cabaret* was Kander and Ebb's second musical to be produced on Broadway; it followed on from *Flora*, which starred Liza Minnelli in the leading role. Although *Flora* was not well-received (Leve, 2009: 170; Mizejewski, 1992: 164), Minnelli impressed enough to win a Tony award for best actress and she was therefore familiar to Kander and Ebb prior to being cast as Sally in the film version of *Cabaret*.⁴⁴ The producer of the movie, Cy Feuer, nominated Bob Fosse as director; Fosse also choreographed the dance numbers, all of which take place within the cabaret.

The storylines of the stage and film versions of *Cabaret* differ in many respects.⁴⁵ This is reflected partly in terms of the personnel. The importance of some characters is expanded from the stage musical (for example, Sally). Other characters are either re-introduced (for example, Fritz and Natalia), renamed (Brian), or reduced in significance (such as Fräulein Schneider)⁴⁶ from the stage version, *I Am A Camera*, or Isherwood's stories. The film musical can therefore be seen as a text in its own right, with the recognition that the character of Sally has undergone a number of

⁴² The opening lines of Isherwood's story are 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.'

⁴³ The book is by George Abbott and Robert Russell.

⁴⁴ See Leve (2009: 173) and Mizejewski (1992: 164).

⁴⁵ For more information about these changes, see Mitchell Morris (2004), Keith Garebian (1999), Randy Clark (1991), and Kevin Boyd Grub (1989).

⁴⁶ This character is named Fräulein Schroeder in the original novel.

reincarnations. One of the major changes to the Sally of the film musical is that she becomes, via Minnelli, an accomplished singer and performer, and thus is very different from Isherwood's description of the character. In addition, she is the one main character who features prominently both on the stage of the Kit Kat Klub and also in the world outside the cabaret. With Minnelli cast as Sally, it is not surprising that Kander and Ebb were asked to compose some additional songs to fit both the film's new narrative and her vocal abilities, and the new songs particularly impact on the reception of Sally, as she is involved in more of the numbers (Clark, 1991: 55). However, Minnelli's performance encompasses a complexity that allows it to be interpreted as both androgynous and camp. Indeed, there is a paradoxical fusion in her portrayal of the character that offers contradictory readings, such as gawky, yet elegant, and ordinary, yet spectacular. It is arguably Minnelli's version of Sally that is best known to the wider public, given the film's success and continuing popularity.⁴⁷ Indeed, the fact that the stage show now incorporates many of Sally's songs from the film further emphasises the movie's – and Minnelli's – iconicity.

Cabaret's Time and Place

Following the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany became a republic in 1919. The country had suffered a huge loss of life during the First World War, and this impacted on the country's finances. Furthermore, the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed in June 1919, stated that Germany should pay reparations because it was responsible for initiating the war, and Michael S. Neiberg suggests that 'the initial payments called for in the treaty were crippling' (2017: 61). The National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi Party, was formed in 1920 during a period of hyperinflation in the country. The Great Depression in the USA additionally affected Germany's fragile economy, leading to both further unemployment and growing support for the Nazi Party.

Set in Berlin in 1931, *Cabaret* portrays the increasing presence of Nazi Party members in the city. The vast majority of viewers of the film at the time of its release would have been aware of the atrocities committed by members of the Nazi Party against particular groups who, they believed, did not fit with their ideology of the superiority of an Aryan master race. The film's subplot of the growing relationship between Natalia (Marisa Berenson) and Fritz (Fritz Wendel), along with the Emcee's number 'If You Could See Her,' allude in some measure to the rising persecution of followers of the Jewish faith. However, those identifying as queer were also targeted by the Party. As noted by Rüdiger Lautmann, '[T]his century's most extreme form of antihomosexual repression

⁴⁷ The film is featured regularly in television schedules and Minnelli won the Academy Award for 'Best Actress in a Leading Role.' See Stephen Tropiano, *Music on Film: Cabaret* (Milwaukee, WI: Limelight Editions, 2011), p. 108

occurred in Germany between 1933 and 1945' (1981: 141), with many homosexuals sentenced to spend time in concentration camps from as early as 1933 (Lautmann, 1981: 143).

One striking scene in *Cabaret* demonstrates the way that Nazi beliefs were infiltrating Germany's general public. It features the only song performed outside the cabaret, and does not involve Sally. While Sally is asleep in the car, Max (Helmut Griem) and Brian, who have become lovers, have a drink together in a beer garden. A young man 'who could be the poster boy for Aryan good looks' (Belletto, 2008: 612) starts to sing what appears to be a traditional folk song. However, the camera gradually pans down to show that he is wearing an armband that signifies him as a member of the Hitler Youth organisation (*Hitlerjugend*). With the exception of one elderly man, those in the garden, some of whom similarly wear Nazi armbands, gradually stand up and join in the singing of 'Tomorrow Belongs To Me.'⁴⁸ The singing becomes progressively more animated and intense and Max and Brian, who can be viewed as representative of the queer community, decide to leave. They are clearly outsiders within this environment; indeed, the portentous scene is a forewarning of what is on the horizon for many people identifying as queer. This is the only number performed in an outside space, and this space is signified as not being 'safe' for those who do not 'fit' with Nazi ideology, denoted in the scene by the departure of Max and Brian while the song is being sung. The constraints of the outside space contrast with the freedom demonstrated in the 'inside' space of the Kit Kat Klub. However, the suggestion that this freedom is to be short term is denoted at the end of the movie through the club's distorted mirrors revealing the presence of members of the Nazi Party among the crowd, thereby showing that they are no longer just 'outside,' but also 'inside' as part of the cabaret audience.⁴⁹

The release of the film version of *Cabaret* came at a time when the freedom licensed in the Kit Kat Klub of 1931 for those identifying as queer was again being sought following years of oppression. The discrimination being shown to particular groups by the Nazi Party a few years after the film's setting could be seen as similar to the prejudice many queer people were still experiencing in the 1970s, but now resisting more actively. The film conveys this liberty in a narrative that is advanced for its time, not only because it features bisexual and other non-heteronormative characters, but also through the inclusion of an ambitious and independent woman seeking a career – something that would resonate also with women of the early 1970s who were striving for equal rights.

⁴⁸ The song is written in strophic form, giving the impression that it is a familiar folk song.

⁴⁹ Gemma Casadevall notes, for example, that '[P]olitical cabaret... disappeared under the Third Reich, albeit only in German territory. Some of those who stayed behind... ended up in concentration camps' (2007: 81).

Cabaret and the 'New Woman'

Fosse was keen to portray the era in which *Cabaret* is set as authentically as possible.⁵⁰ This not only involved filming in Germany, but also ensuring that the stage in the Klub was a similar size to those in the cabarets of the 1920s and 1930s (Garebian, 1999: 131). The first cabaret in Germany was established in Berlin in 1901, and during the years of the Weimar Republic, there was a relaxed attitude as to what could be portrayed on the cabaret stage.⁵¹ As there was no longer strict censorship, topics addressed included 'pornography, song, sport, and stinging satire,' which were 'all recorded in... *The Blue Angel* with Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings' (Garebian, 1999: 53). Kicklines of women were popular, the most famous of which were the Tiller Girls (Jelavich, 1993: 176).⁵² Such ensembles offered 'a new image of womanhood, full of strength and energy,' which 'negated the picture of passive sexual receptivity that had prevailed until then, and made the Girls seem asexual' (Jelavich, 1993: 177). Their mechanical movements also suggested a more contemporary environment, evoking efficiency, modernity, and change, areas similarly typified by the 'New Woman,' a figure who came to symbolise the disputes between traditionalists and modernists in Germany during the Weimar years (Kosta, 2009: 87). This 'strength' and 'energy' was represented, for example, in the style of clothing women wore, as they needed practical garments for the workplace.

In the aftermath of the First World War, women were gaining more freedom in German society. Although women from the lower classes had often been in employment, more middle-class women were now joining the workforce. The impact of this was twofold. On the one hand, it meant that more females were attaining economic independence, thereby promoting social change. On the other, however, there were concerns that women would no longer fulfil what were seen as their traditional roles, namely, being wives and mothers (McCormick, 1993: 647). In particular, there was dissension from many people – women as well as men – in respect of the 'New Woman,' not only because she was an independent female seeking a career, but also because the women concerned often wore styles of clothing more traditionally sported by men. The tabloid press of the day reported this situation as alarming. Newspapers belittled 'the threatening *Mannsweib* ("Mannish Woman") figure,' which was 'synonymous with the New Woman's androgyny' (Hales, 2007: 227), because they believed such females posed a danger to men's rightful position in society. For example, Barbara Hales mentions an article from 1925 in the magazine *Berlin Illustrierte Zeitung*,

⁵⁰ See Boyd Grubb (1989: 144-146 and 149-150), and Garebian (1999: 129-132).

⁵¹ The Weimar years are generally considered as 1919-1933. As Peter Jelavich explains, prior to 1918, police had the power to ban 'any presentation that they believed would offend public morals or religious sensibilities' (1993: 154), but during the Weimar years, there was more freedom due to 'more liberalized definitions of obscenity' (1993: 155).

⁵² Jelavich notes that the Tiller Girls appeared in Herman Haller's Weimar Revue in the 1920s (1993: 165).

called 'Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women,' which bemoaned the 'unfeminine' way some women were dressing (2007: 234). Such illustrated newspapers provided 'some of the most sensationalist contemporary commentary on the masculine woman' (Sutton: 2011/2013: 11). The perceived 'threats' were not only considered to be from the working woman, but also the more sexualised woman, and the more overtly visible lesbian community frequenting bars and clubs in big cities.

During this period, Berlin was viewed as a liberal city in this respect. Particular clubs were frequented on a regular basis by 'men wearing powder and rouge as well as short-haired women dressed in tuxedos' (Whisnant, 2016: 84). Clayton J Whisnant argues that, '[P]erhaps more than anywhere else, Weimar Germany became associated with experimentation in sexuality' (2016: 91). The public prominence of a queer subculture in Berlin during this period, and the ability of cabarets to shape and convey these differing outlooks, are issues explored by Alan Lareau. He explains that, between 1919 and 1933, 'satirical cabarets and gay locales became notorious haunts of the avant-garde' (2005: 16). One famous duet of the time that addressed lesbianism was 'When My Best Girlfriend' ('Wenn die beste Freundin'), sung by Margo Lion and Marlene Dietrich (Lareau, 2005: 20), a song that Steven Bach calls 'a breezy lesbian duet' (1992/2011: 84).⁵³ Jelavich explains that, on the surface, the song's subject matter focuses on two women who are out shopping together, but it is implicit within the lyrics that they have no time for their husbands and are involved in a relationship with one another. He proposes that this song 'became an unofficial anthem for German lesbians in the late twenties' (1993: 193), while Hales suggests that the song 'documents bisexual desire in Weimar culture' and led to Dietrich becoming 'a cult figure for lesbians' at this time (2007: 233).⁵⁴ It was not long before Dietrich's fame grew following her starring role as Lola Lola in the film *The Blue Angel*/*Der blaue Engel* (Josef von Sternberg; 1930).

Film was considered one of the arts that led to an 'Americanisation' of Germany during the years of the Weimar Republic, impacting on the social changes viewed by many traditionalists as detrimental to the country's future.⁵⁵ The narrative of *The Blue Angel* encompassed many of the internal conflicts about a changing society prevalent in Germany's Weimar years, such as the perceived threat of the sexualised female.⁵⁶ A number of those appearing on screen and behind the

⁵³ As noted by Katie Sutton, the word girlfriend was 'also a frequent term of self-description among homosexual women at this period' (2011/2013: 11). Lion and Dietrich performed the duet within the 1928 show *It's in the Air* (*Es liegt in der Luft*).

⁵⁴ Alice A. Kuzniar reports that the singers 'pinned a posy of violets, the lesbian flower, to their shoulders' (2007: 239).

⁵⁵ The influence of Jazz was another area of debate.

⁵⁶ This includes high versus low art and traditional versus modern. For more discussion on various themes in the film, see, for example, Patrice Petro, 'National Cinemas / International Film Culture: *The Blue Angel* (1930)

scenes 'had long-standing careers in cabaret, as did the composer Friedrich Hollaender' (Kosta, 2009: 38), thereby authenticating the representation of *The Blue Angel* in the film as a club typical of the period. Barbara Kosta describes *The Blue Angel* as 'one of the best-known films to emerge from the Weimar Republic' (2009: 1), and argues that it has been '[K]ept alive by the image of Dietrich and her iconization' (2009: 1). However, the fact that Dietrich continued to reject 'traditional roles of womanhood in favor of sexual independence and androgyny' was seen by many of her countryfolk as 'profoundly un-German' (Desjardins and Gemünden, 2007: 5). Indeed, many of Dietrich's early roles typify her as a 'New Woman.'⁵⁷

Minnelli similarly problematises the heteronormative notion of femaleness in the role of Sally. She stated in an interview with Rose Eichenbaum in 2006 that she modelled her look for Sally on actress Louise Brooks and other photographs of women from the period given to her by her father, rather than on Dietrich (Hirt-Manheimer, 2008: 163). Brooks sported the *Bubikopf* (bob) hairstyle that was 'widely recognized as the quintessence of the New Woman's androgyny' (Laikin Funkenstein, 2007: 394) and 'a threatening symbol of women's masculinization' (Sutton, 2011: 32). Brooks was most famous for her role as Lulu in the film *Pandora's Box* (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, G.W. Pabst, 1929), the narrative of which includes another woman becoming infatuated with Lulu.⁵⁸ Brooks herself admitted to having affairs with both men and women; Barry Paris suggests that her acknowledgement of having sexual relationships with three other women is likely to be 'a conservative figure' (1989: 239). While Sally does indeed have a 'bob' androgynous hairstyle that is similar to that of Brooks, there are also echoes of Dietrich's Lola Lola in Minnelli's performance. This combination suggests that the character of Sally as portrayed by Minnelli can be interpreted as a 'New Woman.'

However, the freedom of independent women at this time, like the freedom that could be expressed on the cabaret stage, was also to be short-lived due to the philosophy of the Nazi regime regarding the place of women in society. Jill Stephenson explains that '[T]he Nazi message to everyone was: be a mother, first, foremost and always' (2001: 16). Furthermore, 'Hitler believed unswervingly that women had no place in public or political life' (Stephenson, 2001:16). In practice, this meant that the 'accepted' place for women to be was in the home; Alexander J. De Grand observes that 'the Nazis presented medals... to mothers of numerous children: a bronze for five,

in Multiple Language Versions' in Noah William Isenberg (ed.), *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 255-270.

⁵⁷ Dietrich moved to the USA in 1930 and Thomas Doherty reports that both *The Blue Angel* and *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) were banned in Nazi Germany. Dietrich became an American citizen in 1939 due to her anti-fascist beliefs. See Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 27 and pp. 204-5.

⁵⁸ Vito Russo argues that the character of the Countess Geschwitz (Alice Roberts) 'is probably the first explicitly drawn lesbian character on film' (1981/1987: 24).

silver for six and gold for seven' (1995: 62). Women were thus expected to have specific gender roles that contrasted noticeably with those of self-sufficient, independent women, such as those employed in the cabarets. Indeed, the women working in the Kit Kat Klub present with an alternative version of culturally-constructed female behaviours. This fact is perhaps best demonstrated in *Cabaret* in an early number, 'Mein Herr,' in which the performance of Minnelli as Sally not only echoes the androgyny of Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, but also the androgyny ascribed by Dyer to Judy Garland in his analysis of why she is designated as a gay icon.

Minnelli/Sally and Androgyny

Some of the readings of Minnelli's Sally as androgynous centre on the idea that Minnelli does not present as traditionally 'feminine.' Linda Mizejewski proposes that 'Minnelli's attractiveness verges on masculine handsomeness' (1992: 210), for example, and claims this is because her build is 'much flatter and longer than the traditionally curvaceous show girl' (1992: 210) although, at less than 5' 5" in height, Minnelli would not be described as tall for a woman. These descriptions not only make assumptions about a woman's accepted body shape and reinforce expected gender norms – especially as 'show girls' were not necessarily 'curvaceous' – but also recall issues experienced by Judy Garland who, as is well publicised, regularly tried to lose weight to appear svelte on screen. Adrienne L. McLean notes that Garland 'did not conform to "normal" (that is, cultural and ideological) images of the adult feminine star body, and to "correct" this meant continual manipulation with heavy corsets and harnesses as well as dieting' (2002: 8). Mizejewski's remarks about Minnelli's supposed 'masculine handsomeness' may perhaps therefore be based around the notion that, like her mother, she does not fulfil a specific type of body shape traditionally associated with Hollywood starlets.

In his analysis of Garland as a gay icon, Dyer differentiates between sexual and gender androgyny, stating that Garland 'regularly expressed' the latter (1986/2004: 166).⁵⁹ He explains that she sometimes wore clothing more associated with male garb, but qualifies this by stating that '[A] certain androgyny has always been permissible for women... in chorus girl costumes, in the tomboy role' (1986/2004: 167), such that this is not something particularly unusual in film musicals of the Golden Age. But Dyer proposes that 'later in her career... the androgyny of Garland goes much further' (1986/2004: 168), giving as one example the 'Get Happy' number from *Summer Stock* (Charles Walters, 1950) in which, he argues, surrounded by male dancers, she presents 'an androgynous image with sex appeal' (1986/2004: 173).⁶⁰ Dyer differentiates this image ('the vamp-

⁵⁹ Dyer defines sexual androgyny as 'in the sense of homosexuality' (1986/2004: 166).

⁶⁰ Jacqueline Nacache proposes that Garland is 'suddenly and spectacularly transformed' in this number, and 'wears an androgynous uniform *à la* Marlene Dietrich' (2013: 456).

androgynous') from what he calls the 'tramp-androgynous' presented in numbers such as 'We're a Couple of Swells' from *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, 1948). He suggests that 'in the tramp we could identify with someone who has... an androgyny that is not so much in-between (marked as both feminine and masculine) as without gender' (1986/2004: 175/6). This differentiation fuses in relation to Minnelli's Sally, as she is discussed in terms of being both a 'tramp androgynous' via visual similarities at times to the Emcee – particularly by Mizejewski, who notes the 'heaviness and masculinity of Minnelli's features' (1992: 216) – but also as vamp, given proposed similarities between Minnelli's Sally and Dietrich's Lola Lola.⁶¹

It is not just Mizejewski who sees Minnelli's Sally as having 'male' characteristics, however. Ralph Willett proposes that Sally is 'an ambiguous figure, linked in this musical as much to male as to female sexuality' (1996: 53), and brings to mind 'a filmic history of androgyny that includes Minnelli's mother, Judy Garland' (1996: 53). Mitchell Morris asserts that Minnelli's performance is 'ambiguously gendered' (2004: 149), comparing her performance in 'Mein Herr' with that of Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* (1930) (2004: 149). Ethan Mordden even ventures that '[I]t can't be disputed that Dietrich's famous delivery of "Falling in Love Again" in... *The Blue Angel*, inspired Bob Fosse and Liza Minnelli in her "Mein Herr" number in *Cabaret*' (1981: 60). In fact, there are similarities and differences between the performances of Dietrich and Minnelli.

With regard to similarities, some scholars suggest visual resemblances. Geoffrey Block proposes that Dietrich's 'iconic rendition as the cabaret singer Lola-Lola... has provided an indelible image for Sally Bowles' (2011: 172) in her many incarnations, thereby not just that rendered by Minnelli. He suggests that similarities to the German star in the film version of *Cabaret* 'are more visual than aural, especially in Liza Minnelli's stylistic allusions to Dietrich in the costuming and staging of "Mein Herr"' (2011: 172). This is understandable given the different singing styles of the two women. Marjorie Garber suggests that Minnelli 'straddles an identical chair, and brandishes her legs and her bowler hat' (1992/1997: 19), while Mizejewski proposes that '[I]n the widely publicized image, Liza Minnelli wears the unmistakable costume of Berlin-cabaret-decadence – black boots, gartered stockings, black hat – and is perched on a chair, one leg lifted in homage to the pose of her cabaret predecessor, Marlene Dietrich, in the similarly well-known image from *The Blue Angel*' (1992: 3). These remarks actually fuse Dietrich's two renditions of 'Falling in Love Again' as, in the first performance, Lola has one leg raised while sitting on a barrel, but in the second, she straddles a chair (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Minnelli and the other Kit Kat dancers certainly employ chairs during

⁶¹ Adrienne L. McLean suggests that Garland felt comfortable in numbers dressed as a 'male' tramp, as it meant she did not have to wear the corsets she was often forced to put on to make her body shape more culturally 'acceptable.' See 'Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesis of Suffering' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Spring 2002), pp. 2-15.

'Mein Herr,' but Dietrich does not dance in her routines. Minnelli's pose is, in fact, not particularly similar to that of Dietrich, although it does arguably reference it. I will therefore consider Dietrich's two performances of 'Falling in Love Again' before analysing that of Minnelli in 'Mein Herr' in order to address the topic of Minnelli's Sally as both androgynous and queer.



Figures 1.1 and 1.2 Two contrasting images of Dietrich's Lola Lola performing 'Falling in Love Again' (Screenshots from *The Blue Angel*/*Der blaue Engel* Josef von Sternberg, 1930)

Whilst *The Blue Angel* is not a musical per se, Dietrich as Lola Lola performs a number of songs, the best known of which, 'Falling in Love Again,' is one that she continued to sing throughout her career.⁶² Because she performs the song twice, it is easy to conflate the two performances in terms of the iconic images of her from this film. However, the renditions are very different, and take place at contrasting sections of the narrative. Probably the most widely-known image relates to her first interpretation of the song. This has Dietrich sitting on a barrel, looking nonchalantly and demurely over her right shoulder in a 'seductive' pose (Isenberg, 2009: 1). There are other women around her, who are casually drinking and smoking as she sings. For this performance, which takes place early in the film, Dietrich is wearing a white top hat, but other than this, her clothing can be described as ultra-feminine. She wears a black vest top, a lacy white collar and cuff, and white, high-heeled shoes. However, her demure pose is subverted via her skirt being hitched up at the front, revealing her white frilly underwear, suspenders, and the tops of her stockings, all items of clothing that are normally hidden from public view. It is possible that Dietrich got the idea of wearing a suspender belt from 'her experiences in Berlin with gay men in drag,' (Kennison, 2002: 151), as they often wore this item, while top hats were 'part of the lesbian haute couture subculture' (Kennison, 2002: 152).

⁶² Dietrich has four songs in the film. See Donald Spoto, *Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich* (1992: 61).

Dietrich's second interpretation of 'Falling in Love Again' is very different from the first, and replaces coyness with confidence. This performance takes place near the end of the film, and she is alone on stage this time, straddling a chair that has its back to the audience. She wears a black cowboy-style hat, a black, sparkly sequined dress, and dark high-heeled shoes. As argued by Barry Keith Grant, 'black hats and white hats differentiate hero and villain in the western [sic]'; 'the cowboy who dresses all in black... is invariably a villainous gunfighter' (2007: 12). The iconography is therefore of note, given that she wears a black hat in the later scene, though this can be viewed somewhat ironically, as Lola Lola is not really a 'villain,' but simply an independent woman.

The clothing that Dietrich wears as Lola Lola in both of these scenes is additionally significant in terms of reading the character as androgynous, due to the mix of traditional male and female garb, along with her presentation as a woman who is ambiguously both attainable and unattainable. Indeed, although Sybil DelGaudio describes Dietrich's first performance of the song as 'openly seductive,' (1993: 36), she suggests that, in the second rendition, 'she is far more androgynous, as she takes a characteristically masculine, defiant pose with legs spread across a chair turned backwards' (1993: 36). The androgyny and appeal of the character is also remarked upon by Richard McCormick who, while proposing that the character in general has 'an androgynous aura' (1993: 662), believes that her second performance of 'Falling in Love Again,' shows her to be 'more glamorous – and much more the hard-hearted vamp – than earlier in the film' (1993: 657). Dietrich's performances are thus read as androgynous, but at the same time as alluring to both men and women.

There are also suggestions that Lola Lola is able to use this sexuality to manipulate men. For example, Judith Mayne proposes that, in her second rendition of the song, Dietrich 'has become a perfectly containable image of a tart, a man-eater, a seductress and destroyer of men' (1989: 37). Commenting on representations of the 'New Woman' in films of the period, Sutton similarly describes Lola as 'man-eating' and an example of 'the sexually dangerous and vehemently non-productive "vamp" or *femme fatale*' (2011/2013: 6). As can be seen from these differing views, Dietrich's Lola Lola in both renditions conjures up varied interpretations, ranging from being a sexual predator to callous, though the terms androgynous, vamp, and *femme fatale* recur. These latter three descriptions are intriguing perspectives from which to compare Dietrich's performances of 'Falling in Love Again' as Lola Lola with Minnelli's performance of 'Mein Herr' as Sally, especially as the latter considers herself to be a *femme fatale*,⁶³ while the character Natalia sees her as a vamp.⁶⁴

⁶³ Sally tells Natalia that 'Men have found me irresistible,' although Brian (Michael York) tells Sally she is 'about as *fatale* as an after-dinner mint.'

⁶⁴ Natalia describes Sally as 'a woman who is giving her body often to men.'

The outfit worn by Minnelli as Sally in 'Mein Herr' combines the aesthetic of both of Dietrich's costumes and hints thereby at androgyny. She wears a bowler hat with a purple trim and a (male) black v-neck waistcoat that belonged to Fosse,⁶⁵ but she also has skimpy shorts, over-the-knee stockings and suspenders, a black choker with purple sequins, and calf-length high-heeled boots, thereby arguably referencing and imitating Lola Lola, while not copying her outfit/s exactly. Having been introduced to the audience by the Emcee as an 'international sensation,' Sally comes through the back curtain confidently and walks upstage with her back to those watching, putting her left hand on the chair that is side-on to the audience. The other girls in the number, who are already on stage, also take up their specific positions on their individual chairs, and Sally is shown framed in an arch formed by other dancers. The shot is very theatrical, in that she is captured in this frame to emphasise the performative aspect of her role. Before Sally starts to sing the first verse, she turns to face the audience, placing her right hand on the back of the chair, and her right leg awkwardly on its seat in a very unnatural and alienating pose.

Whilst the Dietrich performances appear quite relaxed, Fosse's choreography for this number is very stylized. There are multiple quick cuts to show the other Kit Kat girls poised on their chairs, and the camera pans out to reveal the whole stage, with Sally in the centre, and in the spotlight. There is then another cut before Sally starts to sing, shown in medium shot, mimicking the notes of the music with her fingers and her knee in mechanical fashion, her nonchalance here echoing that of Dietrich. Following another cut for the line 'You'll never turn the vinegar to jam, Mein Herr' there is a return to the 'framing shot,' whereby the two relevant Kit Kat girls change position in the manner of automatons or puppets. Sally is then shown perched on the chair (see Figure 1.3), turning her ankle in time with the music – as do the other Kit Kat dancers in the next shots, copying her foot and hand gestures in their awkward, 'unladylike' positions in a robotic, artificial manner that negates any suggestion of traditional cultural ideas of femininity. As Sally begins to sing the chorus, the other dancers lie on their chairs, heads down and looking forward impassively, snapping their fingers mechanically to the beat of the music. When Sally stands crouched down on her chair, the other girls continue to move on their chairs, their bodies shaped inelegantly, systematically finger-clicking mechanically as the camera pans out again.

⁶⁵ See Wasson, *Fosse* (2013: 259) and Winkler, *Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical* (2018: 149).



Figure 1.3 Sally poses inelegantly on her chair, looking over her right shoulder like Lola Lola (Screenshot from *Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972)

The second verse has Sally sitting astride the chair, thereby referencing Dietrich. The other Kit Kat girls visually mimic her words with their arms, and then lie in a foetal position on their chairs before a cut that shows Sally alone and centre, with one foot on the chair back. Once more the other girls imitate Sally's words/moves, as if they are visual echoes, with further cuts at times showing them in close up, straight-faced and staring into the distance like robots (see Figure 1.4), with no visible emotion. Their heavy makeup, which evokes a grotesque, mask-like quality, adds to the overall queerness, over-emphasising their features to suggest that they are only 'performing' as women, almost drag style, seemingly 'imitating gender' (Butler, 1990/1999: 175). As the number becomes increasingly frantic, so does the tapping/beating of the Kit Kat girls, frequently perched inelegantly on their chairs in unflattering poses. The girls eventually join in with the singing, still tapping, and changing positions frequently, with Sally moving around the stage more enthusiastically. The overall effect of the quick edits and ungainly moves is somewhat unsettling.

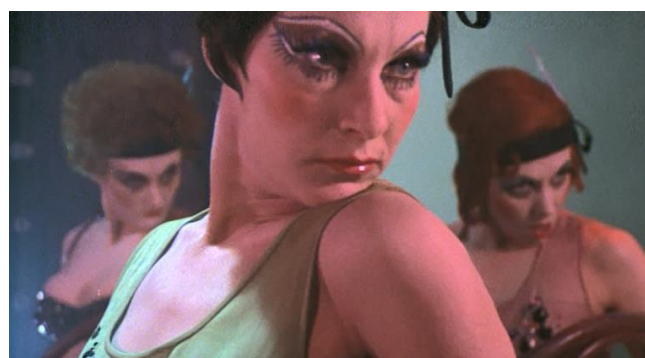


Figure 1.4 Some of the heavily made up, expressionless Kit Kat girls (Screenshot from *Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972)

As the speed of the song continues to accelerate, the camera pans in on Sally, who is looking skyward, moving her outstretched arms frantically right and left. There is a close-up on her face as

she states, donning her hat, with eyes wide, 'and bye-bye.' But the song continues with a key change, and Sally drags her chair downstage to be nearer the cabaret's audience, standing on and moving around it. There is then a cut to three of the Kit Kat girls, still expressionless, banging their hands on the floor while prostrate on their chairs, before a change of shot shows those on stage from an audience perspective. A series of quick edits follows before a smiling Sally finishes the song sitting sideways on her chair, her legs thrashing wildly in the air. She takes off her hat, ending the number bent backwards over the chair, with one arm on its back, and the other on the floor holding her hat, as if mimicking a 'reveal' in a drag show.

Sally's performance of 'Mein Herr' on the Kit Kat Klub stage replaces any suggestion of femme fatale or vamp by the idea of the grotesque, and this is mimicked by the other girls, with their 'mask-like' makeup. This grotesquerie amplifies the idea of queerness, as it is connected to caricature and difference, while the cabaret itself offers a safe space for this difference to be displayed. In their discussion of the works of Francis Bacon, Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund argue that 'the queer grotesque includes a representation of otherness and difference that forces the viewer to experience the juxtapositions of attraction and repulsion, desire and disgust' (2013: 116). These paradoxes are similarly typical of caricature. As Hannah Andrews contends, caricatures 'are deliberately exaggerated, simplified and distorted images that are nevertheless instantly recognisable provided the perceiver is armed with sufficient knowledge of the original face' (2020: 2). Such oppositions are also in play on the cabaret stage, where queerness is not always overt, but can be masked, both literally and figuratively, a hiding or disguising of the self behind the persona.

The link to the grotesque in 'Mein Herr' appears to be deliberate, given the period setting. As noted by Esti Sheinberg, '[I]n the first decades of the twentieth century art seems to be saturated with the grotesque. This trend originated mainly in Germany' (2016: 248). Two artists prominent in this field at the time were George Grosz and Otto Dix, and a number of their paintings 'best represented the realism of Berlin at that time' (Metzger, 2007: 111). Indeed, an androgynous-looking audience member shown in the cabaret during the opening song and again at the narrative's end (see Figure 1.5) is modelled on the subject of Otto Dix's *The Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926) (see Figure 1.6).⁶⁶ The unflattering 'mask-like' makeup of the Kit Kat Girls can therefore be seen to be referencing paintings by Dix and Grosz,⁶⁷ while also suggesting an unstable, problematic view of femininity. Samantha Holland argues that '[T]he term femininity is a concept

⁶⁶ Another of Dix's well-known paintings, *Eldorado* (1927), shows '[A] slim man wearing a green dress... approaching a butch-looking transvestite in a red dress, carrying a fan' (Bolton, Van Godtsenhoven and Garfinkel, 2019: 1/114). The Eldorado nightclub in Berlin was popular with transvestites and others identifying as queer, but also with tourists. See Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945* (2016: 94).

⁶⁷ Fosse is reported to have 'kept books on Grosz's art in the makeup room' (Garebian, 1999: 132). Berlin-born George Grosz was a prolific painter during the Weimar years and emigrated to the United States in 1933.

which refers to a set of gendered behaviours and practices, and yet which is fluid and not fixed,' such that it can 'mean as many different things as there are women' (2004: 8). Sally's stern-faced 'backing dancers' display this suggestion in part through the way their bodies contort and distort awkwardly, while the frequent quick cuts and the frantic way the scene is edited suggest a fragmenting of, rather than a focus on, the female body, conflicting with Laura Mulvey's theory of women in films 'as erotic object' (1975: 11). The overall effect is very different from the message in the song 'Dames' written by Harry Warren and Al Dubin for the Golden Age musical of the same name (*Dames*, Ray Enright and Busby Berkeley, 1934), namely 'What do you go for / Go see a show for? / Tell the truth, you go to see those beautiful dames.' Instead, the female body is 'deliberately exaggerated, simplified and distorted' in a way that matches how Andrews defines caricature.



Figures 1.5 and 1.6 An androgynous Kit Kat Klub customer resembles an individual in an Otto Dix painting (Figure 1.5 Screenshot from *Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972; Figure 1.6 *The Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden*, 1926, Screenshot from boutique.centrepompidou.fr/en/art-prints/art-print-bildnis-der-journalistin-sylvia-von-harden/1749.html accessed 5 June 2017)

The idea of Minnelli's Sally as androgynous is augmented through 'Mein Herr' appearing to be an homage to Dietrich's performances of 'Falling in Love Again' as Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*. Although there is nothing specifically androgynous about her renditions of 'Falling in Love Again' other than the fact that she wears hats more traditionally worn by men, Dietrich is/was a cross-gender icon, often wearing trouser suits in public and playing with gender stereotypes in her film roles. The song itself outlines her lack of control when faced with romance and the issues she experiences through being a magnet for the attention of men. But the romance, as likewise described in 'Mein Herr,' is destined to be short term. The lyrics of the middle eight state 'Men cluster to me like moths around a flame / And if their wings burn, I know I'm not to blame,' thereby

situating Lola Lola as an independent 'New Woman' who controls her own destiny in a way that is similar to Sally in *Cabaret*.

While Lola Lola uses the chair as a seat, albeit positioned astride it rather than sitting in conventional fashion, Sally and the other Kit Kat girls use their chairs in 'Mein Herr' as disposable props for the dance, practically using them in lieu of male dance partners. The 'prop dance' is a topic explored by Jane Feuer, in relation to ordinary items that appear to be available by chance 'to give the effect of bricolage,' even though they are clearly included in the *mise-en-scène* for the dancer's benefit (1982/1993: 5). She suggests that Fred Astaire, who regularly danced with or around items of furniture, 'appeared to use the prop dance out of a kind of despair – no partner of flesh could match his grace' (1982/1993: 6). While Astaire made his props 'dance' as elegantly as he did, there is no such sophistication regarding Sally and the other Kit Kat girls, whose chairs/props arguably replace formal (male) partners. Instead, the dancers can be seen to be referencing the New Woman, independent and in control both of their work and their love lives, and who use men, like chairs, when necessary for their own convenience.

The lyrics of 'Mein Herr' similarly reflect the independent female of the day. Sally says farewell to her erstwhile lover in the song by explaining that he needs to understand the type of person she is, and tells him that 'I do what I do / When I'm through then I'm through / and I'm through. Toodleoo!' She ends the affair thereby on her terms, and without any expectations of a lasting relationship. Furthermore, she is not dependent upon her male lover, but instead is 'always a rover' with regard to her liaisons with men. The lyrics of 'Mein Herr' further queer normative constructions of the feminine and demonstrate Sally to be a 'New Woman.' They show that the singer has agency and is in charge in her relationships, in contrast with the usual position of male and female leads and conventions of film musicals as described by Rick Altman. As he argues, the 'simple opposition' that 'remains important throughout the history of the American film musical' is that 'man is seen as an endless source of gold, while woman is identified by her beauty,' with marriage 'as the only way to join beauty and riches' (1987: 25). Sally, however, is singing openly about her promiscuity, while additionally the other women in this number are presented as androgynous/grotesque figures. Although the other girls only join in with the song's lyrics towards the end, the fact that they often mimic Sally's actions suggests their similarly casual approach to sexual relationships.

While it may appear paradoxical that a character who can be described as androgynous can also be viewed as ordinary, there is a 'normality' to Sally given that she resides in a boarding house and appears to find it hard to make ends meet, facts that signify her as average rather than as a star. Although her performances on the cabaret stage may hint at glamour, this is yet another mask,

covering up the fact that she is really a struggling artist with big dreams. Such a reading may further link Minnelli to her mother, given that, as noted by Steven Cohan, Garland often ‘presents a mix of girlish innocence and ordinariness that is then deepened by the sophistication of her singing’ in film musicals (2020: 110), qualities that may similarly apply to Minnelli in her role as Sally.

Minnelli/Sally and Ordinariness

This section explores the theme of ordinariness – another quality referenced by Dyer when analysing Garland’s gay iconicity – via an analysis of ‘Maybe This Time’ and the prelude to Minnelli’s performance of the song as Sally. As Dyer suggests, it might seem strange that appearing ordinary ‘is part of the male gay reading of Garland’ (1986/2004: 151). But, he argues, although this was very much her promoted screen image, her appeal was that ‘she was not after all the ordinary girl she appeared to be’ (1986/2004: 153), thereby camouflaging truths often similarly hidden by members of the queer subculture. One of the scenes in *Cabaret* that most links these two factors – Garland and ordinariness – to Minnelli’s performance as Sally is the episode in which she is let down by her father. Having excitedly gone to meet him in a restrained monochrome outfit, green nail varnish replaced with clear, and wearing hardly any make-up, she is next featured back at the house. She explains to Brian that she waited in vain for hours, only to find a telegram from her father upon her return stating that his plans had changed. Sally tells Brian that her father tries to love her, ‘but the real truth is, he just doesn’t care.’ Sally openly shows her vulnerability at this point, breaking down, crying, and entreating ‘Maybe I *am* just nothing – nothing.’ Brian tries to reassure her that this is not true, as she is very talented, but she shakes her head, trembling and initially dismissing such claims, before asking him, ‘Do you really think so?’ Mizejewski proposes that, as Minnelli ‘sobs and breathlessly stammers out her frustrations’ here, ‘it is difficult not to hear Garland’s voice from her backstage breakdown in *A Star is Born* (1954)’ (1992: 210). This suggestion links Minnelli to Garland in the film not just facially, but vocally, similarities that continue in her performance of the torch song ‘Maybe This Time,’ which occurs immediately after this scene, and which implies the ‘ordinariness’ ascribed to Garland.

‘Maybe This Time’ was not part of the original stage musical, but was interpolated for the film.⁶⁸ It is a torch song,⁶⁹ which can be defined as ‘a sentimental popular song about love, usually sung by a woman,’⁷⁰ and ‘typically one in which the singer laments an unrequited love.’⁷¹ The torch

⁶⁸ Minnelli included this song in two of the albums she recorded prior to the filming of *Cabaret*, namely her first record, *Liza! Liza!* in 1964, and a subsequent release, *New Feelin’*, in 1970.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Blades (1973: 234); Mizejewski (1992: 225); Garebian (1999: 136); and Leve, (2009: 70).

⁷⁰ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/torch-song> (accessed 4 March 2017)

⁷¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/torch+song> (accessed 4 March 2017). ‘The Boy Next Door’ sung by Garland in *Meet Me in St Louis* is similarly a torch song.

song singer usually expresses an emotional vulnerability that gradually builds to excess as the number progresses. Freya Jarman-Ivens argues of this style of song that the 'vulnerability enacted by the singer... is tied to a feminized subject position' (2012: 506). Brian Currid suggests that Garland's "'torch songs"... play... a central role in the gay fan cult's admiration for the star' (2001: 129). Indeed, the lyrics of 'Maybe This Time' could be describing Garland's doomed relationships (she was married five times, thus seemingly always looking for true love) – and, in retrospect, Minnelli's.

The manner in which the number is filmed is of interest in analysing whether Minnelli's performance of the song in her role as Sally strengthens a connection between the character and the idea of ordinariness. Initially, Sally's performance of the song on stage is intercut with scenes of her at home with Brian, thus linking the lyrics to her newfound romance. However, it has already been established in the narrative that Brian is probably bisexual, something that is referenced again later in the film following his affair with Max.⁷² In contrast to the sentiments of 'Mein Herr,' here Sally is singing about a relationship she hopes could last for once, and the performance is interwoven with shots of her with Brian, thereby establishing that he is the person she is singing about. Yet, the disparity between the Sally presented thus far in the narrative – who is willing to sleep with any man she thinks can help her to further her career – and the wish she is expressing in the lyrics for a long-lasting relationship, means that her liaison with Brian appears unworkable. This is not just because of Brian's bisexuality and Sally's laissez-faire lifestyle, but also because of how Minnelli performs 'Maybe This Time' as Sally, and the way the number is filmed.

Initially, there is the impression that the performance might be a rehearsal, as it gradually becomes clear that hardly anybody is present in the club. The emptiness of the club appears to resonate with the performance, indicating that there is an 'emptiness' to Sally's life – something missing, or possibly hidden. Rather than representing a carnivalesque space as witnessed during 'Mein Herr,' on this occasion, the theme of the song gives the illusion of the club as a dreamlike space. The words of the song appear to be meaningful to Sally at this point. As Blades proposes, when she sings her final 'maybe this time,' 'we see the sparkle and hope in her eyes' (1973: 235), while Randy Clark suggests that the lyrics 'clearly refer[s] to Sally's feelings about Brian,' although somewhat cautious in the way they are expressed (1991: 55). Indeed, it is possible that her sexual promiscuity may be masking what she really desires. One could therefore argue that her seemingly selfish exterior is hiding something; it is feigned, while her rendition of the torch song is genuine, especially given the vulnerable side of her that is revealed following her father's non-appearance.

⁷² Geoffrey Block suggests that the fact that Brian and Sally admit to each other that they have both slept with Max 'sent shock waves to screen audiences of the time' (2011: 166).

Although the song could therefore indicate Sally's true feelings, especially as one is familiar with the convention of songs in film musicals being a form of emotional expression, Mizejewski argues that 'the happy heterosexual ideal' expressed via the intercut scenes of Sally and Brian together 'is contradicted by the diegetic gazes present during her performance' (1992: 225). This statement is worth exploring in more detail, as there are actually hardly any 'diegetic gazes' during the number. The diegetic viewers shown during the performance are two older men (at separate tables) – one of whom does not actually appear to be watching Sally – a man with his head on a table, presumably asleep, a female musician who is not involved in the song's accompaniment, the Emcee in the wings and, just visible and appearing to be waiting to go on stage, the drag artist, Elke. Of these, only one of the men and the Emcee are clearly shown to be watching the performance. This observation appears to reinforce the argument that the sentiments expressed in the song are pipe dreams, a proposal strengthened by the fact that Sally's performance, and thus the song itself, is disrupted in order to include the interjected scenes, suggesting the relationship will not be a smooth one.

Each time the scene returns briefly to the seeming domestic bliss, there are instrumental breaks, such that 'Maybe This Time' does not flow initially, but instead has pauses. These interruptions hint at the new relationship between Sally and Brian not being what it may seem. The song's instrumental introduction starts as Sally and Brian are gazing lovingly at one another at home, and the camera then swoops up, with the scene changing to the nightclub. Shown in extreme close-up and side profile, Sally sings just the opening lines of the number, namely 'Maybe this time / I'll be lucky / Maybe this time he'll stay,' before the scene returns to the house. The camera announces this scene change by descending again. The next visuals illustrate that it is raining and dark outside the house, with a focus on a window pane before the couple are shown in bed together. The darkness and the raindrops descending on the glass like tears appear to be symbolically indicating that the relationship is doomed and contradict the optimistic lyrics just sung by Sally. She is then shown singing the next lines, 'Maybe this time / For the first time / Love won't hurry away,' but there is yet another cut to the house to show Brian, who is in the foreground and flexing his arm muscles, asking, 'Doesn't my body drive you wild with desire?'⁷³ Although Sally responds positively, she is in the background and Brian is not facing her. His question could therefore be addressed as much to the filmic audience (male and female) as to Sally. There is then a return to the stage performance, and Sally is now filmed face front, but the shot is slightly blurred, the focus seemingly affected by a side light which dominates the screen, as if to question the truth of the lyrics. This is followed by the final intercut scene of Brian and Sally. They are both reading at home, and smile at

⁷³ Sally asks this of Brian in a previous scene.

one another across the room, although the visual distance between them hints that they will grow apart, especially as there is a fade almost to black before the segue back to the club.

The remainder of the song focuses on Sally's performance on stage. She is shown initially in profile again before the camera pans slowly around such that she is in a spotlight. There is a cut to a head and shoulder shot for 'It's gonna happen,' at which point her performance becomes more animated. The camera then tracks back very quickly, as if trying to distance itself from the words that have just been sung. This is the first point at which Sally is shown in long shot on the stage, a blue-lit curtain just behind her, and empty tables in the foreground. What Minnelli's Sally is wearing on stage now becomes clear. Her attire for this song is of note, as her clothing could easily be contemporaneous with the making of the film, hinting at Minnelli's universality with audiences at the cinema via her ordinariness (see Figure 1.7). It is at this point that the various different characters at the Klub are shown in quick succession watching (or not watching) her performance.

Some of Minnelli's movements as Sally are quite demonstrative as the number builds, but this suits the sentiments of the song and the excitement of the person singing, because, in a utopian fashion characteristic of the musical genre, Sally believes that she has finally found her 'Mr Right.' Although she is stationary for most of the song, she uses her head and arms to communicate her feelings and convictions. At times, Minnelli throws her head back, claps along and raises her arms, showing an emotional excess reminiscent of her mother's performances. For the final few lines of the song, she is again in long shot, the gleams of the spotlights radiating from her hands in both directions reinforcing her star quality (see Figure 1.7); as Blades also notes, Sally's 'outstretched arms catch the backlighting in such a way that rays seem to emanate from her fingers' (1973: 235). She then turns towards stage left, raising her arms in quite an awkward fashion; the camera moves closer again and the spotlights fade, so that she is in shadow against the back lighting. She clenches her fists and faces front in this semi-darkness.



Figure 1.7 Minnelli as Sally shines on stage despite there being numerous empty tables at the club (Screenshot from *Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972)

The ordinariness of the emotions expressed – hoping for something that may not be achievable – would resonate with many audience members, despite the talent of the person expressing these views in song. The hope therein adds a dreamlike quality, especially as the performance takes place in the safe space of the Klub. Yet the number appears incongruous, not just because of its ‘ordinariness’ as an interpolated love song typical of the style found in the classic Hollywood musicals in which Garland often starred, but also because Sally appears to be singing about Brian, a character who is bisexual. The complex way the performance is filmed suggests that the relationship is destined to fail, yet it also highlights Minnelli as star via the lighting and centrality of her performance of this solo number in a way reminiscent of her mother’s stardom. The universality of the style of song and typicality of a torch song in a Hollywood film musical thus reinforce the character’s and Minnelli’s ordinariness and vulnerability, similarly typical of readings of Garland’s performances of torch songs via their emotional excess, such songs paradoxically usually associated with star performers and iconic performances. The number is queered given that Minnelli performs the song with verve and energy as Sally, but does so in the almost empty space of the club. Indeed, the lack of listeners presents her as ordinary, despite her extraordinary voice. These contradictions reinforce the queerness of Minnelli’s portrayal, and the emotional excess of the song in such a venue evokes the suggestion of camp, another quality named by Dyer in relation to Garland’s gay iconicity.

Minnelli/Sally and Camp

This section explores Dyer’s assertion that ‘Judy Garland is camp’ (1986/2004: 172) by considering whether Minnelli’s performance as Sally can also be described in this manner. Camp is a status that Dyer lists as one of the reasons for Garland’s gay iconicity; for Dyer, this quality includes her ordinariness, but also the fact that she is ‘imitable, her appearance and gestures copiable in drag acts’ (1986/2004: 172). He argues that she was well aware of her appeal to gay male audiences and that she often seems to acknowledge this in her films. He gives as an example her performance of ‘When I Hear Beautiful Music’ [sic] in *Presenting Lily Mars* (Norman Taurog; 1943), during which ‘she uses excessively elaborated trills, oversweetened notes and handwringing, shoulder-rolling, lip-curling gestures’ (175).⁷⁴ Such artifice, excessiveness and hyperbole, often associated with torch song singers, are archetypal examples of camp as described by Susan Sontag (1966: 275).

Minnelli’s solo numbers as Sally in the Kit Kat Klub are, like Garland’s, permeated with an overstated and hyperbolic presentation style. Morris describes Minnelli’s Sally as ‘hyper-expressive,’

⁷⁴ The song title is actually ‘When I Look at You.’

(2004: 151) because she is more demonstrative in her delivery of her songs than she needs to be. Her performances, particularly of her solo numbers on the small cabaret stage, can thus be read as camp, tying in with one of Sontag's descriptions of the concept, namely 'artifice and exaggeration' (1966: 275). Knapp similarly argues that '[C]amp, understood broadly, always involves exaggeration and an expressive lack of proportion' (2006: 7). In addition, he suggests that 'exaggeration in performance has tended, historically, to remove women performers from the accepted boundaries of respectability, often tainting them... with associations of sexual license and promiscuity' (2006: 206), a description that seems to fit Minnelli's Sally to a tee. The manner in which Minnelli performs her solo numbers as Sally, therefore, particularly given the sparse audience when she sings 'Maybe This Time,' is open to camp readings, as her performances can be defined as excessive and extreme within the context of the cabaret venue.

Given these overexuberant performances, it can be argued that the performances foreground excess. It is noteworthy that Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, discussing 'gender ideology' (2013: 158), argue that 'portrayals of women and gay men as hyper-expressive' is 'a stereotype that exists not in actual life but in parody' (2013: 159). Excess and hyperexpressiveness are characterisations of camp, while Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's reference to parody (2013: 146) has links to Judith Butler's theories about gender identity. Butler gives the example of drag as parody, arguing that it destabilises notions of gender identity (1990/1999: 187), while also arguing that gender is performative. It is of note in this respect that Mizejewski proposes that Minnelli's Sally presents 'as a drag version of femininity,' and thus, arguably, queer (1992: 216), but also that she 'is not sexy but "sexy,"' (1992: 210) thereby employing the quotation marks that Sontag includes as relevant in her definitions of camp.⁷⁵ Another of Sontag's definitions relates to 'something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms' (1966: 279). Minnelli's 'larger than life' portrayal of Sally fits this description.

Despite the similarities that can be drawn between Minnelli's performance of 'Mein Herr' as Sally and Dietrich's performances of 'Falling in Love Again' as Lola Lola, Sally is really a phony *femme fatale*, rather than a genuinely seductive woman. Garebian also makes this point, stating that 'Liza Minnelli's Sally was more a parody of the *femme fatale*' (1999: 137) than an actual vamp. Terri J. Gordon, similarly describing Sally as 'a faux *femme fatale*,' argues that the character's identity is 'performative on and off the stage' (2008: 454). *Cabaret*'s narrative does indeed suggest this, and the comments about her 'fauxness,' which relate to someone not being what they seem, suggest a camp, and thereby queer, reading. Such an evaluation ties in with the reading of Sally as ordinary,

⁷⁵ Sontag argues that '[C]amp sees everything in quotation marks' (1966: 280).

given Jack Babuscio's argument that camp 'aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular' (2004: 124). Furthermore, the idea that Sally is impersonating a *femme fatale*, via her bright green nail varnish, overplayed mannerisms and outlandish make-up – especially in the scene in which she 'reveals' her true emotional vulnerability to Brian when let down by her father – raises questions about constructions of identities, as she is 'putting on' a role as Sally during most of the narrative.

This is evident not just through her attempt at a *femme fatale* persona and her extravagant manner of dressing, but also via her interactions with Max, with whom she flirts once she sees his chauffeured car. To impress him, she pretends to be someone she is not, accepting his 'free' gifts and hospitality, and asking for caviar when they are in an elite restaurant. Sally similarly 'performs' in a scene in which Brian is teaching English to Fritz and Natalia, interrupting them and 'putting on a show' as she attempts to shock the small group – particularly the wealthy and prim Natalia – by pretending that she recently saw a film about syphilis. She is then deliberately provocative, introducing the slang term 'screwing' into the conversation before offering Natalia some gin in an outrageous, yet matter-of-fact manner, to the great embarrassment of those present.

Minnelli's Sally can be read as 'performing' as Sally for most of the narrative, not just when she is on stage. Her mannerisms and 'larger than life' personality are exaggerated to the point that they can be read as camp, such as in the way she 'performs' for Max. Even when she is on stage, her renditions of the songs are unnecessarily overstated and ostentatious, particularly given the fairly inconsequential status of the Kit Kat Klub, fulfilling the 'Being-as-Playing-a-Role' Sontag defines as one of camp's monikers (1966: 280). For example, during her number 'Maybe This Time,' she performs as if she were singing to a packed house in a much larger venue, when in reality there is hardly anyone present in the cabaret. Referencing Bakhtin, Mizejewski compares camp to the carnivalesque, arguing that '[L]ike camp, the carnivalesque operates through reversals of hierarchy, the use of mask and grotesquery' (1992: 63). These descriptors all apply in relation to the Kit Kat Klub, which also provides a licensed carnivalesque space for grotesquery and camp, and for those identifying as queer.

The Kit Kat Klub and the Carnavalesque

One of the important elements of the Kit Kat Klub in *Cabaret* is that it is presented as a unique and specific space. Comparisons can be made with the cabaret of *The Blue Angel*. Kosta argues that 'Lola Lola never really leaves the space of the cabaret... She is a product of that space, one of performance and make-believe' (2009: 75). Sally can similarly be described as a 'product' of the cabaret, as she continues 'performing' when outside of it, appearing to be totally unaware of what is

taking place in the world beyond the Klub. All of Minnelli's songs as Sally are diegetic and performed on the cabaret stage. Her licensed, queer space is thus that of the stage and its environs – and she seems oblivious to the rise of Nazism and the associated growing tension outside of that 'safe' space in which she is free to perform. Although elements of the songs performed at the Klub frequently 'mirror' what is taking place beyond its walls, often illustrated via cross-cutting between the Klub and the city, they are two distinctive places in terms of what is permitted. For example, the 'Tiller Girls' number on the cabaret stage, incorporates dancers (including the Emcee in drag) turning their hats into quasi-style helmets, holding their canes as if they are guns, and goose-stepping, all to the accompaniment of uproarious laughter from the audience. The number is intercut with scenes of some men, who have killed Natalia's dog simply because she is Jewish, leaving it on her doorstep while chanting 'Juden.' The scene indicates both visually and aurally the contrast between the safe world of the Kit Kat Klub, in which people can rebel against and mock Nazi ideologies, and the unsafe world outside its environs for many people who do not conform to Nazi beliefs, illustrated via the rising threat of the Nazi militias.

The Klub thus offers a 'different' world for its occupants, a licensed space that incorporates elements of the carnivalesque. The 'upside-down' world of the cabaret space is illustrated immediately the movie begins, with the theme of mirrors and reflection distorting and blurring what appears to be 'real' and 'unreal.' In the number described above, for example, one of the 'girls' is played by the Emcee in drag. Furthermore, in his opening song, 'Willkommen,' the Emcee tells those in the Klub to 'leave your troubles outside,' indicating that the Kit Kat Klub is a safe venue that contrasts with the growing fascism and unrest in the city. He also states, '[I]n here... the girls are beautiful' as drag artist Elke is shown donning her wig, demonstrating that she is able to perform in drag securely while part of the cabaret. Elke's 'real' identity may be masked via her costume, but she personifies a different, subversive type of beauty that is accepted in the Klub. As the Emcee and Elke indicate, it is not just hierarchies that are safely reversed in the cabaret setting, but also genders.

Both the Emcee and Elke are in disguise, employing subterfuge. In both cases, their transformations are similar to that of using a mask, which likewise is employed to veil and obscure, but is also an important element of carnival costume, described by Bakhtin as 'connected with the joy of change and reincarnation' (1968/1984: 39). For the Emcee, this masking and change is achieved primarily through his heavy makeup, while Elke 'masks' her biological sex by dressing as female. When he sings the opening song, 'Willkommen,' the Emcee's makeup is traditionally feminine. He wears long, false eyelashes and eyeliner, with a dark lipstick that accentuates the shape of his mouth. For the 'Money, Money' number, there is the addition of gaudy pink blusher on

his cheeks. Along with his heavily powdered face, the effect of the makeup is disorientating, especially as he is never seen in the film without this 'mask.' Elke's 'mask' is similarly that of the feminine, but as a drag artist, and she is shown in the opening scene in her blonde wig, wearing makeup, a long dress and a pink feather boa. The transformation is successful enough to confuse Brian, who gives a double take when standing next to her at the cabaret's urinals in the early part of the film.

The cabaret itself becomes a diverse place that is free from inhibitions and a space in which those inside can confront, mock, and celebrate the lack of restrictions. Just like Bakhtin's description of carnival, 'everyone participates' through laughing at the performances and 'life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom' (1968/1984: 7). The patrons of the Kit Kat Klub are given licence to laugh at everyone and everything, regardless of status or topic, illustrating that '[L]aughter... knows no inhibitions, no limitations' (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 90). Arlene Rodda argues that those inside the cabaret 'are never really aware of what is happening outside of their world of pleasure' (1994: 38). Perhaps it is more accurate to state that the growing threat of Nazism's ideologies and what these represent for many minority groups is subverted (at least temporarily) by the Klub's attendees, who are allowed to make fun of situations in this carnivalesque space without fear of reprisals. The success of this subversion is, however, questionable, given that it, too, is 'masked' or hidden within the cabaret space. The filmic audience witnesses the growing tensions outside the cabaret and the rebellion within it, but with the knowledge of the seriousness of what will take place in Berlin and beyond in the next few years. The idea of two contrasting spaces is similarly prominent in one of Garland's best-known films, *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Jacqueline Nacache ascribes to its storyline 'the motif of "transworld travel"' (2013:451), while Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty argue the movie has a narrative 'in which everyone lives in two very different worlds, and in which most of its characters live two very different lives' (1995: 3). In *Cabaret*, the world inside the Klub represents the safe, fantasy world, while the world outside is real and dangerous.

Liza meets Judy/Judy meets Liza (meets Sally)

Given that the three themes that are referenced by Dyer in relation to reasons for Garland's gay iconicity also apply to Minnelli's performance as Sally in *Cabaret*, it is of note that Minnelli is similarly viewed to be a queer icon; indeed, their queer iconicity is often described as interlinked. For example, Jodie Taylor argues that the two women are 'deeply entwined in queer music history' (2012: 80). Minnelli has been described as 'a fitting icon for the early years of gay liberation, extending her mother's role as an emblem of the pre-Stonewall era' (Morrison: 2010: 14), and many writers note the importance of *Cabaret* in making this connection, released just three years after

Garland's death. John Trezn, for example, argues that *Cabaret* was one of the films that led to the 'queer star reception of Liza Minnelli as a musical icon' (2012: 488). Minnelli's status as gay diva was also explored by Greg Hernandez on the eve of her 70th birthday in March 2016. Hernandez references Minnelli's age by naming his article '70 things we love about Liza Minnelli' and his list includes the suggestion that 'Liza is as big a gay icon as her mother!' He also includes '*Cabaret* and her unforgettable Oscar winning portrayal of Sally Bowles' in his list.⁷⁶ Such comments indelibly connect Minnelli, particularly in her role as Sally, to Garland. The main links that tend to be made between mother and daughter relate either to their facial resemblances, or suggested similarities between their performance styles. With regard to the first of these connections, Rebecca Mead suggests that 'the singer's physical resemblance to her mother is... striking' (1997: 20). Similarly, Jim Watters, reviewing *Cabaret* in 1972, proposes that 'in the edged poignancy of a lone figure on a spotlight stage,' Minnelli 'reminds the world of someone it has never forgotten: her late mother, Judy Garland' (36). When combined with the fact that Garland is famous for her torch songs, these observations hint at the idea of the palimpsest, as if Minnelli is somehow a superimposed version of Garland.

If this is the case, then it can be argued that Garland's presence haunts that of Minnelli in *Cabaret*, enhancing her performance as queer text. Elin Diamond suggests that 'each performance marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances' (1996/2005: 1). This is an interesting observation when considering what Marvin Carlson calls 'ghosting,' something he believes impacts upon an audience. He gives as an example the fact that people can 'recall situations when the memory of an actor seen in a previous role or roles remained in the mind to haunt a subsequent performance' (2001/2003: 10). Although not re-enacting a role played by Garland, given the links made by writers between Garland and Minnelli, and the fact that both women performed in film musicals, it could be argued that audiences hold multiple images and associations between the two women when watching Minnelli as Sally, thereby augmenting queer readings of the film.

Furthermore, the lack of glamour attributed to Garland by Dyer (1986/2004: 158) is not typical of many Hollywood stars of the Golden Age. Indeed, Judith Peraino argues that Garland 'was not the classic Hollywood beauty of her on- and off-screen rival Lana Turner' (2006: 122), therein describing normative gender expectations of how women in film should look. Garland was not viewed by the film industry as conventionally attractive, and was very aware of this fact. The singer was 'consistently plagued by observations about her physical features' (Staiger, 1992: 165) and 'her physical appearance is consistently referred to as not conforming to some ideal type' (Staiger, 1992:

⁷⁶ Greg Hernandez, '70 things we love about Liza Minnelli' (11.03.16) <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/liza-minnelli/#gs.=kdIqRQ> (accessed 4 February 2017).

165/6). Hollywood producer Louis B. Mayer reportedly referred to her as a ‘little hunchback’ (McLean, 2002: 3).⁷⁷ Garland strove ‘to adapt to the demands’ of the film industry concerning both her ‘body and temperament,’ along with ‘the visual conventions of women’s stardom itself’ (McLean, 2002: 7). It is of note, therefore, that similar disparaging comments have been made in relation to Minnelli’s performance as Sally. For example, *National Review* critic John Simon purports that, in *Cabaret*, Minnelli ‘rattles around gawkily and disjointedly, like someone who never got over being unfeminine and unattractive.’⁷⁸ Questions about the expected characteristics of femininity are also to the fore when Ralph Willett describes Minnelli in *Cabaret* as ‘a brash singer, gauche dancer and intense performer’ (1996: 53), arguably suggesting an inelegance that is not typical of the average female musical star performer. Not just being Garland’s daughter, then, but also being so similar facially to her mother (see Figures 1.8 and 1.9), along with the disparaging descriptions of her looks and body shape – criticisms similar to those ascribed by others to her mother – mean that Minnelli as Sally reinforces the suggestion of her mother’s ghosting and queer presence in *Cabaret*.



Figures 1.8 and 1.9 Facial similarities between Minnelli as Sally and Garland in a September 1967 interview on *The Irv Kupcinet Show* (Figure 1.8 Screenshot from *Cabaret*, Bob Fosse, 1972; Figure 1.9 Screenshot from www.youtube.com/watch?v=C35sw0JfLxM accessed 4 June 2017).

Conclusion

While there have been many interpretations of Sally, the performance of Liza Minnelli in the film version of *Cabaret* offers complex and diverse signifiers that encourage a queer reading that may not be immediately overt, but is still present. One of these indicators is that her portrayal destabilises representations of femininity in a leading role, as she presents with attributes and behaviours that suggest she is representative of the period’s ‘New Woman,’ an independent character who is clearly

⁷⁷ For information about other texts where this is recorded, see Adrienne L. McLean, ‘Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesics of Suffering,’ *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Spring 2002), fn. 1, p. 13

⁷⁸ See Christopher Tookey, *Named and Shamed: The World’s Worst and Wittiest Movie Reviews From Affleck to Zeta-Jones* (2010:197).

ambitious and knows her own mind. This is something that would resonate with women seeking equal rights at the time of the film's release. For example, she realises that a life married to the bisexual Brian and a move to England would not have a successful outcome, and this is not what she truly wants. Instead, she is keen to pursue a career that is worthy of her talents, even if this is not ultimately successful. Sally's rejection of the offer of marriage means that the film thus does not have the 'musical's typical romantic resolution' (Altman, 1987: 51) emblematic of earlier movie musicals.

In addition to the fact that she engages in a relationship with a bisexual man, links between Minnelli's Sally and Marlene Dietrich's Lola Lola also imbue the character with an androgyny that was embodied by Dietrich in a number of her films, as well as in her private life. Sally's performances in the licensed space of the Kit Kat Klub reference the queer subculture prominent in Weimar Berlin at the time in which *Cabaret* is set, but also invite a queer reading in being played by Minnelli, particularly via the notion of Judy Garland as palimpsest. In watching Liza Minnelli as Sally, one is also seeing gay icon Judy Garland as Minnelli/Sally given her potential 'ghosting' haunting presence. The scenes analysed underline the strong links between gay icon Garland and her daughter's performance as Sally. These analyses take account of Dyer's descriptors outlining some of the reasons why Garland has been celebrated as a gay diva, namely her ordinariness, androgyny and camp knowingness. Indeed, Minnelli's Sally exemplifies all the qualities Dyer ascribes to Garland in terms of her gay iconicity, as well as echoing elements of Dietrich and Louise Brooks, thereby similarly allowing her to be read as a queer icon.

In the next chapter, I will question the extent to which some of the characters in the 1975 movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* again conjure up echoes of a star or stars from film musicals of the Golden Age in a way that is similar to the haunting presence of Garland in *Cabaret*. I will explore how the narrative of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* references previous movie musicals in a manner that may queer some of the filmic characters, as well as aspects of the storyline, through intertextual allusions to earlier well-known films. I will also investigate the degree to which the narrative suggests a diversity of masculinities and how these may be read as queer. Given the relevance of the carnivalesque space of the Kit Kat Klub to queer identities, I will trace aspects of the carnivalesque in the later film and how this impacts on the filmic audience.

CHAPTER TWO - 'Just a Sweet Transvestite'? Representations of Queerness in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated the importance of a licensed space for the performance of queer identities in a film released shortly after the demise of the Production Code. While the analyses therein predominantly focused on readings of a female performance as queer within a licensed space, in this chapter I will examine and interrogate representations of queerness, queer space and masculinities through an analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). In debating whether the narrative's alien spaceship offers a licensed space for masculinities to be presented both as queer and as a social construct, I will discuss the topics of inversion and the carnivalesque with particular reference to the performance of gender identities. I will consider theories of performativity in this regard, including those conveyed by Judith Butler in her influential book, *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999). In order to investigate further the ways in which the film's narrative can be read as queer, I will question the extent to which the storyline can be understood as camp, further investigating Susan Sontag's influential text on this topic. Given that a camp reading of Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles is underpinned by camp readings of her mother, Judy Garland, in Hollywood musicals of the Golden Age, I will assess ways in which characters in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* similarly evoke musicals of this period from a camp and queer perspective. In exploring the themes outlined, I will also examine *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as cult film, and the importance of the cinematic space as safe for audiences wishing to express and celebrate Otherness through their identification with characters in the movie and their knowledge of the text.

Although the movie version of *Cabaret* differs in many ways from the 1966 stage production on which it was based, the film of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, released three years after *Cabaret*, stays reasonably faithful to its original theatrical counterpart. When it opened at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in London in June 1973, Richard O'Brien's stage musical *The Rocky Horror Show* was both a commercial and critical success. Originally expected to play there for a mere three weeks, the run was extended by another two before the show transferred to the Classic Cinema in Chelsea, and then to the nearby larger King's Road theatre in November 1973, where it was so popular that it ran for six years.⁷⁹ The show was named Best Musical of 1973 by both *Plays and Players* magazine and London's *Evening Standard* newspaper. Given the success of the stage show, moves were made to adapt the musical for the big screen. The budget was relatively small, as there was initially some resistance from American film studio 20th Century Fox about making the movie,⁸⁰ but co-producer

⁷⁹ See Mark Jabara, 'The Rocky Horror Show: Original Cast London 1973' (2015) <http://www.ozrockyhorror.com/Original%20London%20Cast%201973.html> (accessed 3 November 2019)

⁸⁰ See, for example, Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny* (1985: 179).

Lou Adler, who had brought the stage show to the Roxy Theatre in Los Angeles, was very enthusiastic and promoted the work (Michaels and Evans, 2002: 112; Jackson, 2012: 41). Yet, despite having many of the original London cast members in its ranks, including Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Richard O'Brien as Riff Raff, Little Nell as Columbia and Patricia Quinn as Magenta, the movie version initially played to small audiences when released in the UK in August 1975 and in the US in September of the same year. Despite initial low attendance figures, the film grew in popularity after being shown in cinemas as a midnight movie.

The narrative begins as newly-wed couple Betty (Hilary Farr) and Ralph (Jeremy Newson) exit the church following their marriage. After their departure, their friend Brad (Barry Bostwick) proposes to his girlfriend, Janet (Susan Sarandon). These two early scenes are thus framed as representing the expected heterosexual couplings typical of early film musicals. Brad and Janet decide to visit their old Science teacher, Dr. Everett Scott (Jonathan Adams), but it is a rainy night, and a flat tyre causes them to abandon their car to seek help. They remember passing a castle, and walk back to the building in the hope that there will be a telephone they can use. However, they have arrived on an 'auspicious night,' as castle proprietor Dr. Frank-N-Furter is about to reveal his creation, Rocky Horror (Peter Hinwood). Staying the night, both Brad and Janet are seduced by Frank, and become caught up in his evil plans, along with Dr. Scott, who coincidentally visits the castle in search of his nephew, Eddie (Meatloaf). It gradually becomes apparent that the castle is actually a spaceship and its occupants are aliens. Frank's servants, siblings Riff Raff and Magenta, gain control, and the former murders both Frank and Rocky before blasting back home with Magenta to the planet Transsexual, after allowing Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott to leave.

Contemporaneous Social and Political Changes

The Rocky Horror Picture Show was released at a time when the United States was experiencing 'fundamental changes' (Schulman, 2001: xii). The rise of identity politics during the 1970s meant that minority groups were campaigning for their voices to be heard, such as via the Women's Strike for Equality demonstration that took place across the USA in 1970. Stuart Samuels argues that the 1970s 'marked a shift from a concern for class and youth culture to a preoccupation with sexuality and gender' (1983: 148). Certainly, there were some initial positive developments at the time for those who were gay, not least the decision by the American Psychiatric Association in December 1973 no longer to classify homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder. However, at the time of the film's release, the Gay Rights movement in a post-Stonewall America was still in its formative years and many of those who self-identified as queer had to conceal this, at least in public, for fear of reprisals. In September 1975, the month in which *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was released in the USA, a

Vietnam War veteran named Leonard Matlovich, who had received a Bronze Star and Purple Heart for his war service, was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. Openly revealing his sexual orientation by declaring, 'I am a homosexual,' he promoted gay rights by aiming to draw attention to the fact that the United States Air Force banned anyone who was openly gay from joining the service.⁸¹ Such discrimination was similarly not uncommon at this time in other professions.

Although Illinois had decriminalised homosexual activity in 1962, the next state to follow suit did not do so until 1971. By 1980, twenty-two more states had eventually joined them.⁸² Such statistics indicate that, when *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was released, people who identified as non-heteronormative predominantly had to hide this fact. As noted by Taos Glickman and Shawn DeMille, the movie 'demonstrates how careful the LGBTQ community had to be prior to the "Rocky era"' (2015: 23) – and beyond; there were still 'legitimate fears about being "outed" because the gay community was fraught with an immense fear of being discovered' (2015: 24). The castle/spaceship which is Frank's residence signifies for both its occupants and the Transylvanians who visit there a licensed space where those identifying as Other can congregate without this 'fear of being discovered' and in which difference is accepted, which was arguably ground-breaking for the mid-1970s given the discrimination that existed at this time. It similarly represents for filmgoers a society in which it is customary and acceptable to be queer and validates a 'world upside down' reminiscent of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on François Rabelais.

Designating the Carnavalesque

The film opens with the number 'Science Fiction/Double Feature,' which is sung during the opening credits. The lyrics predict the possibility of intertextual references to other Hollywood films within the movie's narrative by mentioning such horror/sci-fi films as *Doctor X* (Michael Curtiz, 1932) and *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956). In the number, the visual image is of the mouth of Patricia Quinn's character, Magenta.⁸³ However, she is lip-synching to the vocals of Richard O'Brien, who plays her brother, Riff Raff. Opening the film with the symbiosis of these two characters ingeniously references the siblings' implied incestuous relationship, while hearing a male vocal emerging from female lips also blurs the gender divide and thus pre-empted crucial themes in the film's narrative, framing the performance of Otherness from the outset. While it may be argued that hearing a man while seeing a woman's lips silences a female voice at a time when second-wave feminists were seeking equality, O'Brien has often spoken of his sexual confusion. For example, he stated in one

⁸¹ See Lily Rothman, 'How a Closeted Air Force Sergeant Became the Face of Gay Rights' (08.09.15) <https://time.com/4019076/40-years-leonard-matlovich/> (accessed 19 November 2019)

⁸² See David Rayside, 'Early Advocacy for the Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity' in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics* (2020: 53)

⁸³ Red lips have become one of the film's iconic visual motifs.

interview, 'I knew I wasn't 100 per cent male and I certainly wasn't 100 per cent female. I finally found this person in the middle.'⁸⁴ Furthermore, the fact that there is a discrepancy between what is being seen and heard suggests an ousting or reversal of conventional norms, a theme that is present throughout the movie's narrative after Brad and Janet go into the castle. Once the couple enter the world of Frank and the other inhabitants, they become participants in a 'world inside out' typical of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 11).

Costume and masks are important elements of the carnivalesque, and they are also of significance in this movie, not just to illustrate the carnival atmosphere, but also to signify a utopia evocative of Hollywood musicals from the Golden Age. For example, Columbia's costume is reminiscent of those worn by Eleanor Powell in film musicals of the 1930s (see Figure 2.1). Indeed, she appears in 'The Time Warp' number to be dressed in an amalgam of two recognisable Powell outfits. Her costume is similar in style to those worn by Powell in the finale of *Born to Dance* (Roy Del Ruth, 1936), in which Powell wears a combination of shorts, tights and tap shoes, and in the last scene of *Broadway Melody of 1936* (Roy Del Ruth and W.S. Van Dyke, 1935), in which Powell has a sparkly top hat, jacket and bow tie (see Figure 2.2). Indeed, Columbia even attempts spins while tapping, something at which Powell excelled and which was often a feature of her dance routines. The fact that Columbia appears to be engaging in role-play and parody in her mimicking of Powell infuses her performance with aspects of the carnivalesque, alongside providing an intertextual reference to movie musical history.



Figures 2.1 and 2.2 Columbia wears a similar outfit to Eleanor Powell (Figure 2.1 Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975; Figure 2.2 Screenshot from *Broadway Melody of 1936*, Roy Del Ruth and W.S. Van Dyke, 1935).

As well as evoking Powell, there also appears to be an homage to Judy Garland's Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) in Columbia's apparel, as she is wearing sparkly shoes

⁸⁴ O'Brien identifies as 'transgender.' See: Jennifer Dann, 'Twelve Questions: Richard O'Brien' *NZ Herald* (27.10.15) https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=11535357 (accessed 5 October 2020)

and ankle socks. This is likely to have been a deliberate choice of footwear, as it was originally planned that the opening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* would be filmed in black and white, only changing to colour on Frank's entrance in the lift, thus mirroring the earlier film musical (Michaels and Evans, 2002: 76).⁸⁵ This proposal would have visually shown the castle to be an alternative space reminiscent of Oz in the 1939 movie, and therefore a more welcoming place for misfits or those marginalised than the 'real' world. Raymond Knapp suggests a further link between the two movies. He explains that '*The Wizard of Oz* is one of the few films whose soundtrack (including dialogue and background music) has been marketed separately from the film,' which means that viewers tend to know the script well and can quote lines while watching (2006: 136). The two movies are thus also connected via the verbal participatory experience of *Rocky Horror's* audience.⁸⁶

While Columbia's outfit and tap dancing can be read as alluding to the utopia of Golden Age musicals, the inference to Garland and *The Wizard of Oz* in Columbia's costume also evokes Garland as gay idol, an area discussed in more detail in the previous chapter. However, the seemingly direct reference to Powell is also worthy of close analysis in terms of reading the film's narrative, and the character of Columbia, as queer text. In their discussion on the Hollywood musical and queer audiences, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that '[R]esearch and anecdotal evidence suggest that... Eleanor Powell... had... lesbian cult followings' mainly because of her 'cross-dressing military tap dances' (2006: 73). Alexander Doty similarly mentions Powell among female musical stars he believes allow for 'actual and potential lesbian readings' (1995: 81), as does David M. Lugowski in his discussion of actresses during the 1930s who presented with 'mild lesbian connotations,' which were often 'masked as strength or exoticism' (1999: 17). Adrienne L. McLean focuses on this 'strength' descriptor in her essay on Powell. She argues that, while 'feminine,' Powell exuded a competence that was unusual for women in Hollywood at that time. In other words, she could do anything a man could do. As she explains, in 'dancing in a man's tuxedo, or in pants, or manipulating a lariat like a rodeo champion, or being able to keep up with Fred Astaire or any other man on the dance floor' (2009: 93), Powell is ultimately 'showing up the artifice of gender' (2009: 101), something that can also be ascribed to Columbia via this intertextual link.

Columbia's Otherness is signified in part during 'The Time Warp' scene via her colourful attire and the way she tap dances with abandon. However, in also mimicking Powell, the character

⁸⁵ This information is given in an interview between the authors and the set designer for the film, Brian Thomson. It is also stated in the original film script for 'sequence 54,' which contains the instructions 'the film changes from black and white to colour. However, the only colour in evidence is the red lipstick on the mouth of their host.' See <https://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Rocky-Horror-Picture-Show,-The.html> (accessed 19 May 2020). See also Raymond Knapp (2006: 136). This is possibly why the two pictures of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' that are clearly visible in 'The Time Warp' number are in monochrome rather than in colour.

⁸⁶ Ian Conrich also notes the 'cult status' of *The Wizard of Oz* (2006: 117), a designation applied to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as detailed below.

similarly challenges classifications of gender as binary. Furthermore, while it is clear later in the narrative that she has been in relationships with both Eddie and Frank, there are also insinuations that she is in a lesbian relationship with Magenta.⁸⁷ Columbia's gender identity can therefore be read as ambiguous, given her links to queer icons Garland and Powell, and her known or implied sexual relationships with certain characters in the movie's narrative.

Masks also feature in the film's storyline, albeit in ways that make the wearers still identifiable. Discussing the carnivalesque, Bakhtin suggests that '[T]he mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries' (1968/1984: 40). It can be argued that these assertions apply during the narrative when some of those in the castle perform on stage wearing the 'masks' given to them by Frank. This takes place during the 'floor show,' with Columbia, Rocky, Janet and Brad all wearing makeup that has a mask-like quality when they perform the number 'Rose Tints My World' (see Figure 2.3), during which they become marionette-like figures that are manipulated by Frank. Janet recognises her personal 'metamorphosis' during the number, singing 'I feel released / bad times deceased / My confidence has increased / reality is here.' This 'reality' is that of the carnivalesque; all four 'masked' characters also participate in the orgiastic swimming pool sequence that follows, singing 'Don't dream it / be it.' They thereby acknowledge their transformations and engagement in activities that defy 'natural boundaries,' such that the dream world presented in the licensed space of the castle becomes, as acknowledged by Janet, one that is deemed to be real.



Figure 2.3 The makeup 'masks,' worn here by Janet and Rocky (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

The alien 'dream' world is a liberating one in which time appears suspended within a licensed space and therefore does not have the same meaning as in the 'real' world outside the castle and cinema to which Brad, Janet, and the filmic audience return at the end of the movie. José

⁸⁷ This is most prominent during Janet's solo number, 'Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me.'

Esteban Muñoz argues that '[Q]ueerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time' and looks forward 'to a greater openness to the world' (2009: 25). Within the spaceship, barriers are broken down and restrictions revoked to show a community contravening the customary boundaries of heterosexual monogamy initially represented by Brad and Janet (and Ralph and Betty's wedding) at the start of the film. The 'light over at the Frankenstein place' about which Brad and Janet sing becomes an enlightenment, with the castle and those inside it symbolising the carnivalesque ideal that 'liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying' (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 47) and transforms them through their experiences. The utopia of this movie musical arguably extends beyond 'only entertainment' (Feuer, 1982/3: 84) due to the narrative's portrayal of acceptable Otherness and the carnivalesque. In many ways, the cinema audience for the film similarly engages in a carnivalesque atmosphere when watching the movie, returning to their 'real' world when they leave the cinematic space.

Audience Participation, Escapism and Cult Following

The movie was not an instant success in the United States; it was as a result of midnight showings of the film that started at the Waverly Theatre in Greenwich Village in April 1976 that a cult following soon began to emerge, with fans of the movie returning to see it on a regular basis. Most of the attendees in the early days identified as gay/queer (Bell-Metereau, 1985:15; Hunter, 2016: 11; Samuels, 1983: 134), although Judith A. Peraino notes that, by the early 1980s, a mix of 'city dwellers and suburbanites, gays and straights' were all regularly going to see the film (2006: 234). As a number of people turned up repeatedly, friendships often formed between those attending due to their shared interest (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983: 181; Bell-Metereau, 1985: 182).

What was particularly unusual about the cinema experience in this case was that the audience started to participate actively while the movie was being shown, something Jeffrey Weinstock suggests makes *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* 'unique, even among cult films' (2007: 33). This participatory behaviour began soon after the midnight showings commenced, and some aspects of this built on the interaction strategies of the original stage show. Some scholars read this interplay as a quasi-religious experience. For example, Mark Siegel argues that the 'almost constant dialogue between the audience and the film' is 'similar to that between priest and congregation' (1980: 307), while James B. Twitchell suggests that returning fans 'reenact what has become almost a religious ritual' (1983: 73). It is possible that the playing of the soundtrack while audience members looked for their seats encouraged the participatory activity, as regulars who already knew the lyrics of the songs would join in. In addition, the film's slow pace allows for, and almost encourages, verbal interface with the characters on screen during the gaps. Indeed, there is now an

audience participation script, also known as counterpoint dialogue, which enables those watching to interact with the characters in a way that alters the text's original meaning.⁸⁸ The participation in cinemas is not just verbal, however, but also physical, including the use of water pistols and the throwing of items such as rice and toast towards the screen at relevant points in the storyline.⁸⁹ It would be impossible now to think of the film being shown in public with the expectation that all of the audience will sit quietly in their seats.

One of the most striking phenomena that developed among the audience was that, independent of one another, people began to dress up as a character from the movie when going to see the film (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983: 177). Referencing this activity, Heather and Matthew Levy argue that '[M]embers of the audience who dress in costume do so as an escape from the normalcy and the banality of everyday life' (2008: 98). Film musicals, particularly those made during the Golden Age of Hollywood, have often been read as offering audiences a form of escapism. However, as explained by Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, while the musical 'has largely produced an escapist criticism,' nevertheless, those making film musicals at that time 'knew that there were more difficult and important things to be said' (1985: 3).⁹⁰ One could argue that the amount of care and attention taken to imitate the characters' appearance indicates that there are stronger reasons for such actions by the filmgoers, albeit that escapism may be one of the factors for this behaviour and for the movie gaining cult status.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is one of the films regularly cited as an example of a cult film. Indeed, Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich name the movie as 'the definitive exemplar' (1992: 198), while Stuart Samuels describes it as 'the king of midnight cult films' (1983: 11).⁹¹ Umberto Eco argues that a cult object 'must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own' (1985: 3). Certainly, fans can quote lines from the film, and the 'private world' of *Rocky Horror* allows them to dress as the characters and create their own dialogue, whereby they 'talk to' the characters on screen. In addition, I. Q. Hunter's definition of a cult film as one that has '*a devoted following or subcultural community of admirers*' (2016: 2) is also pertinent.⁹² Both of Hunter's statements apply in the case of *Rocky Horror*; many cinemagoers have seen the film on numerous occasions – as early as 1978, one critic reported that 'your pro has seen the film fifty to one hundred times' (Mano, 1978: 1494), indicating the movie's popularity.

⁸⁸ Stuart Samuels explains that '[B]y the end of 1977, there existed a new audience text, a new set of lines and actions that had nothing to do with the makers of the film' (1983: 135).

⁸⁹ For more information, see, for example, Knapp (2006: 241) and Peraino (2006: 234).

⁹⁰ The authors argue that 'the musical, in its own distinctive ways, expresses... truths and formulates... meanings' (1985: 3).

⁹¹ See also Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli (2012: 28).

⁹² Italics in the original text.

It appears that audience members believe it is safe within the confines of the cinema to take on the persona of a character from the movie. In addition, some of the cinemagoers 'act' as the character in front of the screen while the film is being shown, becoming part of a shadowcast. These participants precisely imitate the movements and gestures of the characters, facing out towards the audience who are watching the film.⁹³ Bakhtin argues of Rabelais' carnivalesque that '[C]omplete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world' (1968/1984: 47) and this idea is adopted by those engaging in audience participation, who freely shout out or throw items at the screen in 'fearless' fashion. Rebecca Bell-Metereau purports that the movie 'shows that rebellion can be pleasurable' (1985: 187) and this is an experience that is shared by those who come together to watch the film in cinemas. In adopting the persona of a character from the film or talking to the characters on screen, the filmgoers believe that they are a part of the movie, envisioning a freedom present in the storyline that is not necessarily obtainable in the world outside of the cinema. While this may be a temporary form of escapism, the narrative of this film musical appears to give people permission to be whoever they want to be, at least for the length of the movie. As noted by Glickman and DeMille, '[A]ttendants participate in an environment free from judgement' (2015: 25); their actions are accepted by the other cinemagoers in this safe environment where, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, people can dress as and mimic queer characters from the film that are easily identifiable to other members of the audience. Costume can therefore be considered as an important feature of the movie with regard to both the audience's sense of a carnivalesque freedom and also the ways in which the film's characters can be read as queer in the carnivalesque space of the castle.

For the apparel oft proclaims the man

It is initially the back of the character's six-inch-heeled shoes that are revealed in the entrance scene of Dr. Frank-N-Furter.⁹⁴ Coloured white and covered in rhinestones, the right heel of his shoe is shown stamping to a rhythm as Frank descends in a lift, before he turns around to show that he is wearing a black cape with stand-up silver collar. A close-up of Frank's face illustrates that it is heavily made up in a way that particularly accentuates his eyebrows, eyes and lips (see Figure 2.4). Sue Matheson suggests that the makeup alludes to 'the middle-aged Joan Crawford' (2008: 29), while Bell-Metereau similarly argues that Curry has a 'masculinized Joan Crawford face' (1985: 180) (see Figure 2.5). It is of note that these writers believe that there is an intertextual reference to

⁹³ D. Keith Mano has reported that 'when a really fine Dr. Frank N. Furtersingalike stood in his small flashlit pool, well, I found myself watching him, not the film' (1978: 1494).

⁹⁴ As noted by Patricia Quinn, Curry 'finally "found" his Frank character' in the stage musical when he wore the shoes selected for him for the role (Michaels and Evans: 2002, 135).

Crawford as, aptly in this regard given the nature of Frank's character, David Bret describes Crawford as 'the ultimate gay icon' (2006: 287) and notes 'her fondness for gay and bisexual men' (2006: ix). However, despite the visual similarities, Curry has denied any deliberate connection between his portrayal of Frank and the well-known actress.⁹⁵



Figures 2.4 and 2.5 The first appearance of Frank-N-Furter (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975); a middle-aged Joan Crawford (Screenshot from *Female on the Beach*, Joseph Pevney, 1955).

Frank's entrance in the movie is very dramatic and memorable; his arrival demonstrates that he is clearly a figure of importance within his community. The character of Frank is strongly associated with his opening number, 'Sweet Transvestite' – Zachary Lamm describes this as the film's 'signature performance' (2008: 197) – during which Frank reveals himself to be dressed in sexualised women's garb. Moreover, in this number and beyond, he seems deliberately to engage directly at times with the filmic audience. These traits become part of an overall queerness present in the film. The camera follows Frank as he sweeps past Brad and strides forward confidently along a red carpet towards a throne positioned on some steps. As he reaches the steps, Frank turns to face the camera and throws off his cape to reveal what he is wearing underneath it, singing as he does so, 'I'm just a sweet transvestite,' the word 'sweet' suggesting that his personality is not menacing. The camera angle emphasises his phallic bulge, a methodology discussed further in the next chapter in relation to the dual masculinities of Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*. Frank's clothing consists of stockings and suspender belt, black briefs, elbow-length fingerless gloves, corset, and a chunky pearl necklace (see Figure 2.6), thus mixing sexualised underwear with jewellery that is a symbol of the respectability and poise that complements his refined accent. Frank sings in a rich

⁹⁵ See a reprint of the March 1976 interview by Susan Pile in *Interview: 'New Again: Tim Curry'* <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/new-again-tim-curry> (accessed 10 October 2018)

baritone voice; Paul Robinson suggests that '[B]ecause of its weight and darkness, the baritone voice sounds naturally masculine' (1985: 174). The singing voice heard therefore knowingly contrasts aurally with the visual, feminine attire that he is wearing, reminiscent of the male voice heard and female lips seen in the film's opening number.



Figure 2.6 Frank shows what he is wearing underneath his cape (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

Given Steve Neale's argument that mainstream musicals are 'the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display' (1983: 15), Frank demonstrates this suggestion with relish, deliberately flaunting his body in a direct and overt manner. Frank thereby problematises Laura Mulvey's theories of the gaze in terms of this character as sexual object, given her argument that it is women who are 'the leit-motif [sic] of erotic spectacle' (1975: 11) in an article written in the same year as the film's release. Here, the object of the gaze and erotic spectacle is biologically male, but dressed in female attire. Chris Straayer argues that Frank is an example of a 'She-man.' She suggests that the 'She-man' is a male performer who 'exploits cross-dressing's potential for intense double sexual signification' (1996: 80). Certainly, Frank is shown to be anatomically male, yet his makeup and clothing are more traditionally associated with women, such that he demonstrates here the 'double sexual signification' that Straayer proposes. What is especially significant in Frank's case, however, is that he is not attempting to 'pass' as female.

Gaylyn Studlar makes a comparison between Frank's attire in this scene and that of Marlene Dietrich and her 'erotic ambiguity' (1989: 10) as Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*. This is a noteworthy assessment with regard to queerness given that, as argued in Chapter One, comparisons can also be made between Dietrich's Lola Lola and Liza Minnelli's Sally in her performance of 'Mein Herr.' Frank's stockings and suspender belt are evocative of those worn by Sally in that number. But in this number, those items are being worn by someone who is biologically male. Studlar suggests that Frank's garb evokes Lola Lola in the scene because the pearl necklace he wears, typical of a 'demure

matron,' is juxtaposed with 'a sequined lace-up corset, spiked heels and gartered stockings' (1989: 10). This view is particularly significant given Kenneth Tynan's suggestion that Dietrich 'has sex, but no particular gender,' and his proposal that 'her masculinity appeals to women, and her sexuality to men' (1954: 187). The queerness ascribed to Dietrich here can thus also be applied to Frank, whose appeal similarly blurs gender lines. Furthermore, given the comparisons between Dietrich's renditions of 'Falling in Love Again' and Minnelli's performance of 'Mein Herr' analysed in Chapter One, Frank can be seen to be evoking familiar past musical performances.

Given the appearance of the male body displayed in this scene, with Frank's transvestism not hiding that he is biologically male, the character thereby challenges dominant ideas about gender and identity, topics theorised by Judith Butler. When discussing the topic of masquerade, Butler argues that 'appearances become more suspect all the time' (1990/1999: 61), and claims that her theory that gender is a social construct can be witnessed in drag performance. Arguing that gender is performative, she posits that '[T]he performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed' (1990/1999: 175), proposing that 'the gendered body... has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (1990/1999: 173). In other words, she advises, gender is a social construct and something one does, rather than something one is. It is therefore fluid, rather than set. These suggestions can be applied directly in Frank's case; even though he is not hiding the fact that he is biologically male while in drag, he sings 'don't judge a book by its cover,' thereby signifying the fluidity of gender.

The juxtaposition of Frank's baritone singing voice, phallic bulge and strutting confidence, with his apparent charm, makeup, pearls and female clothing, does not just authorise his own affirmation that he is a transvestite. It also challenges conventional ideas of gender, particularly when considering Butler's theories of drag and performativity, as the lyrics of Frank's opening song make reference to traditional views of gender. For example, he advises Brad and Janet (and the cinemagoers) not to 'get strung out by the way I look' and proposes that he is 'not much of a man by the light of day.' Given that Frank proclaims to his audience that he is a 'sweet transvestite,' and this is how he therefore identifies at this point in the film, his statements reference the issues concerning gender and performativity theorised by Butler.

There is a gender fluidity, deliberate ambiguity and playfulness about the character that defy binary oppositions, problematising and challenging ideas about sexual norms. These contradictions become more pronounced as the film progresses as, although it is possible given his sexual encounters to suggest that Frank is bisexual, it may be more accurate to state that he is pansexual. For example, Frank is initially easily able to convince Brad that he is Janet when getting into his bed

simply by adopting her voice and wearing a wig, while also likewise successfully pretending to Janet that he is Brad. He has also been in a relationship with the gender-fluid Columbia. The fact that he is uncompromising in his transvestism and announces this fact with pride makes his queerness resounding and unambiguous. Despite the fact that Frank is an alien, the onscreen acceptance of his Otherness supports his gender ambiguity.

Audience Acknowledgement

During his singing of 'Sweet Transvestite,' in similar fashion to Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* and Sally in *Cabaret*, Frank has a diegetic audience – not just the visiting Brad and Janet, but also his 'servants' and the party-going Transylvanians. But, in addition, he makes it clear during the number that he is also performing for the cinematic audience via his direct address to the camera, something that continues at various points throughout the narrative. Frank performs this number very much with the filmic viewers in mind. For example, his first announcement that he is 'just a sweet transvestite' is directly to camera. He is then filmed in close-up as he struts towards the camera/filmic audience/Brad and Janet, and after the ironic line to Brad and Janet, 'You look like you're both pretty groovy,' he grimaces intentionally not to anybody in the diegesis, but to the film's viewers, who understand the irony and thereby feel that they belong among Frank's entourage.

Shortly afterwards, he dismissively discards the water from his cup straight into the camera's lens,⁹⁶ thus making it seem that the movie's viewers are in the room with him, and his line 'How about that' is again directed to the filmic audience. The verse commencing 'Why don't you stay for the night' and his invitation to 'come up to the lab' from the lift also appear to be addressed directly to viewers of the film. The overall effect of Frank's direct address makes those in the filmic audience feel that he is talking to them personally and that they are a part of what is taking place in the diegesis. While direct address can sometimes be used in film as a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation/distancing effect) that aims to estrange audiences from the characters they are watching, the purpose here, which links in part to the theatricality of the show's stage origins, appears to be to welcome the filmic audience as part of Frank's community. This is suggested through Frank's knowing facial expressions to camera, which appear to licence filmic audience members to join him.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Sarah Artt suggests that this is the 'first instance in which the audience is really acknowledged by a character other than the Narrator,' (2008: 63) but, as indicated, Frank shows an awareness of the filmic viewers earlier in the song.

⁹⁷ Graham Wood suggests that self-reflexivity 'permeates all aspects of the movie musical,' via either plot, songs, or the stars performing (2002/2008: 307). Some musical stars regularly performed their numbers, at least in part, directly to the camera; one thinks of Ann Miller's 'Prehistoric Man' number from *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1949) or 'Too Darn Hot' from *Kiss Me Kate* (George Sidney, 1953), for example. In this number, Frank is the only character who engages in direct address.

It is during the final line of the song, 'but not the symptom,' that there is a visual clue in Frank's facial expression that suggests his apparent charm may just be a front, hiding qualities that are far more sinister, as indicated below. However, the charm offensive continues in the next scene, when Frank meets his visitors in his laboratory. His female clothing is now covered by a green lab coat, but he continues to wear his pearl necklace visibly as a reference to his sexual ambiguity. Approaching Brad and Janet, he puts out his hand formally to welcome them, but looks straight ahead as if welcoming his filmic audience as well, before stating mockingly, 'How nice!' directly to viewers. His authority and direct address help to draw audiences into his world and make them feel it is a safe one in which they will be welcomed, but also encourage audience members to accept their differences. The framing of this shot is noteworthy in this respect. Frank's creation, Rocky, is yet to be revealed, but his body is in the background covered with a sheet. The mise-en-scène is such that the sheet appears to give Frank wings and thereby an angelic form (see Figure 2.7). The image thus presented here is of Frank as compassionate doctor, welcoming ally and virtuous creator.



Figure 2.7 Frank is framed in angelic fashion (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

The direct address towards the filmic audience that is displayed by Frank is also (and more logically) exhibited by the Criminologist (Charles Gray), who speaks only to the viewers in his role as narrator, and thereby similarly makes the audience believe that they have some involvement in the storyline.⁹⁸ This is particularly relevant during the 'Time Warp' number, during which the Criminologist explains the dance moves to filmic viewers. Scott Samuels debates to whom the Criminologist is speaking: 'Not the characters in the film. He's telling a story, he's talking to us, the listeners. He invites us to respond, to converse, to answer his rhetorical questions' (1983: 144/5). Samuels argues that the movie's action is therefore presented in a way that is more typical of the

⁹⁸ The character references British broadcaster Edgar Lustgarten, who was known for introducing detective stories in the short films *Scotland Yard* (1953-61) and *The Scales of Justice* (1962-67) in a very serious manner.

theatre, such that there is a 'breakdown of filmic space' (1983: 144) which enables the movie to 'burst the screen itself to connect with a real live audience' (1983: 145). The work's theatrical origins are seen as a disadvantage by Hunter, who asserts that the movie never quite loses its staginess (2016: 12), citing as reasons for his claims the Criminologist's teaching of moves for 'The Time Warp' and Frank's occasional acknowledgment of the cinemagoers. Nevertheless, he argues thereby that '[T]he cult audience, responding to the film's residual theatricality, breaks down the fourth wall and essentially completes the film' (2016: 12). Certainly, the actions/reactions of these characters within the narrative may be at least part of the reason why audience members are comfortable enough to respond to them in participatory fashion, and to feel safe enough within the cinematic environment to do so without fear of discrimination.

Camp Perspectives and Empathy

The suggestion within the narrative that there is a 'concealed' audience somewhere is even illustrated within the diegesis itself, during Frank's performance of 'I'm Going Home.' Frank sings this number after his servants, Riff Raff and Magenta, now in alien clothing and having taken command, state that they are returning to Transsexual, with Frank assuming at this point that he will be going with them. Sarah Artt notes that the number is sung 'in torch song style' (2008: 55); Frank's final song is thus reminiscent of those of many female performances in earlier musicals, including, as discussed in Chapter One, Sally Bowles' number, 'Maybe This Time,' in which she alludes to her bisexual lover. Indeed, it is noteworthy in this regard that Samuels argues that Frank performs the number 'à la Judy Garland' (1983: 43), while Peraino believes the 'highly melodramatic performance' can be read as 'a reference to Judy Garland's concerts or her singing "Over the Rainbow"' (2006: n.104, 303-4), thereby once again evoking this gay icon and *The Wizard of Oz*. Indeed, Frank's performance of 'I'm Going Home' can be read as camp.

Frank's mannerisms and actions during the number are overemotional and exaggerated, and thereby in the camp style favoured by Garland as argued by Richard Dyer (1986/2004) and, as contended in Chapter One, also adopted at times by her daughter in *Cabaret*. Julian Cornell suggests that '[B]efore Stonewall, camp was a survival strategy... in some homosexual communities' (2008: 38) and it can be read as an attempted 'survival strategy' for Frank to use in this scene, as he realises that Riff Raff has taken command and that he is his prisoner. For example, Frank throws his head back and stretches his arms out while melismatically singing an elongated final word at the end of the sentence, 'Smile, and that will mean I may.' Susan Sontag lists in her 'Notes on Camp' 'the love of artifice and exaggeration' (1964: 105) and 'the extravagant gesture' (1964: 113) and elements of both are employed by Frank in this number. For example, he catches a scarf that is thrown to him

and uses it in an overstated manner as he walks to the edge of the stage to address his fantasy diegetic audience. He also superfluously deals imaginary cards on the words 'cards for sorrow / cards for pain,' grimacing dramatically as he does so.

As a result of his predicament, Frank is no longer the confident 'sweet transvestite' witnessed in his earlier solo number near the beginning of the film. Instead, he presents as vulnerable and defenceless, deliberately smearing his make-up, and singing about 'the tears in my eyes' (see Figure 2.8). It is notable, also, that the camera pans in on an extreme close-up of his face at this point, reminiscent of Barrios's suggestion in relation to silent films that such actions 'weakened the illusion' of representations of drag (2003: 19). Although camp, the earnestness of Frank's performance in the song is also reminiscent of the style of many numbers in classic Hollywood musicals as analysed by Heather Laing. Laing argues that numbers are generally placed within a storyline when an emotion 'must be acknowledged and shared in order to progress the narrative' (2000: 7), which would apply in this instance. She also proposes that 'a particularly intense singing style' allows characters to demonstrate their sincerity (2000: 11). The manner of Frank's torch style-esque and dramatic performance of 'I'm Going Home' can therefore be read as encouraging the filmic audience to be sympathetic to, and emotionally affected by, his heartfelt words, despite the fact that the evil side of his character has been witnessed earlier in the narrative, such as via his murder of Eddie (Meatloaf). His licensing of queerness attracts empathy from those in the filmic audience who are or may be queer and can relate to this ostracisation. Such a compassionate response is bolstered by the inclusion of an imaginary audience.



Figure 2.8 Frank shows his more vulnerable side (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).⁹⁹

Frank performs the song on a stage that has a curtain backdrop and a spotlight is provided for him by Columbia at his request. Brad, Janet, Rocky and Dr. Scott are in one corner of the stage, both watching the performance and also providing backing vocals (see Figure 2.9). As Frank looks

⁹⁹ In her discussion of *Pandora's Box*, Janet Bergstrom notes of a character that '[A]n extreme close-up of his eyes... emphasizes his emotional state' (1990: 168)

out towards Riff Raff and Magenta, who are standing in a doorway at the rear of the theatre (see Figure 2.10), the latter gradually ‘vanish’ and the previously empty seats become occupied by the fantasy audience (see Figure 2.11). Frank’s performance thus recalls *Cabaret*’s ‘Maybe This Time’ from a variety of perspectives, and not just because of the Garland link. Sally likewise performs her song on stage and in the spotlight, yet most of the seats in the Kit Kat Klub are shown to be unoccupied, despite her very dramatic and exaggerated performance.



Figure 2.9 Frank initially performs ‘I’m Going Home’ in the spotlight on stage (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).



Figures 2.10 and 2.11 Riff Raff and Magenta start to ‘disappear’ as the phantom audience materialises (Screenshots from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

Frank is allegedly explaining his behaviour to Riff Raff and his sister, and is therefore supposedly singing to them, but he actually delivers the song directly to the imaginary crowd, who appear to signify the filmic audience. Although the number starts on stage, Frank moves beyond this confined performative space to sit on the edge of the stage for the second verse, thus involving his ‘audience’ more directly. This gesture is reminiscent of many of Garland’s later concert performances of ‘Over the Rainbow.’ As Ryan Bunch notes, Garland ‘would sit on the edge of the stage and give a heartfelt rendition of “Over the Rainbow,” as though breaking the fourth wall... to

bare her soul.¹⁰⁰ Towards the song's end, Frank even walks along the aisle to create a shared, participatory space, and many of the smartly-dressed 'audience members' on either side stand up to greet him, some of them holding out pen and paper to request an autograph. This phantom crowd also cheer, wave, and shout for more at the end of the song, which encourages the same reactions and empathy from those watching the film from their seats in the cinema. The theatricality of Frank's performance appears to connote that it is taking place before a real (filmic) audience as much as to those within the diegesis. This further connects the cinematic space with the phantasmagorical space of the castle, and those within both places.

Reality soon resurfaces for Frank, however, as the siblings 'reappear' in the doorway and Magenta proclaims 'How sentimental!' Frank looks around in shock to see that he has been imagining the admiring audience; the chairs are actually empty. Although he is still in drag, Frank's performance of 'I'm Going Home' is therefore very different from the knowing, confident and self-aware delivery of 'Sweet Transvestite.' Figure 2.8 illustrates the only time during 'I'm Going Home' that Frank looks directly at the camera. The swaggering, secure demeanour of his early number is replaced by timidity and yearning, and instead of perfect makeup and coiffure, his makeup is smudged and his hair is unkempt. The smeared makeup appears to designate the crumbling of the carnivalesque mask, revealing the unhappiness beneath, and the performativity of his presentation.

While Frank's performance of 'I'm Goin Home' encompasses many of the characteristics typical of camp, it is very different in its presentation from his earlier solo number. The imaginary audience to whom he performs encourages empathy for his situation, despite the vindictive side to his character, especially as those listening are not only extremely attentive, but also very approving, as if to persuade the filmic audience to respond to Frank in the same way. Furthermore, the theatricality of style and fact that Frank performs to an audience – albeit a phantom one – appears to licence the cinematic audience to display their emotions publicly as well. Despite Frank's earlier actions, therefore, the style of the performance means that his murder by Riff Raff, which immediately follows, evokes sympathy from the filmic audience.

'I Can Make You a Man'

The complexities and nuances of Frank's character and gender portrayal as shown in both his solo numbers and throughout the narrative as a whole are demonstrated in the variety of ways that he is read by scholars. For example, Walter Kendrick suggests that Frank is 'a terrifying fusion of hyperfeminine mannerisms and hypermasculine slathering lust' (1994: 127), while Kinkade and

¹⁰⁰ See Ryan Bunch 'Judy Garland sings "Over the Rainbow,"' (16.09.18) <http://www.ryanbunch.com/2018/09/judy-garland-is-probably-best-known-for.html> (accessed 1 October 2020)

Katovich argue that he is 'simultaneously repulsive and attractive' (1992: 199). Although he is a doctor and scientist, he is very different from the character after whom he has been named. Benjamin Nugent has described Victor Frankenstein as 'an ur-nerd,' explaining thereby that he is academically brilliant, but unable to connect emotionally with other people (2008: 25). In contrast, Frank-N-Furter, despite his amorality and sadistic behaviour, has a winning charm and charisma, and is 'a figure whose allure crosses gender lines' (Bell-Metereau, 1993: 180). In not hiding that he is biologically male, he offers diverse representations of masculinity, and it is therefore useful to compare this depiction with the way that some of the other male characters in the film are portrayed, starting with the film's 'replacement nerd,' Brad.

Brad is often described as presenting a specific stereotyped masculinity that harks back to an earlier era. For example, Weinstock suggests that he 'appears to have been timewarped from the 1950s into the 1970s' (2007: 57), while Peraino describes him as 'wimpy and powerless' (2006: 240). Matheson, proposing that the character evokes the 'emotionless, heterosexual, hypermasculine hero found in late night science fiction,' argues that Brad 'is a caricature – that familiar type popularized in early science fiction movies and television serials as the nerd' (2008: 20). It is useful to consider these descriptors more fully with regard to diverse masculinities. In terms of Brad being described as a throwback from the 1950s, certainly, in his early scenes, there appear to be visual similarities between Brad and the fictional character Clark Kent, as depicted by actor George Reeves in the American television series *The Adventures of Superman*, which ran between 1952 and 1958 (see Figures 2.12 and 2.13).¹⁰¹ Clark Kent is a familiar character who is traditionally viewed as a 'geek,'¹⁰² and in 'Dammit, Janet,' an early number during which Brad proposes to Janet, Brad sings that he met his fiancée-to-be in a science exam, thereby evoking the familiar trope of the studious nerd who is likely to be old-fashioned and a bore. Brad is portrayed as gauche in this scene, dropping the engagement ring when attempting to put it on Janet's finger, and then toppling over clumsily as she rushes away to admire it, symbolising thereby that he is socially awkward. Also, Frank barely takes any notice of Brad while he is being addressed by him during 'Sweet Transvestite,' instead ignoring him so as to welcome his Transylvanian guests. These traits, visible in Brad's early scenes, appear to authenticate Weinstock and Peraino's assessments of the character. Matheson's views of the character as evoking the 'emotionless, heterosexual, hypermasculine hero' of 1950s sci-fi films need more investigation, however.

¹⁰¹ See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044231/?ref=fn_al_tt_2 (accessed 3 December 2018)

¹⁰² For example, John G. Henry proposes of Kent that 'basically, he's a wimp. And probably a nerd. Or a geek.' (2005: 132)



Figures 2.12 and 2.13 There are visual similarities between Brad (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975) and a 1950s Clark Kent, played by George Reeves (Screenshot from *The Dog Who Knew Superman*, aired 04 November 1953) www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROtbElkMBBI (accessed 4 December 2018).

The differences between the original stage and final film scripts can arguably be seen as impacting unfavourably on the character of Brad as portrayed in the movie. Although he is the dominant singer in ‘Dammit, Janet,’ his verse in the next number, ‘Over at the Frankenstein Place,’ is inexplicably omitted in the movie, and his solo song, ‘Once in a While,’ is not included at all, ostensibly due to time constraints.¹⁰³ However, one could argue that an extra three minutes or so would not have made a great deal of difference given the film’s reasonably short length (96 minutes). This latter omission, in particular, may affect the way that people respond to the character, as the torch song ‘Once in a While’ contains evidence that Brad is not ‘emotionless’ and truly loves his fiancée. In this number, he expresses his belief that Janet’s unfaithfulness will be temporary, ending the song in hopeful fashion with the words, ‘You look around / the one you found is back again.’ With regard to his heterosexuality, this is compromised following his sexual encounter with Frank, and although there are some references from Frank to Brad’s ‘hypermasculinity,’ these are most definitely stated in an ironic fashion. For example, when the exasperated Brad angrily reproaches Frank for ignoring his request to use a telephone, Frank responds, ‘How forceful you are, Brad. Such a perfect specimen of manhood. So – dominant.’ He then asks Brad whether he has any tattoos.¹⁰⁴

In this short exchange, Frank is describing a particular stereotypical and traditional view of masculinity, suggesting that the ‘perfect’ man should be ‘forceful’ and ‘dominant’ while he himself

¹⁰³ See Patricia Quinn’s discussion with Scott Michaels about the number being cut in Michaels, Scott and Evans, David. *Rocky Horror: From Concept to Cult* (2002), p. 253. The number was filmed, and can be viewed online and as an outtake on certain releases of the DVD. Both ‘Once in a While’ and Brad’s verse in ‘Over at the Frankenstein Place’ were in the original film script. See <https://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Rocky-Horror-Picture-Show,-The.html> ‘sequence 24’ and ‘92A’ (accessed 19 May 2020)

¹⁰⁴ Frank himself has a tattoo, as does biker Eddie.

presents a very different portrayal of masculinity at this point that challenges this outdated perspective. The trope of the assertive heterosexual male is questioned further when Brad offers only 'token resistance' (Kinkade and Katovich, 1992: 200) after Frank climbs into his bed pretending to be Janet, but then reveals who he really is. Weinstock suggests that Frank's seduction of Brad 'carries... radical implications,' as the fact that a 'straight-laced, conservative, "all-American" man accedes so readily to a homosexual encounter can be interpreted as suggesting a fundamental but repressed bisexuality' (2007: 58). In many ways, the omission of 'Once in a While' strengthens this view, given that the lyrics of the song indicate that Brad is worried about losing Janet, and the number's deletion from the released version of the film emphasises Brad's queerness through its absence.¹⁰⁵

The character of Brad is presented as a counterpoint to the man Frank has created – Rocky. Yet the latter is just as much a male stereotype as Brad – Peraino describes him as 'a gorgeous blond muscle man' (2006: 235). The muscular Rocky is fashioned by Frank using a Charles Atlas manual. John Pettegrew explains that Atlas was the winner of a contest to find the 'world's most perfectly developed man'¹⁰⁶ two years in a row in the early 1920s, leading to the competition being stopped; the founder decided it would be unfair to continue it, as he believed Atlas would win every year (2007: 313). Atlas set up a business marketing a fitness programme that promoted his personal body shape as the one other men should aspire to acquire. Rocky, a 'beef-cake in jockey shorts' (Twitchell, 1983: 75), is indeed shown to be very strong; he lifts weights easily, and press-ups are equally no problem for him, given his Atlas-style body. He is physically modelled on this 'ideal' version of masculinity. However, Frank has created Rocky to be his sexual partner, and therefore this 'perfectly developed' creation becomes the lover not of a woman, but of another man. Indeed, Rocky 'comes to life' within his tank when it is lit up in rainbow colours (see Figure 2.14), a possibly unintended queer reference at the time, but one that would be recognised today.¹⁰⁷ As Rocky is being led by a self-assured Frank to their 'marital bed,' the Transylvanian guests throw 'confetti' over the couple. Such a union between two men is therefore shown as acceptable within a narrative decades before same-sex marriage was legalised.

¹⁰⁵ The position of the song in the stage show follows Brad's sexual encounter with Frank.

¹⁰⁶ This phrase is the trademark for Charles Atlas Ltd. The website states that 'Charles Atlas's measurements are on file as being the ideal male specimen for 20th century man.' See 'The Official Website of Charles Atlas' <https://www.charlesatlas.com/about.html> (accessed 3 December 2018)

¹⁰⁷ The Rainbow Flag has since become a symbol of gay pride/LGBTQ+ pride.



Figure 2.14 Rocky comes to life in a rainbow-coloured tank (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

One of the science fiction films that Magenta/Riff Raff reference during their opening song is *Flash Gordon*, with the eponymous hero being ‘in silver underwear.’ In making his ‘monster,’ Rocky, Frank goes one better, such that his creation is revealed to be wearing not silver, but gold bikini briefs. In the stage show, Rocky has dialogue and interacts verbally with other cast members, but in the film, he is reduced to a non-verbal caricature, a stereotyped muscleman portrayed as all brawn and no brains, and with an awkward walk. Although he sings, the voice that is heard is not actually that of the actor playing the role, Peter Hinwood, but of Australian singer Trevor White, who is not credited for his part in the process.¹⁰⁸

However, Frank’s creation gains legitimacy near the narrative’s end. Rocky shows great loyalty to his maker and lover, Frank, at the end of the movie, when Riff Raff and Magenta rebel against their previous master. As already noted, the film has numerous intertextual references to other well-known movies, and there is a clear and deliberate intertextual link between Rocky carrying Frank’s lifeless body up a model of the RKO tower present in the background and the 1933 version of *King Kong* (Merian Cooper), which was produced by RKO pictures.¹⁰⁹ Towards the end of this film, Kong climbs the Empire State Building carrying his beloved Ann Darrow (Fay Wray), but he is killed not only because of the kidnap, but also because he is in a world he does not understand, and that does not understand him.¹¹⁰ As argued by Kenneth Von Gunden, ‘the viewer roots for Kong’ (1979: 55), but he is shot by machine gun fire and falls from the top of the building; the filmic

¹⁰⁸ Trevor White had played the lead role in Jim Sharman’s Australian production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. See http://www.rockyhorrorwiki.org/wiki2/index.php?title=Trevor_White (accessed 20 April 2020).

¹⁰⁹ For further information about the movie’s intertextual references to other films, see for example J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1983: 182); Raymond Knapp (2006: 243 and 245); Stuart Samuels (1983: 150); and Kenneth Von Gunden (1979: 55).

¹¹⁰ Frank references wanting to be like Fay Wray shortly before his death.

audience similarly roots for the innocent Rocky, but he, too, is murdered and, along with his creator, falls from the tower into the swimming pool below.

It is not only the 'masculinities' of Brad and Rocky that diverge. Lamm argues that, 'as the contrast between Frank and Rocky makes clear, "masculinity" might not always signify the same thing' (2008: 200). And, as both of these characters show, that masculinity may not actually be a heterosexual one, but rather a queer masculinity. Frank is shown to have tired of previous partners Columbia and Eddie, and he has sexual encounters during the film with Janet, Brad and Rocky. And when Janet discovers an injured Rocky in hiding, the pair find that they are sexually attracted to one another; Janet's sexuality is released further and they have sex. Glickman and DeMille propose thereby that Rocky 'is allowed to explore his sexuality in an accepting environment' (2015: 24), an environment that offers a safe space in this regard. Likewise, Brad explores his sexuality in sleeping with Frank. The spectrum of masculinities shown in the film is therefore diverse and varied.

An Ambiguous Ending

The manner in which the film ends and how this can be interpreted from a queer perspective has been the subject of much debate. Although acting as a servant to Frank for the majority of the film, Riff Raff overturns the servant/master relationship to take control. In doing so, his hunchback vanishes and he transforms into a ruthless alien leader who is just as capable of murder as Frank. Before beaming the spaceship back to Transsexual, Riff Raff murders Frank, Rocky and Columbia, allowing Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott to leave.¹¹¹ Some critics have read these actions as showing the re-establishment of the sexual normative. For Barry Keith Grant, for example, 'dominant sexual values are restored, as the couple survives and Furter is eviscerated' (2000: 21), while Kinkade and Katovich argue that 'traditional norms are validated; Frankenfurter is merely a distraction' (1992: 2001). Ben Hixon similarly suggests that '[T]he authentic queer does not live happily ever after; it is murdered by the normative society in which it lives' (2008: 189). One could also point to the fact that gender fluid acceptability is shown only within the realms of an alien spaceship, and may not be so easily tolerated outside of this extra-terrestrial, carnivalesque world.

There is an alternative interpretation of the ending, however. For example, Julian Cornell questions the views about restoration of the normative, arguing that it is important to note that those who destroy Frank and Rocky are incestuous, and that in showing that heterosexuality is one sexual orientation among many, the narrative 'asserts the viability of the marginalized over the dominant' (2008: 47). Indeed, it is a queer character, Riff Raff, who is the killer, and his actions in

¹¹¹ In the original stage show script, Columbia runs to protect Frank by standing in front of him, such that Riff Raff kills both characters simultaneously. Her death on stage therefore appears more accidental than deliberate. The reason for killing her is more inexplicable in the film version.

allowing Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott to leave may simply be construed as valid in the context that they are the only earthlings present and he and his sister are about to return to Transsexual. Also, Brad's sexual orientation, given what happens in the narrative, is open to debate. Furthermore, although he states that he is taking command because Frank's lifestyle has become 'too extreme,' Riff Raff gives his reason for the murder as being the fact that Frank never liked him, and does not specifically mention it is anything to do with his sexual exploits. Furthermore, Brad and Janet are visually separated at the narrative's end, crawling on the ground as they try to make sense of their experience. The storyline is left open as to whether they reunite.

Given the regularity with which many of the audience view *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, one could argue that Frank, along with his fluid sexual orientations, is resurrected constantly, regardless of how the movie concludes. This indicates that the destruction of queerness will only be temporary. Peraino proposes that, '[I]t is a gloomy ending to be sure, but the audience knows that they will be back to see it all happen again' (2006: 239). In many ways, the sadness audiences may feel following Frank's demise is witness to the acceptance of the character's queerness. As Kay Siebler argues, Frank exemplifies 'queerness that could be celebrated, queerness that could be embraced, queerness that was hip, and cool' (2012: 75). The popularity of the film and its cult status acknowledge this fact, with the character of Frank living on as queer icon.

Also, in many respects, despite the themes of the narrative and Artt's suggestion that the ending of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is an analogy of the demise of the classic Hollywood musical (2008: 54) and the various myths therein,¹¹² the film actually harks back to and celebrates some familiar aspects of the Golden Age musical and the utopian ideal. In his seminal text *The American Film Musical* (1987), Rick Altman divides Hollywood musicals into three categories, namely show, folk and fairy tale. The theatrical aspects of the piece, such as Frank's looks to camera and his performance of 'I'm Going Home' are reminiscent of backstage musicals; the community feel of the world within the spaceship/castle, alongside the audience participation that the film encourages, are representative of earlier folk musicals; while the 'don't dream it, be it' mantra of the floorshow and alien world where everyone can be accepted, regardless of how they identify, evokes a fairy tale quality of a storybook world, albeit in this case a queer one. Although clearly a post-Stonewall movie musical in terms of its storyline, in many ways *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is an amalgam of all three of Altman's divisions, thereby reinforcing the utopian carnivalesque atmosphere promoted, albeit presented in a manner that would not have been acceptable if released during the observance of the Production Code.

¹¹² For example, Artt discusses the myths of spontaneity and integration as theorised by Jane Feuer (1982/1993).

Double Feature

As I will also suggest in relation to *Saturday Night Fever* in Chapter Three, there are elements of a form of duality present in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show's* narrative. This is perhaps connoted in the title of the film's opening song, 'Science Fiction/Double Feature,' a song that is reprised/doubled (albeit with different lyrics) at the end of the movie, as well as through there being two different actors involved in the song's presentation – O'Brien and Quinn. Some of the other aspects of doubling involve duality of roles. In the original London theatre production, some of the parts were doubled.¹¹³ Patricia Quinn played the Usherette as well as Magenta, while Paddy O'Hagan was both Eddie and Dr. Scott. In the film, Campbell, Curry, O'Brien and Quinn all appear in the wedding scene that opens the narrative, and the latter three even appear in one of the couple's photographs (see Figure 2.15). There is also a point during the scene that shows O'Brien and Quinn – who clean the church with Campbell during the singing of 'Dammit, Janet' – standing in front of the doorway of the church in a manner that echoes Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* (1930), with O'Brien holding a pitchfork (see Figure 2.16). This art work is referenced again near the end of the film, when Riff Raff and Magenta 're-enact' their pose in the doorway from near the start of the movie, thus creating a type of doubling. However, on this occasion, the characters are in alien garb; the 'pitchfork' handle held by Riff Raff becomes a weapon that emits the laser beam that kills Columbia, Frank and Rocky. It is a significant choice of pose and painting due to the ways in which the couple portrayed in the original art work can be interpreted. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argues of the two figures that 'there is something queer about them, letting that word resonate with all its original and contemporary meanings' (2010: 13). This queerness is married in the film's narrative through the incestuous relationship of Riff Raff and Magenta. The actual painting *American Gothic* is visible on the wall of the hallway of the castle as Riff Raff starts to sing the opening lines to 'The Time Warp' (see Figure 2.17).

¹¹³ This practice continues to this day.



Figure 2.15 'Magenta,' 'Frank' and 'Riff Raff' are in the rear of the wedding photograph (Screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).



Figures 2.16 and 2.17 The characters reference Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* (1930); the painting is visible in a later scene (Screenshots from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

There are other examples of dualities in the film. A number of those featured in the wedding scene and who appear in the photograph in figure 2.15 also play the roles of Transylvanians. There are two paintings of the 'Mona Lisa' visible in the large room in which 'The Time Warp' is danced. These are positioned either side of the doorway. There is also doubling in the scenes in which Frank seduces first Janet and then Brad. Indeed, much of the action and dialogue in these scenes are duplicated; the colour coding of the couple's individual bedrooms – blue lighting for Brad's bedroom and pink lighting for Janet's – also deliberately plays with recognised traditional gender conventions (see Figures 2.18 and 2.19). It is revealed late in the narrative that half of Eddie's brain was used to create Rocky, the two characters thus having a duality of the body despite their differences in personality. There is a duality of gender via the representation of Frank as biologically male, but wearing female clothing, when he sings his opening number. The doubling is also implied via the idea of two different worlds, the drab, rainy one that

Brad and Janet leave as they enter the castle, and the queer, vibrant, carnivalesque one inside the spaceship that offers a licensed space for everyone to express and explore their diverse sexual orientations and identities without fear of reprisal.



Figures 2.18 and 2.19 Frank seduces Janet and Brad in identical fashion (Screenshots from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Jim Sharman, 1975).

The many instances of doubling in the film appear to question what is real and not real, but also allude to the 'double life' many queer people experienced at the time of the film's release. Furthermore, it illustrates the two different people the characters are, or become, within and without the carnivalesque space. For example, Tim Curry appears initially as the sombre vicar who has presumably presided over the wedding of Betty and Ralph, but as Frank, he presides over the wild festivities that take place in the castle as a pseudo Lord of Misrule. It also denotes, in retrospect, the duality of audience members, who put on and then take off a role, engaging thereby in two different identities while inside and outside the licensed space of the cinema.

Conclusion

The Rocky Horror Picture Show offers acceptance and inclusion of sexual otherness. Frank is a fully-rounded character who happens to be pansexual and identifies as a transvestite. Tim Curry's portrayal of the character offers the audience the opportunity to be accepted and included too, regardless of their sexual orientation. This is in part because he deliberately acknowledges the filmic audience in a way that makes him appear to be both within and without the diegesis. Curry's depiction of Frank, with its combination of outrageous confidence, engaging vulnerability and parasitic sycophancy is directed beyond the diegesis to the cinematic onlookers, so that there is no doubt that he is performing, playing a role, and doing so with an infectious enthusiasm. Thus, the character's early inclusion of the audience in this way could have been part of the reason why audiences in cinemas in the United States in the early years of the film's release felt comfortable

enough to interact with the characters on screen and imagine themselves as cast members – outsiders becoming ‘insiders’ within this fictional, carnivalesque world.

The binary system of gender is problematised during the film’s opening song and again at the point at which Frank appears and sings his first number. Furthermore, the gender identity of Columbia is blurred, and it is clear that siblings Magenta and Riff Raff are engaged in an incestuous relationship. Frank’s creation, Rocky, presents as queer not just because he has been created in the spaceship, but through his sexual encounters with both Frank and Janet. The film presents queerness as established and commonplace within the society represented in the world of the castle and licences as ‘safe’ the fact that audiences can celebrate their queerness alongside the queer characters in the movie. The film is one that enabled a generation of filmgoers to see a movie in which the narrative challenged some traditionalist perspectives on sexual difference, as the film’s characters and storyline demonstrate a queerness that subverts and destabilises conservative societal norms of the day. The usual primacy of heterosexuality within Golden Age Hollywood musicals, as illustrated by Altman (1987), is thus subverted in a post-Production Code movie, with the narrative celebrating the flouting of contemporary accepted social and sexual norms in carnivalesque – and queer – fashion. Indeed, the future of Brad and Janet’s relationship is left open.

The narrative and characters probe and question gender as a cultural construct, highlighting masculinity in particular as a spectrum along which different qualities and features are acceptable. The different masculinities presented within the film raise questions about the presentation and demonstration of queer masculinities and the importance of licensed spaces in this regard. These are areas I address in my next chapter, in which I focus on the male protagonist in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) to discuss further the paradox of heteronormative/non-heteronormative readings through probing the notions of men as spectacle and object of the gaze in a film musical of the period.

CHAPTER THREE - Dualities of Masculinity: John Travolta and Queerness in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977)

Introduction

The previous chapter considered the portrayal of queerness and the carnivalesque in the cult film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Steinman, 1975). The analysis indicated that the movie's narrative questions the essentialism of gender, while the castle/spacehip offers a 'safe' space for the characters to express their queerness openly. Furthermore, the storyline champions a diversity of masculinities, while celebrating queerness in a carnivalesque manner. This chapter investigates aspects of masculinity in the representation of the main character, Tony Manero (John Travolta), in the successful film *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). I focus on four key scenes that feature Tony to examine how far these suggest potential queer readings. I analyse this character's presentation particularly in relation to themes of duality, such as heteronormative/non-heteronormative, masculinised/feminised, and shunned/respected. To investigate these proposals further, I explore gaze theories, such as those identified by Laura Mulvey in her influential article from 1975, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' and the responses to that article from Steve Neale (1983) and Steven Cohan (1993). In this case study, I consider these texts with specific reference to men as spectacle in film musicals. I analyse the ways in which Tony is presented on screen as object of the viewers' gaze via the camera's focus on the character in order to explore a potential queer reading of Tony. This is pertinent both within and without the diegesis.

As with the two films I have analysed so far, I question whether the themes of licensed spaces and the carnivalesque are significant when considering readings of Tony from a queer perspective. I therefore reference Mikhail Bakhtin's work on François Rabelais to explore whether the disco – which is so important in the life of Tony – provides a licensed space in which the character can display a freedom and autonomy not possible outside of that venue. Given the importance of disco music and the disco itself as a specific dance space within the movie's narrative, I examine disco/anti-disco discourses that were prevalent at the time of the film's release. This includes evaluating the early popularity of disco music amongst gay men. In this regard, I question whether the movie's emphasis on disco songs featuring the Bee Gees, with their prominent use of the falsetto register, further enhances grounds for a potential queer subtext in respect of Tony.

When he was cast as protagonist Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta was a virtual unknown, at least outside the United States. He had played the part of Billy Nolan in Brian De Palma's 1976 horror film *Carrie*, and starred as Tod Lubitch in the 'made-for-tv' movie *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* shown the same year, but it was his role as disco king Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*

that catapulted him to fame.¹¹⁴ The storyline for *Saturday Night Fever* was derived from an allegedly true story by British rock critic Nik Cohn. Entitled 'Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night,' Cohn's article first appeared in a 1976 issue of the magazine *New York*.¹¹⁵ His narrative centres on an eighteen-year-old from Bay Ridge called Vincent, who works in a hardware store by day, and goes with friends to the 2001 Odyssey disco on Saturday nights. Vincent takes four hours to get ready to go out, loves to dance, and commands the dance floor.¹¹⁶ There were a number of bids for the rights to make a film based on the story; Cohn decided to sign with RSO, a company founded by Robert Stigwood (Kashner, 2008: 238). Stigwood had some experience in the world of film musicals, as he had produced the movie versions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973) and *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975). Stigwood invited pop group the Bee Gees to write some songs for the forthcoming film and decided to release the soundtrack prior to the film hitting cinema screens.¹¹⁷ The success of the disco soundtrack and film revived the fortunes of the Bee Gees; indeed, the album remains one of the best-selling of all time.¹¹⁸

'Disco Demolition Night' and Alleged Discrimination

As established in the previous chapter, following the Stonewall Riots, many of those in the United States who self-identified as LGBTQ+ were becoming more visible via their campaigns for equal rights, with organisations such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist Alliance at the forefront. In the year of *Saturday Night Fever's* release, the openly homosexual Gay Rights' activist Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and led campaigns aiming to stop discrimination based on sexual orientation in such areas as employment and housing. With the opening of gay clubs and dance venues in the 1970s, those who identified as non-heteronormative

¹¹⁴ I am analysing the original R-rated film; a PG-rated version of the movie was released in 1979.

¹¹⁵ See <http://instapaperstories.tumblr.com/post/973007321/tribal-rites-of-the-new-saturday-night-new-york> (accessed 5 January 2018). Cohn originally wrote: 'Everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly by the people involved. Only the names of the main characters have been changed.'

¹¹⁶ Although Cohn had stated that the article was based on fact (see fn.115 above), he admitted twenty years later that the work was fiction, 'albeit based on observation and some knowledge of disco culture.' See, for example, Nadia Khomami, 'Disco's Saturday Night Fiction' (26.06.16) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/26/lie-heart-disco-nik-cohn-tribal-rites-saturday-night-fever> (accessed 3 February 2018) and Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 20

¹¹⁷ The album of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was similarly released prior to the show being staged or filmed. See Elizabeth L. Wollman, *The Theater Will Rock: A History of the Rock Musical, from Hair to Hedwig* (University of Michigan Press, 2006/2009), p. 93

¹¹⁸ The soundtrack is listed in the top twenty of the best-selling albums worldwide as at August 2018. See Josh Jackson and Paste Music Staff, 'The 25 Best-Selling Albums of All Time' (22.08.18) <https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/best-selling-albums/the-best-selling-albums-of-all-time/> (accessed 3 January 2020)

were able to dance more openly with a member of their own sex.¹¹⁹ It was from such underground clubs that disco's popularity emerged. One of the earliest venues was an apartment in New York that became known as the Loft, which was owned by music lover David Mancuso. Mancuso started to throw invitation-only all-night parties in 1970 and often acted as Disc Jockey (DJ) himself (Ortiz, 2011: 7). The DJs 'juxtaposed records to shift the mood or create dramatic narrative for the evening' (Ortiz, 2011: 71) and were therefore crucial in creating a particular atmosphere via the music they selected, often merging tracks together to create a continual dance beat. They were also key to getting certain popular dance records into the public domain (Echols, 2010: 3-4), most of which were released initially on independent labels (McLeod, 2006: 359). Another important New York location for dancing in the early 1970s was the Sanctuary, a former church.¹²⁰ Both the Loft and the Sanctuary were 'influential venues' in terms of the emergence of disco (Lawrence, 2011: 231). The attendees were generally gay men (Echols, 2010: 2).

Dancing to disco music was very different from other, older forms of social dancing, the main variation being that you did not need to be part of a couple in order to take to the dance floor.¹²¹ Lori Ortiz notes that 'disco brought men onto the dance floor where they could find constructive help in the communion and physical expression of dancing.' (2011: 55). David Walsh calls disco-dancing 'a free-forum kind of dancing' (1993: 114). He argues that disco venues provided opportunities for men to excel on the dance floor in a way that enhanced traditional masculine characteristics due to the physical exertions involved in the movements, but also allowed male homosexuals to enjoy dancing without the need to partner a female (1993: 114-5). This meant in practice that men could dance with, or alongside, one another. In his essay 'In Defence of Disco,' Richard Dyer argues that the style of music elaborates a whole body eroticism, which 'leads to the expressive, sinuous movement of disco dancing' which was different from the way people danced or moved to other popular music of the time (1979: 22).

During the decade, disco music gradually became more mainstream and increased in popularity. Despite the mounting interest in discos and disco music in the mid to late 1970s, however, there was a backlash in the United States at the end of the decade. The growing chart success of many disco records was not welcomed by everyone – not least Steve Dahl.¹²² Dahl had been working as a rock DJ for radio station WDAI in Chicago, but in 1978 the station decided to

¹¹⁹ As noted by Tim Lawrence, 'the law that restricted men from dancing with each other was repealed in New York in December 1971' (2011: 233).

¹²⁰ The name reflects the idea of offering a safe space for those marginalised in wider society at the time.

¹²¹ See, for example, Lawrence (2011: 231).

¹²² Anthony Hogg names 'Love's Theme' by Barry White's Love Unlimited Orchestra as 'the first disco track to top the American Billboard Chart' in 1974 (2019: 126).

broadcast disco music instead of rock due to its popularity, such that Dahl was no longer needed.¹²³ It has been claimed that many radio stations took this approach due to the success of *Saturday Night Fever*.¹²⁴ Dahl, who was vociferous in his dislike of disco records on his new radio show on WLUP, was contacted by the promotional director of baseball team Chicago White Sox, Mike Veeck, who was keen to get more fans to watch the team play. As an incentive, people were encouraged to come along to the game between the White Sox and the Detroit Tigers in July 1979, with the inducement that the entrance fee would be reduced to 98 cents if they brought along an unwanted disco record, which Dahl would blow up publicly during the interval between the games. However, so many people attended that there was no room in the allocated box for all their discs and some were forced to take their records with them to their seats. In the lead up to the explosion, the crowd were encouraged to chant 'disco sucks.' Following the explosion, people not only invaded the pitch, but also started using the records that had not made it into the box as Frisbees. This led to the police being called and the planned second baseball game to be cancelled. The evening became known as Disco Demolition Night.¹²⁵ Ironically, it seems unlikely that people who disliked disco music to that extent would own disco records in the first place, and it is therefore probable that records representing a variety of styles of music were destroyed that evening. However, this does also enhance suggestions that there were more sinister motives at play.

Disco's origins were with those seen as marginalised. Ortiz explains that '[C]ultural outsiders – black, gay, and Latino inventors of the style – disseminated the dance throughout and beyond the disco era' (2011: 6), while Ken McLeod notes that disco's roots lay in 'working-class, gay, and African American communities' (2006: 348).¹²⁶ Although, on the surface, Disco Demolition Night was simply an opportunity for people to share their dislike of disco music in communion, in more recent years, many scholars have suggested that there were more deeply entrenched, anti-queer reasons for the display. For example, in her article on this backlash, Gillian Frank argues that the 'attack on this musical genre had implications for gay men whose identities were associated with disco' and that it 'was motivated by antigay prejudice' (2007: 279). Similarly, Tim Lawrence asserts that the "'disco sucks" campaign' was 'homophobic' (2011: 241). However, Dahl has denied that there was any hidden agenda. He has stated that 'I'm worn out from defending myself as a racist homophobe for

¹²³ Dahl explains his views on the origins of 'Disco Demolition Night'; see Chuck Garfien, 'Disco Demolition Night: 30 Years Later' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97lgR41qZC8> (accessed 3 February 2018)

¹²⁴ See, for example, Frank Mastropolo's article, "'It Was Like A Riot:" The History of Disco Demolition Night' (12.07.15) <http://ultimateclassicrock.com/disco-demolition-night/> (accessed 4 January 2018)

¹²⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97lgR41qZC8> (accessed 4 January 2018) to hear Dahl explain his reasoning for organising the event and some footage from the evening.

¹²⁶ Similarly, Mark Moore purports that '[D]isco used to be the black, Hispanic and gay subculture, dancing at night to be able to cope with the daytime.' See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b04v8677/the-joy-of-the-bee-gees?suggid=b04v8677> 37' 40" (accessed 3 February 2018), while Anthony Thomas notes that the roots of disco 'go back to the small underground gay black clubs of New York City' (1995: 438).

fronting Disco Demolition at Comiskey Park. This event was just a moment in time. Not racist, not anti-gay.¹²⁷ Yet, even if Dahl simply disliked disco because he felt the style to be inferior to rock, nevertheless, by the summer of 1979, it was inevitable that his actions would be seen as homophobic given the popularity of disco music within LGBTQ+ communities.¹²⁸ But anger against the influence and popularity of *Saturday Night Fever* was also evident that evening, and an effigy of Travolta was set alight outside the stadium (Howell, 2015: 150). Maxine Leeds Craig suggests that this was because Travolta's Tony represented 'the wrong kind of heterosexual man, one too concerned with appearance. He danced too well' (2014: 104). While stating that the character is heterosexual, her words actually may unwittingly be connoting Tony's duality and queerness. Furthermore, while some of those in the stadium wore 'Disco Sucks' T-shirts, others wore tops with the slogan 'Death to the Bee Gees' (Frank, 2007: 278), such that the group, whose songs featured prominently in *Saturday Night Fever*, was being viewed as synonymous with disco music.

Queering Masculinity in the Male Voice

The Bee Gees comprised brothers Barry, Robin and Maurice Gibb. The family moved from the UK to Queensland, Australia, in the late 1950s and the brothers soon achieved success as a close-harmony singing group. By 1967, they had released 11 singles in Australia¹²⁹ and decided to move back to England to further their musical career. It was in the UK that they met Australian impresario Stigwood, who signed the group and later formed his own company.¹³⁰ The Bee Gees achieved chart success both in the UK and USA in the late 1960s with a number of pop ballads, but their music career had dwindled by the early 1970s and the brothers had to resort to playing in small venues, akin to working men's clubs, in the North of England. In 1975, the group had a surprise hit with 'Jive Talkin', a song that signalled their comeback as a chart act. Becoming interested in soul music, Barry started to make use of his ability to sing in the falsetto register.¹³¹

The falsetto singing of the group, which is prominent in their songs that feature in *Saturday Night Fever*, was something that was often mocked and disparaged. Indeed, comedian Kenny Everett included a sketch in one of his television shows broadcast in the late 1970s, *The Kenny Everett Video Show*, to poke fun at the Bee Gees' image. In the sketch, Everett – who had not yet

¹²⁷ See Steve Dahl (03.08.16) <https://medium.com/cuepoint/disco-demolition-night-was-not-racist-not-anti-gay-3dfde114464> (accessed 3 February 2018)

¹²⁸ For example, Gillian Frank argues that Disco Demolition Night 'sent a message to the American public that listening to a genre of music that was openly identified as gay was unacceptable' (2007: 305)

¹²⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b04v8677/the-joy-of-the-bee-gees?suggid=b04v8677> [07' 25"] (accessed 3 February 2018)

¹³⁰ RSO is the Robert Stigwood Organisation.

¹³¹ The second and follow-up single from album *Main Course* (1975), 'Nights on Broadway,' was the first song to feature Barry singing falsetto. See Joseph Brennan, 'Gibb Songs' (2006-2013) <http://www.columbia.edu/~brennan/beegees/75.html> (accessed 3 June 2018)

revealed his bisexuality – makes use of available technology of the day to play the role of all three brothers, who are dressed in white and wearing gold medallions similar to that worn by Barry on the *Saturday Night Fever* album cover, while he also interviews them.¹³² Everett proposes that '[S]ome people have implied that your high voices, coupled with the long hair, shirt open to the navel revealing your hairy chest and medallion look, suggest that you are somewhat less than masculine, and that you' – at which point the 'Bee Gees' interrupt by singing in falsetto 'look the other way?'¹³³ This is greeted with uproarious canned laughter. Everett continues his questioning by asking, 'So you pooh-pooh the less than masculine slur do you, Barry?' 'Barry' responds by singing in falsetto the opening line to 'Stayin' Alive,' namely, 'Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a woman's man,' followed by gesturing from his 'brothers' that suggests this statement is false.¹³⁴

Whilst not openly stating that the Bee Gees themselves were gay – the brothers were all in heterosexual relationships – the insinuation from Everett's questions, responses and body language while impersonating the brothers is that the group's style of dress, mannerisms, and use of falsetto denote them as queer. This is of particular interest in relation to their voices, which Everett is critiquing as 'less than masculine,' and thereby othered or 'feminised,' because of their high pitch. Although the phrase 'less than masculine' might be interpreted as carrying derogatory undertones towards women, the tongue-in-cheek approach Everett took in his sketches was such that it was often difficult to ascertain to what extent he was being serious. However, the queer insinuations present in Everett's sketch can be read as linked not just to the falsetto voice, but also to *Saturday Night Fever*, as his chosen song accompanies Tony's first scene at the start of the film.

Disco's association with gay male subculture in the 1970s was often connected to the falsetto voice. Falsetto has been defined as 'a male singing voice with artificially high tones in an upper register'¹³⁵ and 'an unnaturally or artificially high-pitched voice or register, especially in a man.' The fact that a male singer's vocals are 'high-pitched' means that they are heard not only as 'unnatural,' but also feminised, or 'unmanly.' Judith Halberstam proposes that, 'in a way, the queerness of any given musical performance does so often lie in the pitch' (2007: 55), and uses as an example the openly gay American disco singer Sylvester, who often dressed in drag and generally used falsetto vocals in his songs. Peter Shapiro suggests that Sylvester's best-known song, 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real),' released in 1978, 'asked what "realness" is supposed to mean to gay

¹³² *The Kenny Everett Show* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsE-Dqok5mY> (accessed 6 February 2018)

¹³³ 'And you may look the other way' is a line from the first verse of 'Stayin' Alive.'

¹³⁴ Gillian Frank argues that many heterosexual men disliked disco culture because it 'privileged an inauthentic form of masculinity' (2007: 280).

¹³⁵ <https://mnemonicdictionary.com/word/falsetto> (accessed 2 June 2018)

black men... forced to hide their true identities for most of their lives' (2005: 78).¹³⁶ Sylvester uses falsetto throughout the song.

Falsetto therefore often has 'artificial' and 'unmasculine' connotations, due to the elevated vocal pitch, and the timbre produced,¹³⁷ and, as Wayne Koestenbaum notes, 'is part of the history of effeminacy' (1994: 164).¹³⁸ As Simon Ravens explains, it is also described pejoratively as a 'false' voice (2014: 8). The idea of falsetto as a 'false' voice can also be linked to the castrati, popular singers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Valeria Finucci explains that castrati 'were thought of, or often thought of themselves, as diminished males' (2003: 239),¹³⁹ inferring the idea of masculine lack, or 'false' men. Marianne Tråvén, who argues that castrati were 'in a gender limbo,' explains that they were often classified 'as a third gender;'¹⁴⁰ castrati generally played the role of women on stage.¹⁴¹ Edward D. Miller (2003) goes further regarding connections between falsetto and gender, directly confronting any suggestion that men should be expected to sing or speak lower than those identifying as female. Indeed, he claims that '[W]hen voices are so strictly assigned to particular bodies, the falsetto becomes transgendered – it moves between binaries of male and female.'¹⁴² Serena Guarracino, in her reading of a text inspired by a song of Antony and the Johnsons,¹⁴³ argues that '[T]here is something not "straight" in falsetto when used by a man' (2018: 133). In other words, then, queerness can be connoted via the employment of falsetto, signifying it as a type of 'non-binary' voice.

The proposal that male falsetto is a 'false' voice thus challenges gender stereotypes and the stability of masculinities. Judith Butler argues that '[G]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity' (1999: 179) and, given her arguments that the connection between gender and sex is contested when somebody performs in drag, one could equally apply her lines of reasoning when considering the stability of gender to the voice, particularly in relation to assumptions made when

¹³⁶ For more discussion about Sylvester and his use of falsetto, see Anne-Lise François, 'Fakin' It/Makin' It: Falsetto's Bid for Transcendence in 1970s Disco Highs' in *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 33, No. 1/2 (Winter – Summer, 1995), pp. 446-7. See also Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2006).

¹³⁷ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/falsetto> (accessed 1 June 2018)

¹³⁸ See also Stan Hawkins' argument that '[H]istorically as much as culturally, falsetto is coded in effeminacy' (2007: 199).

¹³⁹ See also Marianne Tråvén, 'Voicing the Third Gender – The Castrato Voice and the Stigma of Emasculation in Eighteenth-century Society' in *Études Épistémè* [En ligne], 29 | 2016, mis en ligne le 13 juillet 2016 <https://journals.openedition.org/episteme/1220> (accessed 4 June 2020)

¹⁴⁰ See 'Voicing the Third Gender – The Castrato Voice and the Stigma of Emasculation in Eighteenth-century Society.'

¹⁴¹ Sasha Geffen reports that 'the practice of creating castrati was outlawed in the nineteenth century as industrialization and its attendant social values swept Europe' (2020: 5).

¹⁴² See Miller, Edward D. The Nonsensical Truth of the Falsetto Voice: Listening to Sigur Rós (<http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/miller.html>) 2003. Sheila Whiteley makes a similar point, suggesting that 'the falsetto voice invokes... a fluidity that refuses gender-based instructions' (2007: 32).

¹⁴³ Antony Hegarty, now known as Anohni, often sings in falsetto.

hearing a person who is biologically male singing in falsetto voice. In addition, Halberstam argues that men can use falsetto as a way of aligning themselves with women, to offer ‘an affirmative relation to femininity’ (2007: 55), something equally applicable to drag artists such as Sylvester. Given the high number of female disco divas, the use of falsetto by men singing disco numbers, especially those self-identifying as queer, could be heard as empathising with another historically marginalised group.

Falsetto has been used by male singers in pop music since the latter’s rise to prominence in the mid 1950s, and therefore numerous pop stars had used falsetto technique in their songs prior to the Bee Gees, such as Frankie Valli, Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, Smokie Robinson, and Russell Thompkins Junior of The Stylistics. However, these singers were not accused of being ‘less than masculine’ in the same way that Everett insinuates of the ‘Bee Gees,’ whose use of falsetto was often open to ridicule. It is also significant that Lawrence describes the Bee Gees’ falsetto vocals as ‘shrill’ (2006: 144; 2011: 241). The use of this adjective is of note here because it is traditionally gendered judgmentally, applying only to females. A study published in 2016 by linguist Nic Subtirelu showed that, in the media, a female is ‘3.14 times more likely to be described as “shrieking” (or a related form of the word), and she’s 2.3 times more likely to be described as “shrill” than her male counterparts, with these words being employed intentionally in a negative way.¹⁴⁴ In his texts examining the history of high male vocals, Ravens considers both the history of the word ‘shrill’ when applied to falsetto, and the reasons why falsetto has been used by men so often in recorded popular music. With regard to the derogatory equation of male high voices with shrillness, he explains that, although today usually linked to the female voice and therefore regarded as effeminate, historically the term “shrill” was not a gender-exclusive term. Nor was it a pejorative one’ (1998: 128). Ravens notes that the introduction of microphone technology in the recording process was significant for male pop/rock artists wishing to sing in falsetto as, ‘with amplification being provided externally, their falsetto does not need to be projected with any great vocal power’ (2014: 204), which arguably encouraged its use.¹⁴⁵ Anne-Lise François, in her discussion of disco songs, proposes that falsetto can also be read as ‘a staging of an otherness imposed from without by oppressive economic, racial, or gender-based structures’ (1995: 445), thereby signifying its alterity.

¹⁴⁴ The investigation was sparked by the frequent use of the word ‘shrill’ to describe Hillary Clinton’s voice during the 2016 US election campaign. See Nic Subtirelu, ‘Bashing Hillary Clinton’s voice: “Screeching”, “shrieking”, and “shrill”’ <https://linguisticpulse.com/2016/02/08/bashing-hillary-clintons-voice-screaching-shrieking-and-shrill/> 08.02.16 (accessed 2 August 2018); see also William Cheng, ‘The Long, Sexist History of “Shrill” Women,’ <http://time.com/4268325/history-calling-women-shrill/> 23.03.16 (accessed 2 August 2018)

¹⁴⁵ Microphone technology also enabled the popularity of men singing in lower ranges – e.g. Bing Crosby’s baritone.

Conversely, rock singers' inclusion of falsetto generally gives them kudos, boosting their standing as performers through demonstration of an expansive vocal range. Those employing such a technique generally do so by straining the voice or screaming, thereby linking this to a wild lifestyle synonymous with that associated with rock stars. Indeed, Jacqueline Warwick argues in relation to singing styles in pop that '[W]ithin the context of rock culture, masculinity is an issue of central importance' (2009: 351). This proposal is hinted at via Freya Jarman-Ivens's suggestion that falsetto is 'seen to be the stuff of "anti-masculine" musics' (2007: 7), in contrast with the more 'masculine' presentation of rock music. It appears, then, that it was the combination of unvarying/almost unvarying falsetto and the singing of disco songs that led to the 'less than masculine' insinuation of the Bee Gees' vocals, a combination employed in *Saturday Night Fever*. Yet within the popular music subgenre of disco, falsetto – as in the case of Sylvester – could be used deliberately and with pride to indicate a non-heteronormative otherness.¹⁴⁶ I will therefore explore whether the Bee Gees' use of falsetto in the songs that accompany four scenes I analyse that centre on Tony in *Saturday Night Fever* can similarly be read as contributing to significations of queerness via potential alternative readings of masculinity.

However, given that the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever* was released prior to the movie, it is noteworthy that its cover features not just the Bee Gees, but also Travolta as Tony in iconic pose, with his chest out, right arm held aloft and index finger pointed upwards, and his left hand clinched in a fist. He is looking straight ahead determinedly, wearing his legendary white suit,¹⁴⁷ black shirt, and high-heeled black shoes, while standing on the LED floor of the disco. Jesse Zigelstein (1997) suggests that this well-known image makes him 'the object of erotic spectacle,' arguing that 'few male movie stars have been as overtly spectacularized as the young John Travolta' (1997: 3). Above this 'spectacle,' pictured within a radiant frame of light and immersed in a hazy glow, stand the triumvirate of smiling Bee Gees, arms folded, and wearing white suits, with the title of the film/album and a glittering disco ball shining above them. The importance of the Bee Gees' music to the film is accentuated via their being centre stage on the cover, and the fact that Travolta appears to be pointing up at them. Oldest brother Barry Gibb is in the middle of the group, wearing an open-necked shirt and dazzling gold medallion. The combination of images on the cover

¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Jimmy Sommerville's proud use of falsetto in his 1980s covers of certain disco hits originally sung by women in the previous decade, such as his 1986 cover as a member of The Communards of 'Don't Leave Me This Way,' a hit for Thelma Houston in 1977, enabled new interpretations of these songs, not least because of the emerging AIDS pandemic in the early 1980s.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce J Schulman argues that the suit and dance sequences are 'more enduring mementos of Seventies America than the film's dark subject matter.' See *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p. 145. Although not a still from the actual film, the pose, along with the white suit, have become iconic in popular culture and are often parodied. See, for example, the comedic 'Stayin' Alive' scene in *Airplane!* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, 1980).

synergise to signify that this is an album of disco tracks, while the radiance of the Bee Gees' image and the angelic white suits of the figures also allude to the space of the disco being dreamlike and otherworldly, a special, fantasy place where one can escape from the hard reality of the world present in the film's narrative.¹⁴⁸

Dualities of Masculinity in the Opening Scene

In the film's opening scene, the music of 'Stayin' Alive' by the Bee Gees creeps in as John Travolta's name appears on screen. A green shoe with a Cuban heel is shown in a shop window. Someone wearing a similar shoe in maroon holds up their foot against the window, and a tin of paint is just visible in this person's hand (see Figure 3.1.). As the feet wearing the maroon shoes walk along the pavement, stepping in time dancingly to the music, the title of the film appears in red, word by word, with 'fever' flashing in neon style. When the Bee Gees' vocal starts, with Barry Gibb singing in falsetto, the camera pans up so that the man who is walking to the beat is finally seen, swinging the paint tin in time with the music. The singer's (falsetto) voice thus becomes linked to the person's feminine, dance-like walking, while the tin of paint denotes a traditional masculinity. From the film's opening, therefore, there is the connotation of a feminine/masculine dualism present that queers this character.



Figure 3.1 A figure holds up his foot to check if a similar style of shoe in a shop window might fit (Screenshot from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

A young woman with her back to the camera catches the eye of the walker. He smiles and turns around to look at her. She glances over her shoulder and returns the smile, but continues walking. For a moment, the man thinks about changing direction and following her, but he decides

¹⁴⁸ For more information on film and soundtrack synergy, see Jeff Smith, *The Sound of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

to continue on his way, still walking to the beat of the Bee Gees' song. He then stops at a pizza counter where the server welcomes him by name – Tony – and he asks for two slices. There is then a close-up shot of Tony at the counter. He is framed such that he is looking just off-centre, but in a way that means he is the sole object of the camera's and viewers' gaze at that point (see Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.2 Travolta as Tony is framed in a way that encourages the gaze (Screenshot from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

Tony eats the pizza while continuing on his way. There is another close-up on his face, with the camera then returning to his shoes and feet as the opening credits continue. Another cut focuses on Tony from below and diagonally to one side and then the other side, as if to indicate that there are two different components to this person. The cuts take place to the beat of the song, such that both occur after 2-bar phrases, in a style similar to that often used in music videos. These rhythmic cuts strengthen his connection to the words of 'Stayin' Alive,' but also designate the movie as a musical via the sense of choreography in the film's editing and camerawork. There is a cut to an upper body shot, followed by the paint can, which Tony is still swinging to the beat of the music. The camera then focuses briefly on a blue shirt in a shop window. Tony enters the shop and puts down a deposit to buy this item of clothing. When he leaves the shop, he continues walking towards the camera. Another young woman is seen walking with her back to the camera. Tony looks round at her as the Bee Gees sing, 'I'm a woman's man, no time to talk.' This time he does run after the woman to catch up with her and (presumably) stands in front of her, blocking her way, as the camera projects Tony's point-of-view. We then see her exasperated facial expressions as she tries to avoid him and continue on her way, thereby counterpointing the words we have just heard, seemingly about Tony, in the song. He gives up and carries on his journey, breaking into a run. The manager of a hardware store is looking out of his shop window. When he spots Tony, he waves anxiously, and beckons at him to go round the back. Tony then charms the customer who has been waiting a long time for the tin of paint he was carrying. The song fades under the dialogue.

The film's introductory scene described above, which is around 3½ minutes long,¹⁴⁹ succinctly provides an illustrative (if at times somewhat clichéd) summary of the (surface) character of Tony in the film's narrative:

- Disco music and night life are significant (the playing of 'Stayin' Alive' as underscore and the flashing neon lighting for the film's title)
- Fashion is important to Tony (illustrated via his interest in the green shoe and the blue shirt)
- He believes women are attracted to him (his behaviour as he walks along the street and the song lyrics heard)
- He is athletic/a dancer (his rhythmic walk, the focus on shoes and his feet, and the song lyrics [I'm a dancin' man])
- He is of Italian descent (denoted via the pizza)
- He has grown up in the neighbourhood (the waitress knows him by name)
- He works in a hardware store (the can of paint and the fact that he is shown serving a customer)
- He is in a 'dead end job' or rut (the song lyrics of the chorus, namely 'Life goin' nowhere')
- He is used to using charm to win people over (the customer wrongly believes she is getting a discount on the can of paint).

However, there are also elements of this initial scene that queer Tony, some of which are linked to the bullet points above. These occur via a suggestion of duality or 'doubling' present in this scene, which includes: the maroon shoe being held up to match the green shoe in the shop window; Tony looking behind him at two different women; having two pieces of pizza (Tony's first words in the film are 'Two. Gimme two. That's good'), and the low-angle camera shots that view him from one side, immediately followed by the other side. The literal 'dual-focus' of this last example, along with the doubling of the other elements described, could be foregrounding a duality of masculinities. Indeed, this is alluded to via Frank Rich's 1977 review of the film, in which he describes Travolta as '[A]t once mean-looking and pretty',¹⁵⁰ thereby proposing that there is a doubleness to the character that challenges the boundaries of traditional masculinity. This suggestion manifests itself via Tony's potential appeal to both heterosexual female and non-heteronormative male gazes, but also the combined stereotypical masculine/feminine inferences of the scene. For example, on the one hand

¹⁴⁹ This timing is from the start of the music, which begins at c.38".

¹⁵⁰ See 'Discomania' in *Time*, Vol. 110, No. 25 (Dec 19, 1977), pp. 69-70, p.69

Tony chases after women, but on the other hand, he is very interested in fashion. These dualities are also arguably present in subsequent scenes that centre on the character.

Tony 's Preparation for an Evening at the Disco

When *Saturday Night Fever* was previewed in Cincinnati and Columbus, many audience members walked out, as they were offended by some of the language and sex scenes, causing Paramount Pictures concern (Kashner, 2008: 254). There was one particular scene about which Paramount themselves had reservations; this featured Tony getting ready for an evening at the disco (Kashner, 2008: 254). The scene in question is somewhat unusual for the time because it demonstrates how detailed Tony's grooming routine is, and how important it is for this male character to look his best. Tony is shown running home from work, and then getting some unnecessary hassle from his parents before going upstairs to his bedroom to prepare for his night out. As he ascends the staircase, the image dissolves, and the chorus of 'Night Fever,' sung by the Bee Gees, can be heard as underscore.

The next image is of a 'Super-Pro' 1400-watt hairdryer, and the camera then pans left to show a close-up of Tony's face. He is blow-drying his hair while staring straight ahead, so that, in a similar way to when he was at the pizza counter, he becomes the object of the camera's and filmic audience's gaze, this time acting as his mirror. As he looks at his 'reflection' in a seemingly satisfied manner, there is an abrupt cut to a disco dance floor, viewed from above. The camera looks down onto the dancers, who are turning in a circular fashion, creating motion within a red, hazy glow, and clapping to the music intermittently as they turn.¹⁵¹ The overhead shots are reminiscent of the way some numbers were choreographed by Busby Berkeley in the 1930s, which Raymond Knapp describes as being 'elaborately campy' and, thereby, queer (2006: 69). Berkeley's numbers, which were similarly often filmed from above, were famous for their fantastic qualities, and for their extravagance and excess. The cut to the dance floor in this scene can be construed as representing Tony's thoughts while in a trancelike state, whereby he imagines himself in the dreamlike space of the disco given that, a few seconds later, he is shown combing his hair in the mirror as if no time has passed. But the connection between the camerawork used and that of Berkeley's numbers also links the shots and Tony's reverie to the camp sensibility of this style of Golden Age film sequence.¹⁵²

The next cut shows a poster of a bare-chested Bruce Lee. It appears that one of Tony's aims may be to duplicate Lee's athleticism, which initially legitimizes the camera's gaze on Tony's unclothed upper body, as Lee popularised an image of masculine virility through his expertise in

¹⁵¹ Director John Badham states that he had a 'camera on a crane so that it could float and move with the dancers and get a real kinesthetic feeling to the dance.' See Eric Breitbart and John Badham (1978-79), p. 3

¹⁵² Berkeley's numbers are often described as camp. See, for example, Pamela Robertson, 'Feminist Camp in *Gold Diggers of 1933*,' (2002), pp. 129-142

martial arts.¹⁵³ A few seconds later, Tony raises his arms, doing so in time with the beat of the soundtrack, as Barry Gibb sings the initial bars of the song's bridge section in falsetto, namely, 'Here I am, prayin' for this moment to last.' His words thereby appear to comment on the visual image of Tony admiring his Lee-like reflection in the mirror. This is the first time that the filmic viewers witness Tony looking in the 'real' mirror of his dressing table. It allows them both to view Tony from the rear, admiring his own reflection, and also to gaze themselves on Tony's mirror image, creating a duality of views. As with the character of Leroy in *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980), who I analyse in the next chapter, Tony's pictorial stance evokes descriptors of women suggested by John Berger, as Tony becomes both the 'surveyor' and the 'surveyed' in this image (1972: 46).

Tony's hypermasculine surface pose becomes queered amidst the numerous other visible images, because a close look at the *mise-en-scène* at this point is revealing; the items on and around the dressing table – traditionally a feminine space – and the posters visible, suggest a mix of stereotypical male and female adornments that again hint at a doubleness (see Figure 3.3). On Tony's dressing table are the hairdryer he has just been using, two hairbrushes, a hand mirror, various toiletries, a jewellery box, and a teddy bear wearing a hat, while a head-and-shoulders photo of a young man sitting on a deck chair is attached to the mirror. This could just as easily, therefore, be the dressing table of a teenage girl as that of a teenage boy. In addition, the wallpaper of Tony's room is flowery, as are the curtains that cover a small window just visible to one side, and thereby are in a traditionally feminine style one would not expect from a character so mindful of the image he wishes to project – a man that his male friends will admire and want to emulate. Although this is most likely his parents' *décor*, one must assume that either he does not want or has not been allowed to change it, and this demonstrates not just the paradox of how his masculinity is represented, but also illustrates how he may behave and/or be treated in different spaces.

¹⁵³ *Enter the Dragon* (dir. Robert Clouse, 1973) was released shortly after Lee's death. M. Ray Lott explains of Lee that this movie 'raised him to the status of a popular culture icon' and notes that 'posters featuring scenes from his films were selling like proverbial hotcakes.' See *The American Martial Arts Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004), p. 40



Figure 3.3 Tony poses in front of the cluttered dressing table in his room (Screenshot from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

Just visible in one corner is the Lee poster already witnessed, while on the other side there is a poster of Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa. In the mirror's reflection are two smaller posters, the higher of which appears to feature a pop/disco group.¹⁵⁴ The poster most in evidence at this point, however, is that of Linda Carter as Wonder Woman and, although it is not her pose in the image, one of the common poses of Wonder Woman was to cross her arms in a similar fashion to the stance Travolta adopts in the mirror. This was because her bracelets were able to deflect bullets, etc., and she could use them as a shield.¹⁵⁵ The character of Wonder Woman familiar from the television series of the era was viewed in the 1970s to be a feminist icon. For example, the feminist magazine *Ms* (tagline: more than a magazine, a movement) featured Wonder Woman on the cover in July 1972, with the headline 'Wonder Woman for President.'¹⁵⁶

Interestingly, as if to dilute any suggestion that the mise-en-scene may indicate that Tony is 'unmasculine,' there is also a yellow hard hat hanging from the dressing table that is similar to those worn by construction workers. However, the construction worker persona was one of those popularised by the disco group Village People, named after Greenwich Village, where the Stonewall Inn was based. As noted by Martin P. Levine, '[B]y the early 1970s, trendy New York homosexuals... set about creating a new presentational style to convey their sense of manliness' (1998: 58). This led

¹⁵⁴ The group could be KC and the Sunshine Band, who were signed to RSO, and whose song 'Boogie Shoes' features on the *Saturday Night Fever* album.

¹⁵⁵ In the television show's narrative, the bracelets were reported to be made of a metal called feminism. This pose was so well-known that Carter re-created it when inducted into the Hall of Fame. See Sasa Brajovic, Eric Kelsey, and Sandra Maler, "'Wonder Woman' Lynda Carter feted with Hollywood star' (03.04.18) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-people-lyndacarter/wonder-woman-lynda-carter-feted-with-hollywood-star-idUSKCN1HA2RZ> (accessed 4 April 2018)

¹⁵⁶ See Kathy Spillar, 'Ms. Turns 40 – And Wonder Woman's Back On Our Cover!' (01.10.12) <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/10/01/ms-turns-40-and-wonder-womans-back-on-our-cover/> (accessed 2 July 2018)

to the 'clone look,' which highlighted hypermasculinity. Levine tabulates these 'butch images' (1998: 60), and lists 'construction workers' as one of the favoured looks. A number of these 'butch images,' including the construction worker persona, were signified openly by the members of Village People, whose first album appeared in July 1977, just a few months before the release of *Saturday Night Fever*.¹⁵⁷ Mark Simpson proposes that gay men dressing in 'manly' uniforms threaten to divulge the fact that all men in uniform 'are in fact dressing up as men' (1996/1999: 6), highlighting this as a feature of performativity. Rather than being an object of traditional masculinity, therefore, the presence of the hard hat actually can be read differently, denoting one of the 'butch images' prevalent at the time in clubs frequented by men who self-identified as queer, and additionally connoting that Tony, who works in the 'macho' environment of the hardware store, may be 'performing' as male.

Body image was also important in terms of portraying depictions of hypermasculinity within the gay male community. As Levine explains, '[C]lones developed "gym bodies"' which included 'washboard stomachs' (1998: 59). Indeed, 'posing' was also often adopted by 'clones' on their evenings out, and was a deliberate ploy to ensure others caught their eye and admired them (Levine, 1998: 63). Such body consciousness is present in Tony's grooming routine, and the scene can be read as Tony practising the poses and moves he wishes to adopt in the disco while in the private space of his bedroom. Even though the 'unmasculinity' of Tony grooming and pampering himself on screen was being recognised in part at the time of the film's release, these activities were not necessarily being read queerly, but rather as egotistical. For example, Tavia Nyong'o describes Tony as the film's 'showboating protagonist' (2008: 103). However, Frank Rich's comment that the character 'struts like Schwarzenegger in his black bikini briefs' (1977: 69) in his contemporary review of the film perhaps unwittingly references not just the link between self-importance and the 'gym bodies' adopted by a number of homosexual men, but also a 'macho'/queer paradox.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps as an attempt to reinforce a narrative of Tony as heterosexual, the 'crotch shot,' commented upon by many writers (see, for example, Yanc, 1996; Vize, 2003; Nystrom, 2009) has the camera positioned on Tony's body from below. Jeff Yanc argues that filming the character in this way highlights his masculinity as it 'makes the crotch appear larger and more prominent than any other part of the body' (1996: 42). This shot is the first time one sees that Tony is naked apart from some skimpy briefs (see Figure 3.4). The black bikini briefs Tony wears are comparable in style to those worn by Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Tony is similarly filmed in a way

¹⁵⁷ The album is called *Village People*.

¹⁵⁸ Arnold Schwarzenegger was well-known at the time as a bodybuilder and was featured in the magazine *After Dark* in February 1977. Whilst not promoted specifically as a magazine for homosexual men – Schwarzenegger is not queer – Daniel Harris suggests that its readers 'were almost exclusively gay men' (1997: 65).

that shows he is biologically male. Given Steve Neale's argument that Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* exemplifies the male body on display (1983: 15), a comparison can be made here between Tony and Frank, who similarly puts his (male) body on display for viewers in a direct and overt manner. Director John Badham has stated of Tony's scene that '[W]e got all kinds of hassle... We were letting some man walk around in his underwear, showing his body off.'¹⁵⁹ Indeed, as if to accentuate that women should find this image of Tony appealing, the shot that follows shows a poster in his room of actress Farrah Fawcett, interpolated to appease any arguments that the focus on Tony's body could be deemed homoerotic. As Sam Kashner explains, the 'image of lean, sexually vibrant Travolta was so homoerotic that the production designer, Charles Bailey, put up that Farrah Fawcett poster just to cool things off.'¹⁶⁰ The camera pans in on Fawcett's face to imply that her smile is directed admiringly at Tony's near-naked body, but the success of this ruse as a way to accentuate his heterosexuality for the filmic audience is open to debate.

Yanc suggests that the Fawcett poster is used 'to ensure the camera's aggressively heterosexual gaze' (1996: 43) – which, of course, as Kashner indicates, was its intention. But, Yanc argues, the scene is also filmed in a way that enables it to be read homoerotically, as so much of the focus is on Tony's semi-naked body. John Badham acknowledged that filming Travolta in this way was deliberate, stating that 'we were dealing with a very attractive guy, and if we've been merchandising women's bodies in films for years, there's no reason you can't do the same thing with an attractive man' (1978-9: 4). However, the remainder of the interview indicates that – at least openly – he did not recognise the homoerotic potential of the scene. In her description of the scene, Lesley Vize suggests that the film 'may not have set out to attract a gay audience' but that this 'does not detract from the manner in which an ostensibly heterosexual text has been successfully reappropriated' (2003: 37). It can therefore be argued that Travolta's body is filmed in a way that also makes him the object of the gaze for queer viewers.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Sam Kashner, 'Fever Pitch: When Travolta did Disco; The Making of *Saturday Night Fever*' in Nelson George (ed.) *Best Music Writing 2008* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), p. 254

¹⁶⁰ Sam Kashner, 'Fever Pitch: How Travolta and the Bee Gees Shook the Night' (December 2007) <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/12/saturday-night-fever> (accessed 2 February 2018). Fawcett was best known at the time for playing the character Jill Munroe in the television series *Charlie's Angels*.



Figure 3.4 The 'crotch shot' reveals that Travolta is wearing only skimpy briefs (Screenshot from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

In the next shot, Tony puts a gold chain around his neck, allowing the camera to focus on his bare-chested torso. Another cut to the disco follows, with the camera's central point being the disco ball and lights. The dancers are still bathed in a red, dreamlike and magical glow, accentuating the idea of the disco being an otherworldly safe space for the character of Tony, who is then shown tying jewellery around his neck before there is yet another cut to the dancers, all the while accompanied by the Bee Gees' falsetto vocals. Tony then turns and walks towards his wardrobe, opens the door, redundantly turns on a light in the wardrobe and takes out a flowery, polyester shirt. His walk and movements are very robotic, and his face expressionless. He appears to be on 'auto-pilot,' seemingly re-creating steps and actions that he has undertaken many times before, while his thoughts are focused on his evening ahead in his idyllic space, the disco.

As he lets the shirt fall on the bedspread, still on its hanger, the item of clothing gives the impression of being alive, as it appears to emit a sigh, apparently in excited anticipation of being worn by Tony to the disco. Indeed, the next shot is of Tony wearing the shirt, with some matching dusky pink trousers. The camera lingers on him zipping up his flies, before it pans up his body as he adjusts his shirt and again closely examines his appearance in the dressing table mirror. His father then enters the room to let Tony know that dinner is ready. All the while, Tony continues to look at his reflection, picking up his hairbrush again to ensure his hair looks just right. Yanc proposes that this scene exemplifies the fact that 'Mulvey's theory overlooks Hollywood's long history of using the eroticized male body' to enable both 'homoerotic and heterosexual readings' (1996: 43).¹⁶¹ The deliberate focus on Tony getting dressed, alongside the camera lingering on his semi-naked body and allowing the character to become sole object of the gaze, certainly enables a queer reading.

The scene's initial close-up image of Tony combing his hair in the mirror is unexpected because one is more used to seeing this activity undertaken in films by a woman, rather than by a man. Furthermore, the fact that he is looking straight ahead unemotionally could be read as passive,

¹⁶¹ Yanc is referring to Mulvey's 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'

the quality Mulvey argues is distinctive to women in Hollywood cinema in her discussion of the gaze. Mulvey's 1975 article discusses the representation of women in classical narrative film from the perspective of the female as sexual object.¹⁶² Given the fact that the cinematic audience is required to look directly at his face, Tony becomes 'spectacle,' something Mulvey assigns to female actors. The editing not only shows Tony looking at his own image during the scene, but also encourages the filmic viewers not just to gaze at, but to admire, the character's body and the minutiae of his grooming routine, becoming voyeurs into the private space of his bedroom. As Tony's movements develop from passive to active – he is dancing at the end of the scene – so he embodies both the male and female characteristics differentiated by Mulvey, with this duality highlighting the character as queer through its appeal both to heterosexual women and to queer men.

Furthermore, the whole scene is underscored by the Bee Gees' falsetto singing of 'Night Fever.' Although different angles of Tony's room are shown, there is no evidence of a record player, indicating that the song is being employed as nondiegetic underscore. However, one can argue that 'Night Fever' is actually being heard by Tony metadiegetically. As noted by Beth Carroll, a metadiegetic usage represents 'in terms of music and sound... the internally heard sounds by characters, whether it is in their dream, imagination or other such device' (2016: 50).¹⁶³ The idea that Tony is hearing 'Night Fever' in his mind as he prepares for his night out is underlined by the intermittent shots of the disco dancers performing at the 2001 Odyssey, and the fact that the music starts as he runs upstairs to get ready for his evening out. Furthermore, once Tony is shown wearing his 'disco clothes,' his movements and actions, previously mechanical and unemotional, become more enthusiastic and energetic. As he zips up his flies, he moves his hips to the 'imaginary' music, and then sways from side to side in time with the song's beat as he admires his reflection, continuing to do so as he engages in discussion with his father about dinner. Tony appears, therefore, to be imagining himself in the utopian space of the disco even before he has arrived there. As his father starts to leave the bedroom, Tony's dancing becomes more animated and he practises his moves while looking in the mirror, seemingly admired not just by himself and the filmic audience, but also by the gaze from the poster of Stallone as Rocky, with this (passive) male image appearing to be looking in Tony's direction (see Figure 3.5). Another bare-chested hero with sporting prowess – as with Bruce Lee – Rocky's positive gaze seems to give his approval to Tony's queered masculinity.

¹⁶² See Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' (1975), pp. 6-18

¹⁶³ See also Claudia Gorbman (1987), pp. 22-23



Figure 3.5 Tony practises his dance moves in the mirror (Screenshot from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

The ‘dressing scene’ is unusual not only because it focuses on a man, rather than a woman, preparing for a night out, but also because it highlights the care and precision taken by Tony to look his best. In doing so, it emphasises that there are aspects of paradox in the presentation of the character’s masculinity. This includes the mix of posters present, including that of feminist icon Wonder Woman, and the ‘feminine’ objects on display on the dressing table. The fact that a male character is the sole object of the gaze during the scene, along with the excessive care he takes in his appearance, can be read as queering Tony, and this suggestion is reinforced through the scene being underscored by the falsetto singing of the Bee Gees.

The fact that ‘Night Fever’ underscores the whole of this scene again links Tony to the Bee Gees’ falsetto – ‘shrill,’ effeminated and thereby queered – vocals. The song even continues during the dialogue between father and son, although there is a reduction in volume at this point, indicating that Tony can still hear the music in his head while engaging in the conversation. The interspersed cuts to the disco appear to connote that Tony is imagining himself on the dance floor that evening. Tony does indeed later dance to ‘Night Fever’ at the Odyssey. He struts onto the dance floor and moves between two women with whom he briefly dances. One of them demands that he kisses her; Tony does so without missing a step of his dance – and only after she asks him a second time. The woman shouts ‘I just kissed Al Pacino!’, thereby creating a link back to the poster of Pacino in Tony’s room.¹⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that, in a subsequent scene at his home, Tony, who is similarly of Italian descent, wonders if he really does look like Pacino and calls out ‘Attica! Attica!’, words uttered by Pacino in his role as a queer bank robber in *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975), a film similarly set in Brooklyn.

The trio are joined by other dancers who clearly know the steps to the dance well. Although Tony briefly interacts with the two women at the start of the dance when he holds their hands, the

¹⁶⁴ The poster is of *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1973).

remainder sees everyone using the same moves, but with men and women dancing on their own as part of a line dance. As noted by Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, this is a communal dance (1999: 10).¹⁶⁵ The style is therefore typical of the community dances prominent in a number of Hollywood musicals of the Golden Age, except that, in this instance, nobody touches any of their fellow dancers. In addition, the line dance is open to all genders. Although Tony seems flattered by the attention of the two women at the beginning of the dance, he is not participating, therefore, as part of a male/female couple. It is significant that this type of line dance allows anybody to join in, without the need for a partner, and thereby regardless of sexual orientation, something also applicable within disco dancing as a whole.

Tony's Solo and Couple Dance

Given that Tony is object of the gaze in the 'dressing scene,' one can argue that Mulvey's theories on the gaze and the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' she ascribes to women on screen¹⁶⁶ can also apply in relation to screen images of men. This suggestion is debated by Neale, who proposes that there are instances when men, too, can be 'the object of an erotic look,' describing such occurrences as male bodies being 'feminised' (1983: 14). Neale initially discusses the authoritative cinematic male hero, such as the typical characters played by Clint Eastwood, and male protagonists in classic Westerns. He argues, however, that 'feminisation' of male bodies happens mainly in film musicals, as these are 'the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way.' Interestingly, he gives as his example Travolta's performance in *Saturday Night Fever* (1983: 15) and includes a still of Travolta on the dance floor to endorse his argument (1983: 16).¹⁶⁷

In similar vein, Steven Cohan, likewise referencing Mulvey, concurs that the 'song-and-dance man' in cinema is often presented 'to be looked at.' He suggests that this is because the musical is the only genre that allows men as well as women to be in 'showstopping numbers' and, thereby, spectacularised (1993: 46). However, in contrast to Neale, he does not agree that this necessarily means that a man is thereby 'feminised,' using Fred Astaire's performances as models to support his argument. He explains that, in many of his films, a female star is shown watching Astaire perform a solo dance in order to imbue him with an element of authority. Cohan also suggests that most of the male stars of Golden Age musicals were 'ordinary' rather than being seen as 'pin-ups or action

¹⁶⁵ The dance includes the iconic moves whereby the dancers point a finger down across their bodies and then in mid air while moving their hips.

¹⁶⁶ See Mulvey, 1975.

¹⁶⁷ It is interesting that Neale's other example of a man being presented as 'the object of an erotic look' (1983: 14) is Rock Hudson, given Hudson's sexual orientation, which became public following his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1985, two year after the article was published.

heroes' (1993: 62) and that this encouraged viewers to focus on their talents and not their looks.¹⁶⁸ Despite these opinions, he does argue that there may be instances when the feminisation proposed by Neale does occur and, yet again, names Travolta as his example (1993: fn. 2, 66). The views of these writers therefore suggest that Travolta's performance in *Saturday Night Fever* can be read as feminised. However, one can propose that Tony is not actually 'feminised,' but rather masculinised in a way that is different from most male musical stars of Golden Age, pre-Stonewall movies. Indeed, one could argue that at least part of the queer reading of the character is the paradox that he can be read as simultaneously presenting with both traditional masculine and feminine traits.

In fact, there are comparisons between the way Astaire liked his dances to be filmed and one of Travolta's performances in *Saturday Night Fever*. When Travolta saw how his solo to the Bee Gees' 'You Should Be Dancing' was originally edited for close ups, he was very unhappy, firstly because his feet were not always visible, and secondly because he was worried viewers would not necessarily believe that he was the person doing the dancing (Kashner, 2008: 247). The scene was therefore re-edited to Travolta's liking and the finished product predominantly shows Travolta from head to toe, with few cuts. The scene was not in the original movie script, but was added following Travolta's assertion that, if Tony was supposed to be the best dancer, then he needed a solo to illustrate this.¹⁶⁹ The addition of this solo dance is therefore filmed in a way that primarily centres on Tony, but it also takes account of his admiring audience at the Odyssey, although rather than this being just a female co-star, as in Astaire's films as argued by Cohan above, there are many onlookers, both male and female, sanctioning Tony's performance.

In this number, Tony is actually dancing with a female partner initially, but he quickly dismisses her, pushing her aside in order to perform on his own and show off his substantial skills. Everyone else on the dance floor moves away to allow him to do so, and both men and women gather around to watch him approvingly. Yanc suggests that the sequence 'explicitly demonstrates the power of Travolta as erotic spectacle to freeze the narrative' (1996: 44) and, indeed, all eyes are on Tony as he performs. Although the onlookers are of both sexes, the camera does sometimes focus on female admirers (see Figure 3.6). However, this appears, as with the Fawcett poster, to be a diegetic ploy to reinforce the gaze as being heteronormative, despite the fact that there are also numerous male viewers in the crowd nodding and swaying appreciatively to the music. One wonders whether it is Tony's dancing that is being admired, as is the case with Astaire as argued by

¹⁶⁸ Other examples Cohan cites are Frank Sinatra and Donald O'Connor. The use of the term 'ordinary' harks back to Richard Dyer's description of Garland as described in Chapter One.

¹⁶⁹ See Richard Powers, '1970s Disco Dances' (undated) https://socialdance.stanford.edu/Syllabi/70s_dances.htm (accessed 4 June 2018) and also Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 11

Cohan, or actually Tony as erotic spectacle, via a queered masculinisation that potentially appeals to non-heteronormative male viewers as well as to heterosexual women.¹⁷⁰

Tony's approving male friends are party to encouraging the filmic audience to gaze at the dancer. They are sitting with Tony's brother, Frank Jr. (Martin Shakar), who is visiting the 2001 Odyssey for the first time. As Tony brushes his partner aside, the words 'Give the kid some room. He's taking over again,' are heard, seemingly uttered by his friend Bobby C (Barry Miller), causing Frank Jr. to turn round to look, while two of the other Faces¹⁷¹ smile and nod approvingly in Tony's direction (see Figure 3.7). The Faces are all male and clearly are a close-knit group, suggesting a comradeship that k. bradford argues hints at more than friendship. Discussing why a number of Travolta's musical performances are ideal material for drag kings, Bradford proposes that Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney) acts in the film as a foil 'to the homoerotic pulse between the boys,' concealing 'the ever-present gaze between Travolta's character and the boys' (2003: 21), thereby referencing the admiring manner in which the other Faces look at Tony.¹⁷² Although bradford is referring to male characters in the narrative, this 'ever-present gaze' endorses the onscreen and offscreen male filmic viewers' right to look at Travolta's Tony in this number and beyond in similar fashion. The fact that both men and women gaze admiringly at Tony within the diegesis encourages this action outside the filmic space as well. In addition, the LED dance floor encourages the idea of Tony as spectacle in this solo. The red, blue, and yellow floor squares on which Tony dances almost appear to be operated by his feet, as the lights flash on and off in time with the music's beat, and in seeming admiration of Tony's footwork, assisting in the spectacularisation of the scene.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Director John Badham claimed that 'Most of our repeat viewers are women, and they're not going back to see my work, I can assure you. They're going back to look at Travolta.' See Eric Breitbart and John Badham, 'Lost in the Hustle' in *Cinéaste*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter 1978-79), p. 4

¹⁷¹ Tony's gang have this nickname.

¹⁷² Discussing drag kings and the gaze, Kayte Stokoe argues that, while they may be object of the gaze when on stage, drag kings often 'play with the subject/object dynamic through audience interaction' (2020: 42).

¹⁷³ The lighted dance floor, which Lori Ortiz calls 'revolutionary,' was installed specially for the film at the recommendation of director John Badham. See Ortiz (2011: 29).



Figures 3.6 and 3.7 Tony's (female and male) admirers encourage the filmic audience to behave likewise (Screenshots from *Saturday Night Fever*, John Badham, 1977).

It is useful to explore further Tony's decision to dismiss his female partner so that he can dance on his own in this scene. Lawrence has argued that the dance floor became queered in the 1970s because people 'began to take to the floor without a partner' (2011: 233), and therefore did not need to be part of a (heterosexual) couple. Furthermore, he proposes that 'the disco genre... also generated a queer aesthetic' (2011: 236). Yet, he suggests, *Saturday Night Fever* endorsed 'the reappropriation of the dance floor by straight male culture' because 'it became a space for straight men to display their prowess and hunt for a partner of the opposite sex' (2011: 241). He concludes, thereby that 'disco... was thoroughly de-queered in its outlook' (2011: 241). However, the fact that Tony rejects his partner in order to dance on his own forces both the men and women in the diegesis, along with the filmic audience, to gaze solely on Tony. In addition, although Tony 'pairs up' with Stephanie in the narrative, the romantic connection is somewhat tenuous, and the reason he approaches her initially is because he thinks she dances well and would be a suitable partner for the forthcoming dance contest. Even in their 'couple' dance for the competition, as Dyer suggests, the focus is on Tony, as Stephanie does 'very little' (1993: 64); similarly, it is Tony who receives the plaudits when the pair are announced as winners. Gilbert and Pearson suggest that the competition dance is 'the palest dance sequence in the movie' (1999: 11), while Al Auster and Leonard Quart propose that, 'when Tony and Stephanie dance together, the film seems drained of all energy' (1978: 37). Indeed, there were some criticisms of Gorney's casting, due to what were seen as her inadequate dancing skills.¹⁷⁴ However, the fact that Stephanie's dancing is perhaps inferior to Tony's

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Grant (2012: 112) and Kashner (2008: 250).

draws attention to him still further and thereby assists in making Tony still the focus of the gaze when they dance together.¹⁷⁵

With dance being such an important area in the representation and potential queering of Tony, therefore, it is useful to compare his dances with those typical of musicals produced while the Production Code was active. Discussing movies of this period, Barry Keith Grant argues that ‘the film musical exploits the metaphorical connections between dance and sex’ and ‘provides a conventionalized way of addressing issues of sex indirectly, in a manner suitable to both audiences and the demands of the Production Code’ (2012: 46). Similarly, Sue Rickard (1996) proposes that the couple dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers signify sexual activity in a coded manner necessary for the time.¹⁷⁶ In a film musical released post-Production Code, it is humorous that Tony offhandedly alludes to this censorship when he states, ‘You make it with some of these chicks, they think you gotta dance with them.’ Also, when Tony asks Stephanie to be his partner in the dance contest, she makes it clear that is a strict ‘sex off-limits’ arrangement. The two dancers are also not a romantic couple at the end of the narrative, instead deciding to remain just friends. Indeed, part of Tony’s queerness is that he engages on the disco floor in a line dance (men and women in unison) and solo dance (on his own) and that when he finally takes part in a couple dance with a woman, the partnership is unconvincing. This contrasts with the lively performance of the Puerto Rican couple who are awarded second place in the contest, and who present much more as a team.¹⁷⁷ Rather than being an equal partner with the female – as was the case, for example, in the dances of Astaire with Rogers – Tony’s superior performance still allows him to be the sole object of the gaze when he performs with Stephanie.

Tony and Stephanie’s dance for the contest is thus not an equal pairing. In his discussion of the narrative and of the paired dance in the film, Dyer suggests that it is ‘positively Victorian’ in its ‘construction of heterosexuality,’ (1993: 64) and argues that ‘the sexual subordination of the woman in dance is... insisted upon’ (1993: 63). He rightly observes the ‘macho strutting’ (1993: 63) of Tony in the couple dance, for example. Certainly, despite the fact that the couple’s kiss towards the end of the dance is highlighted, there is something unconvincing about its unnecessary length, which makes it more affected than romantic – seemingly inserted for the benefit of the diegetic onlookers to demonstrate Tony’s assumed sexual prowess with women as he lifts up his partner. Indeed, the

¹⁷⁵ It is of note that the poster advertising the film has the same pose of Travolta as Tony on the album cover, but with Gorney’s Stephanie to the rear, looking at him admiringly so that he is the centre of attention.

¹⁷⁶ See Sue Rickard, ‘Movies in Disguise: Negotiating Censorship and Patriarchy Through the Dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers,’ in Robert Lawson-Peebles (ed.), *Approaches to the American Musical* (Exeter; Exeter University Press, 1996), pp. 72-88

¹⁷⁷ Realising they were really the superior dancers, Tony hands over the award and prize money to them.

'construction of heterosexuality' proposed by Dyer may be because it is indeed a construction – a manufactured artifice in the case of Tony, due to his queering.

The dance ends with Tony swaggering off in front of Stephanie, her hand meekly on his shoulder as she follows behind him. However, the filmic audience is aware that it was Tony in the weak position of persuading Stephanie to be his dance partner, and it therefore appears incongruous that she would have agreed for the dance to finish in this manner. This ending, with Tony practically camouflaging Stephanie as they leave the floor, queers Tony's performance in the dance, given his dominance in a couple dance with a woman in which one would expect equality. Perhaps this is why David Kehr, in his 1979 review of the film, suggested that '[I]n no sense does Tony dance "with" his partners; he hardly even dances at them' (12). Indeed, the only partner Tony really has is the dance floor. Even the song to which Tony dances with Stephanie, 'More Than a Woman,' lends the performance a sense of irony, given his strutting finish. And although one sees and hears the pair practise the dance in the studio to a recording of the song by Tavares, it is a different version in the contest itself – performed yet again by the Bee Gees, with the vocals sung in falsetto, further queering Tony during this performance. As it is the independent and more mature Stephanie who is pursued by Tony in the main narrative, this final dance ends 'the wrong way round,' given that Tony leads. He therefore dominates in a manner that monopolises the gaze, but also in a way that offers a duality of readings, indicated by Kehr's suggestion that he is 'the most passive romantic lead in film history, waiting for women to hit on him, and then not caring much when they do' (1979: 12). On the one hand, Tony appears hypermasculine in his supremacy, but on the other hand, his seeming nonchalance towards his female partner when part of a heterosexual dance couple presents a masculinity that could be read as queer.

The Disco as Carnavalesque Space

The applause that greets Tony as he leaves the floor following his dance with Stephanie, and his swaggering stance, are very different from the reception he receives outside the space of the disco. Indeed, the attention paid to him each time he visits the Odyssey indicates that it offers an alternative, upturned space for Tony reminiscent of Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque;¹⁷⁸ rather than being the underdog he is at work and at home, he is allowed within the disco to be a leader both figuratively and, in the couple dance, literally. In contrast to how he is received at the Odyssey, Tony is characterised as unimportant within his own family. For example, when he returns from work, his parents complain that he is late for dinner, albeit that they know he has to work until 6pm. Even when he tells his father proudly that he has received a pay rise, his father mocks him,

¹⁷⁸ See Bakhtin, 1968/1984

belittling the amount of extra money he is receiving. In addition, his mother clearly favours older brother Frank Jr. because he has been ordained as a priest, and blames Tony when Frank Jr. decides to leave the priesthood, even though he had no input into his brother's decision. After meeting the ambitious Stephanie, Tony begins to realise that he can do more with his life. He starts to appreciate that he is in a dead-end job with few prospects, and makes plans to move to a better area. These desires become heightened after the death of his friend, Bobby C.

It is at the disco that Tony experiences a carnivalesque 'world upside down,' as this is a fantasy space in which he is respected, contrasting with his life outside this space. He can truly excel by showing his talent as a dancer. Not only that, but he is 'the king out there' on the dance floor, according to Bobby C, indicating his importance. This is illustrated during Tony's first entrance into the 2001 Odyssey, which is accompanied by Walter Murphy's instrumental 'A Fifth Of Beethoven,' a disco number based on one of the best-known classical compositions, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, thereby imbuing Tony with significance before he even reaches the dance floor.¹⁷⁹ Accompanied by a musical fanfare at the start of the piece as he opens the double doors, he strides through the building in a self-assured manner, and 'as a king might enter his court' (McLeod, 2006: 351), very much the leader of his group of friends, with the other Faces walking behind him. As he comes into the disco proper, he is greeted with handshakes and slaps on the shoulder by the other clubgoers, male and female, as if he is a long lost friend, despite the fact that he supposedly goes to the Odyssey every week, thereby accentuating his important status within the disco space. When Frank Jr. visits the Odyssey with the Faces in a later scene, he states, 'You guys have the Moses effect. You arrive and the crowd parts like the Red Sea,' a factor also evident in the first Odyssey scene as Tony walks between the well-wishers. The reaction to Tony from the other clubgoers is therefore in complete contrast to the reception he receives at home, a place where he is treated with disdain and disregard.

The disco is a magical, otherworldly space for Tony that contrasts with his mundane everyday life. This suggestion is represented not just by the lively music that is often accompanied by ethereal-sounding voices, but also the dreamlike and festive atmosphere in the disco that is reminiscent of the spirit of the carnivalesque, which 'offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world... and enter a completely new order of things' (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 34). Bright colours abound on the magical dance floor, and the glistening disco ball emits a shine that illuminates the ordinary folk performing on it, appearing to take them to a transcendent place. Those in the disco experience a freedom that is not possible outside of it, and Tony in particular is able to benefit from this liberty due to his dancing prowess, which is admired by everyone within this magical space.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Rosen comments of Beethoven that the key in which the symphony is written, C minor, 'has come to symbolize his artistic character. In every case, it reveals Beethoven as Hero' (2002: 134).

The scenes at the Odyssey illustrate that the disco represents a carnivalesque space for Tony that offers him the opportunity for the normal hierarchies he experiences in his outside world to be reversed. In contrast to the indifferent manner in which he is regarded at home and his lowly job in the paint store, at the Odyssey he is transformed into a person who is in command and who is admired and respected. One young woman even goes up to Tony offering to wipe his brow simply because she loves to watch him dance. The exhilarating atmosphere of the disco and excitement of the energetic beat of the music being played, combined with the swirling disco ball and the pulsating lights of the dance floor, all merge to make the space of the Odyssey a magical, transformational one. Once more, there is a duality present in the narrative, expressed via the Tony whose life is restricted outside the Odyssey, and the Tony who sparkles in the carnival spirit demonstrated within the disco space. As Tony enters the dreamlike atmosphere of the Odyssey through its double doors, one is reminded of Dorothy opening the door to the colourful world of Oz, where she is similarly held in esteem, in contrast to how she is treated in her 'real' home in Kansas. Unlike Dorothy, however, Tony does hope that he can achieve a lasting 'escape' to somewhere better, which is represented at the end of the film by his planned move to a different place – Manhattan. Inspired by Stephanie, he realises that the confines of Brooklyn are a stifling space that he will have to leave if he wants to fulfil his dreams.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that, at the time of the film's release, disco music was moving into the heterosexual mainstream, it would seem incongruous to suggest, given the popularity of discos and disco music within the gay male community, that the character of Tony in *Saturday Night Fever* was an 'erotic spectacle' only for heterosexual women. The analyses of the above scenes, which are all accompanied by the falsetto vocals of the Bee Gees, promote a queer reading of Tony via the paradoxical presentation of the character evident from the film's outset, such that he is potentially 'erotic spectacle' for both heteronormative and non-heteronormative viewers.

As I have demonstrated, in this musical, John Travolta is an example of the 'erotic spectacle' more traditionally, according to Mulvey's theories, associated with women on screen. I believe it would be difficult to argue that, in the scenes analysed, Travolta's Tony does not encourage the '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' Mulvey assigns to women in narrative films (1975: 11). This is because he is frequently situated as object of the gaze. Although both Neale and Cohan suggest he is thereby 'feminised,' his performance can arguably be read from a dual 'masculinised/feminised' perspective that appeals to heterosexual women and to non-heteronormative men. Given this fact, Travolta's performance in *Saturday Night Fever* is an intriguing one from the perspective of the viewer's gaze,

whether they self-identify as male or female, gay, bisexual, trans, or straight. His presentation as Tony blurs the boundaries between male and female musical performer and puts a new spin on the social constructs of masculinity and femininity, as well as the idea of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in relation to the way characters are portrayed on screen.

Saturday Night Fever also demonstrates aspects of the carnivalesque via the contrasting spaces of the 2001 Odyssey and the world outside. The disco represents for Tony a magical world in which he can excel and is successful because of his considerable dancing skills. Although he appears to receive only criticism in his home setting, the situation is reversed when he is at the disco, an environment that offers him a sense of community and a milieu in which he is admired and treated respectfully. He even imagines himself at the disco when he gets ready in his room for his evening out. Tony and the filmic audience are taken to a 'better' place as he enters the doors of the futuristically-named 2001 Odyssey, a venue that becomes a licensed space for Tony to express himself through dance and feel a sense of worth that is lacking in his world outside the disco. It is particularly in this carnivalesque space that he can be read queerly. Even though there are instances when women are shown admiring him, this also applies to the men in the disco environment, where Tony is presented as an 'erotic spectacle' for women and men alike, both in his solo dance and in the alleged 'couple' dance that he dominates. The duality of traditional and non-traditional masculinities presented in the film's opening scene is thus also present in the Odyssey, where Tony is object of the gaze for heteronormative and non-heteronormative diegetic and non-diegetic viewers alike, a paradox that allows filmic audiences to read the character as queer, especially as Tony and Stephanie are not a romantic couple at the film's end.

I next consider a narrative in which characters similarly want to use their artistic talents as a means of escape, in order to explore whether queer readings of these characters are again implied paradoxically. As the next film musical I analyse, *Fame*, was released in 1980, three years after *Saturday Night Fever*, I investigate the degree to which it was possible by this time to present more overt and explicit portrayals of queerness within the narrative. I determine thereby how representations in movie musicals may have changed by the end of the 1970s and the extent to which a carnivalesque space was still needed for characters to express their Otherness.

CHAPTER FOUR - Performing Queerness: *Fame* (1980)

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on ways in which the character of Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* can be read as queer, in part because he demonstrates a duality of masculinities that enable him to become the object of the camera's gaze for heteronormative and non-heteronormative viewers alike. This doubleness challenges more traditional representations of leading male performers in film musicals. As I suggested, the disco offers a licensed space in which Tony can exhibit his considerable dancing talent and escape from his mundane life in a carnivalesque atmosphere. Here, he is elevated to the role of 'king' while dancing to the falsetto vocals of the Bee Gees. In this chapter, I discuss the 1980 version of the musical *Fame* (Alan Parker) and again analyse the presentation of a young man who excels as a dancer, namely Leroy (Gene Anthony Ray). I also consider how one of the film's other featured students, Montgomery (Paul McCrane), who similarly attends the High School of Performing Arts, presents overtly as queer. I investigate ways in which the school offers many of the students a licensed space into which they can escape from their difficult or dysfunctional home lives, demonstrated in part via some of the movie's numbers. This includes consideration of the impact on the students of the temporary freedom of alternative, utopian spaces – a feature also typical of many pre-Code film musicals – with reference to theories proposed by Jane Feuer (1982/1993 and 2002) and Richard Dyer (2002).

Given that *Fame* was released at the end of the decade on which I am focusing, I additionally consider how the presentation of characters that offer audiences the opportunity to read them as queer may have changed in film musicals by this time to suggest a fluidity of identities. It is noteworthy that, at this point, queer visibility in the United States was not only increasing, but was becoming more structured and galvanised. For example, the significant National March on Washington took place in October 1979. Amin Ghaziani (2008) provides a detailed analysis regarding the organisation of the march and suggests it was forefronted by a 'visionary' named Jeff Graubart (44). Many non-heteronormative people in the United States still felt isolated and secluded at the end of the decade, and there were some fears initially that the number of people participating might be low, such that the march would prove ineffective (46). It was partly the murder of Harvey Milk in November 1978 that spurred people on, as 'his death provided a nationally resonating catalyst' to move things forward (52). Despite concerns that there would not be enough time to organise the march efficiently, most of those involved were of the view that it would be appropriate to hold the demonstration in 1979, as the year marked ten years since the Stonewall Riots (55). Ghaziani explains that 'an estimated 75,000 to 125,000 lesbians and gay men from across America marched on Washington' (64). Those identifying as LGBTQ+, alongside straight allies,

demanded equal civil rights and advocated for the passage of protective civil rights legislation.¹⁸⁰ The march took place during the period in which *Fame* was being filmed; shooting on the movie started in July 1979 and ended after 91 days.¹⁸¹

Given that a queer reading may be presented differently or uniquely for each of the filmic characters analysed, I explore the diverse portrayals of queerness and gender identities deemed acceptable in a film musical of this period in order to debate further the progressiveness of a movie released in 1980. This will enable me to determine the degree to which the film's narrative is advanced in its representation of queerness by the end of the decade, as well as the ways in which queerness and gender identities are portrayed in the storyline. The character of Leroy impresses enough to be offered a place in the dance department, despite apparently not originally intending to audition. I discuss the theme of sexuality in relation to male dancers in order to explore the ways in which various representations of masculinity are depicted via this character and how these attempt to resist descriptors of queerness. I again consider the arguments of Steve Neale (1983) in relation to male bodies in film musicals being 'feminised' and also the degree to which Leroy's body is put on display overtly, especially in his audition dance. Furthermore, I focus on the ways in which Leroy, who is played by an African-American actor, is presented as a featured Black male dancer within the movie. I debate the extent to which readings of Leroy change as the narrative progresses to show how he appears to gradually become more comfortable about displaying a more 'feminine' or queer side to his character. I also explore the character's potential queerness from an intersectional perspective. Ahir Gopaldas defines the concept of intersectionality as referring 'to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression' (2013, 90) and, given the character's poor background, the three elements Gopaldas lists can be seen to intersect in respect of Leroy.

In terms of exploring the bond in the movie's narrative between the homosexual character Montgomery and his heterosexual friend Doris (Maureen Teefy), I consider the work of Christopher Pullen (2016) concerning the ways in which relationships between queer males and straight females are presented in films. I examine in particular the use of the term 'fag hag,' a slang expression used to describe heterosexual women who associate predominantly with homosexual men, in order to

¹⁸⁰ The Five Demands were to: pass a comprehensive lesbian / gay rights bill in Congress; issue a presidential executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in the Federation Government, the military and federally contracted private employment; repeal all anti-lesbian / gay laws; end discrimination in lesbian mother and gay father custody cases; protect lesbian and gay youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress and / or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs and social environments.¹⁸⁰ Listed in the Souvenir Programme; D. C. Media Committee (ed.), 'National March! On Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights: Official Souvenir Program – Page 23 – UNT Digital Library, 14.10.79.' See <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc276226/m1/25/> (accessed 01 February 2021)

¹⁸¹ See Parker, Alan. 'Fame: The Making of the Film' (undated) <http://alanparker.com/film/fame/making/> (accessed 25 March 2021)

critique how the term is employed in relation to Doris, referencing texts by Pamela Robertson (1996) and Deborah Thompson (2010) on the topic. I also discuss Montgomery's relationship with fellow student, Ralph (Barry Miller),¹⁸² considering the theories of Alexander Doty (1993) in respect of 'trio' musicals, which he argues centre on the potential homoeroticisation of male performers in numbers. I examine Montgomery's initial closeted homosexuality and his decision to 'come out' to fellow students from the standpoint of the film's depiction of homosexuality at the time of the movie's release. This was prior to the AIDS pandemic, which potentially changed representations of queerness in movies from the early 1980s onwards.

Director Alan Parker explains that *Fame*, originally to be called *Hot Lunch*, was never meant to be a documentary-style film of the life of students attending the High School of Performing Arts in New York, but rather 'a theatrical vision of life at the school.'¹⁸³ This 'vision' centres primarily on the positive and negative experiences of eight students who are in one of the school's three departments, namely drama (Doris, Montgomery, Ralph), music (Bruno)¹⁸⁴ and dance (Coco, Hilary, Leroy, Lisa). The movie starts by showing various auditions of teenagers who wish to gain entry into the school, and finishes with an end-of-term performance by those who were accepted and who are now preparing to leave, after spending four years at the establishment. The storyline, written by Christopher Gore, is episodic in nature, and this assists the filmic audience not only to follow the separate stories of the individual protagonists, but also to trace the ways in which they mature during their time at the school, including through their relationships with their fellow students. In some ways, therefore, whilst primarily a musical, the film also displays traits of 'coming-of-age' films with respect to some of the characters, particularly Doris.¹⁸⁵

The film's popularity led to numerous accolades and 'spin-offs.' Although not as triumphant in terms of Academy Award success as the film on which I focus in Chapter One, *Cabaret* (1972), *Fame* received five nominations at the 1981 ceremony and won two Oscars, one for best original song ('Fame') and the other for best original score, composed by Michael Gore.¹⁸⁶ As a result of the movie's popularity, a TV series was created by Christopher Gore that was loosely based on the movie's narrative. It ran for six series, from 1982 to 1987. It aired in the US between 8pm and 9pm,

¹⁸² Miller played the role of Bobby C in *Saturday Night Fever*.

¹⁸³ Parker, Alan. 'Fame: The Making of the Film' (undated) <http://alanparker.com/film/fame/making/> (accessed 2 January 2019). Many of the school's actual students appear in minor roles in the movie.

¹⁸⁴ Like Tony, Bruno is an Italian American, but his talents are in music rather than dance.

¹⁸⁵ As noted by Anne Hardcastle, Roberta Morosini and Kendall Tarte, such films typically feature 'adolescent protagonists as they move from childhood towards adulthood' and 'embrace their emerging sexuality and a new awareness of themselves and their world.' See *Coming of Age on Film: Stories of Transformation in World Cinema* (2009: 1).

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080716/awards> (accessed 5 January 2019)

and was thus scheduled during 'prime time' viewing hours.¹⁸⁷ The success of the television series generated numerous spin-offs, including books, and single and album releases by cast members branded as 'The Kids from "Fame."' A film remake, again called *Fame*, was released in 2009 and was directed by Kevin Tancharoen, with a screenplay by Allison Burnett. It particularly referenced the original film and the television series through the casting of Debbie Allen as Principal Angela Simms; Allen appeared in both the 1980 film and (more prominently) in the television series, playing the character of Lydia. In addition, as is the case with *Saturday Night Fever*, a stage musical, again adapted from the original film, continues to tour on a regular basis.

The Performing Arts School as a Place of Escape and the Carnavalesque

Much is made in the film's storyline about the majority of the featured students coming from deprived and/or disadvantaged backgrounds. Leroy's home is not seen, but he is shown walking comfortably among the homeless, as if he may, at least at times, sleep on the streets. Montgomery lives on his own and although his mother is a famous actress, it seems that he rarely sees her, and she does not have enough money to furnish his flat. During her audition, Doris admits that she wants a place at the Performing Arts High School because her family is unable to afford to pay to further her education. Ralph lives upstairs in a tenement in an area frequented by drunks and junkies, and states that he is 'between fathers.' The father of musician Bruno (Lee Curreri) is a cab driver, and when given a lift by him one evening, Coco (Irene Cara) is too ashamed to be driven to her real home, instead pretending that she is staying with her sister in an upmarket flat. Regardless of their backgrounds, however, while in the school, the students are equal, such that this space provides an idealised existence and 'temporary liberation' reminiscent of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 9/10). Montgomery tells Ralph in one scene that the school promises the students nothing apart from 'seven classes a day and a hot lunch.' However, it does offer them at least a slim chance of escaping from their disadvantageous backgrounds, given their talent. In this sense, the school presents as a utopian space for the students, an important stop on the path to achieving their dreams. The suggestion of both a mundane, real space (home) and a dreamlike, utopian space (school) for a number of the students featured in the storyline evokes the concept of two different worlds present in the narratives of many early Hollywood film musicals, not least *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Brigadoon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1954).

¹⁸⁷ 'Fame.' <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083412/> (accessed 5 January 2019) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fame_\(1982_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fame_(1982_TV_series)) (accessed 5 April 2019). The film was given an 'R' rating in the USA, which stood for 'Restricted'; 'Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.' For information on ratings used between 1972 and 1984, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_Picture_Association_film_rating_system#:~:text=Rated%20PG-13%3A%20Parents%20Strongly,No%20children%20under%2017%20admitted (accessed 14 April 2021).

Rick Altman categorises *Fame* as a 'Show Musical,' a subgenre also known as the backstage musical (1987: 378). Jane Feuer argues that backstage musicals have 'dual levels' that are 'apparent in the contrast... between the world onstage and world offstage' (1982/1993: 69), and this distinction is similarly apparent in *Fame*, given the disparity between the students' bleak 'offstage' reality and the optimistic 'onstage' future signified by the school. Early backstage musicals promoted the idea that a strong work ethic would equate to success. One thinks, for example, of Peggy Sawyer (Ruby Keeler) in *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) being shown close to collapse when rehearsing numbers for a show in which she takes over from the leading lady at short notice. This suggestion is also stressed in *Fame*. For example, one student, Lisa (Laura Dean), is reprimanded on a regular basis by her dance teacher for not working hard enough, and is eventually told that she has to leave the dance department due to her lack of effort.¹⁸⁸

Fame does also include some solo and group musical performances in lessons and rehearsals reminiscent of backstage musicals of the Golden Age. While there are resonances, therefore, of such earlier films, as with the other 'Show Musical' analysed in Chapter One, *Cabaret*, a number of the topics included in *Fame*'s storyline, such as drug addiction, sexual exploitation and contemplation of suicide, are darker and more ominous than those in most film musicals of the Classical Hollywood period. In some respects, parts of the narrative are reminiscent of the grittier sections of the storylines in movies such as *Golddiggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933), which deals with the struggles experienced by performers during the Great Depression.¹⁸⁹ However, as with *Saturday Night Fever*, which similarly centres predominantly on working-class young people in New York City, there is an excess of bad language and dark subject matter in the narrative of *Fame* that would not have been acceptable during the period when the Production Code was in force.

Even so, in line with many pre-Code musicals, *Fame* includes some community numbers that suggest a utopic world, and the 'spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude towards life' described by Feuer in relation to Golden Age Hollywood musicals (2002: 32). She argues that '[A] Utopian, liberating vision lies at the heart of the musical genre' (1982/1993: 84). Two of the numbers that embody this suggestion are 'Hot Lunch' and 'Fame.' Furthermore, in his article 'Entertainment and Utopia,' Richard Dyer lists 'abundance,' 'intensity' and 'community,' as three of the 'categories of entertainment's utopian sensibility' (2002: 22), including film musicals

¹⁸⁸ Laura Dean was the only student from the actual High School of Performing Arts who was cast in a lead role. In the original script, the character was so devastated by this news that she committed suicide shortly afterwards, but this was later altered. See Seth Rudetsky, '6 Behind-the-Scenes Secrets of the *Fame* Movie,' www.playbill.com/article/6-behind-the-scenes-secrets-of-the-fame-movie 05.08.20 (accessed 29 March 2021)

¹⁸⁹ Unemployment figures in New York as at December 1979 were 8.2%. Philip Shabecoff, 'Unemployment Off to 5.8% for Month in Spite of Layoffs' in *The New York Times* (08.12.79); see <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/08/archives/unemployment-off-to-58-for-month-in-spite-of-layoffs-but-many-job.html> (accessed 16 June 2020)

within his discussion. Both 'Hot Lunch' and 'Fame' incorporate these descriptors, thereby also encompassing the utopian sensibility that Dyer depicts.

The jam number 'Hot Lunch' starts after a percussive rhythm becomes audible in the school canteen, in which various students are practising dance moves, reading scripts, or playing different instruments.¹⁹⁰ Bruno begins to tap the rhythm on top of a piano, while others play tambourines or beat drumsticks on the table or on their dinner plates. Bruno then plays an ostinato-style phrase on the piano and a number of the students start to dance or move to the beat. This leads to other instrumentalists joining in, and Coco singing some seemingly improvised words to an accompanying melody. Eventually, practically everyone is participating in some way in the organised chaos, even the adult serving staff, suggesting that the lunchroom is a (temporary) liberating, carnivalesque space. While the number was clearly rehearsed for inclusion within the film, the feeling of spontaneity that is enacted through its presentation within the narrative certainly suggests the 'joyous and responsive attitude towards life' that Feuer argues is typical within classic Hollywood musicals. In addition, 'Hot Lunch' embodies the utopic abundance, intensity and community feel described by Dyer via the passion and energy demonstrated by the large number of students who participate collectively in a carefree manner as they play their instruments or dance on and around the pianos and tables within the cramped lunchroom.

Feuer also proposes that many musicals include a 'dream world' that is 'determined by the primary narrative realm' (1982/1993: 70). Although not containing a literal dream sequence, there is a quasi-dream sequence via the 'fantasy' community dance number that accompanies the film's title song, 'Fame.' In being performed on a street outdoors, the number also connotes the 'limitless space' and the 'theme of escape to "somewhere better"' that Kenneth MacKinnon describes when analysing city-set Hollywood musicals (2000: 41). Although 'Fame' is written in the film by Bruno and sung by Coco, the fact that the performance is a communal one and foregrounds energy, spectacle and spontaneity in the way it is presented, again implies the utopian sensibility described by Dyer in his article on the topic.

Upon hearing the song broadcast through speakers attached to the cab of Bruno's father, the school's students spill out into the road to perform a seemingly unchoreographed number in the busy street, dancing on top of cars, stopping traffic and generally causing mayhem. The number exudes and enacts a temporary oneiric, utopian and carnivalesque freedom, offering safety in numbers as there are (seemingly) no consequences that result from the students' impulsive actions.

¹⁹⁰ Alan Parker explains that the number 'evolved from an all day session involving groups of kids from all disciplines, as we cobbled together the song with everyone chipping in their contributions.' See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6255909/Sir-Alan-Parker-on-the-making-of-Fame.html> (accessed 10 January 2019)

Indeed, there appears to be a cloak of invisibility covering the other people in the street as the students perform within this temporarily fantastical space. For example, they continue dancing to the song while apparently unaware of the appearance of police on horseback, and seem oblivious to the fistfight that takes place between Bruno's father, Angelo (Eddie Barth), and an angry lorry driver, simply moving around them as if they are not really there. This lack of awareness emphasises the students' dreamlike, quasi-hypnotic state as they perform in a joyous, carnivalesque fashion.

The lyrics of 'Fame' encompass the utopian 'alternatives, hopes and wishes' that Dyer describes as 'the stuff of utopia' in his article (2002: 20). They indicate the students' aspirations to succeed but also to achieve immortality, such as via the lines 'I'm gonna make it to heaven / Light up the sky like a flame, fame / I'm gonna live forever' in the song's chorus. It is noteworthy that the lyrics of the opening song of *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), 'Another Day of Sun,' appear to reference those of 'Fame' in the words 'Climb these hills / I'm reaching for the heights / And chasing all the lights that shine.'¹⁹¹ The uplifting, energetic and fantastical way in which a community of young people perform to the song 'Fame' in carnivalesque fashion illustrates the dreams of success that inspire the students at the school, dreams that motivate the two characters that I analyse in more depth, starting with Leroy.

Queerness and the Fluidity of Masculinities: Leroy

Alan Parker explains that the part of Leroy was cast quite late in the auditioning process. Casting director Margie Simkin saw Gene Anthony Ray 'break dancing [sic] on a street corner in Harlem and he came in to read with me.'¹⁹² According to Parker, Ray suggested that he was not too different from the film character he was portraying, telling him, 'This isn't hard for me to play. On 153rd Street and Eighth Avenue there's nothing but Leroy.'¹⁹³ However, the character of Leroy is perhaps more complex than it initially seems. Leroy's first appearance in *Fame* is predominantly a silent one. He is accompanying his friend Shirley (Carol Massenburg), who has come to audition for a place in the dance department at the Performing Arts School. Shirley is at the desk to register, and does all the talking for Leroy on his behalf. She explains that he is only there to partner her, not to audition himself. She is told firmly by Mrs Sherwood (Anne Meara) at the desk that Leroy cannot go upstairs 'until he checks his knife.' It is only then that Leroy speaks. He displays a resistance to authority at this point that characterises him for much of the narrative. He holds the large knife, which was hidden in his clothing, towards Mrs Sherwood, asking her, 'You want it?' seemingly in a threatening

¹⁹¹ The scene also seems to allude to 'Fame' via the traffic jam and the fact that some of the performers dance on car bonnets.

¹⁹² See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6255909/Sir-Alan-Parker-on-the-making-of-Fame.html> (accessed 2 January 2019)

¹⁹³ See <http://alanparker.com/film/fame/making/> (accessed 2 January 2019)

manner before smilingly handing it over. His question can be interpreted in different ways, including potential sexual aggression.

The verbal exchange indicates that Leroy is from a tough neighbourhood, and feels the need to carry a knife to protect himself. But it also denotes the forceful, macho masculinity of a streetwise young man who is not afraid to use a weapon to defend himself if he needs to do so, especially as he reveals to Shirley afterwards that he has a selection of other knives hidden in his clothing. The type of masculinity outwardly presented here by Leroy is a familiar one – the rebel with a cause, a disaffected youth fighting against authority figures because he believes they do not understand him, and thereby not too different from the character of Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*. It is noteworthy, therefore, that the art in which this young man excels is, like Tony, dance, an area generally associated with the feminine, as discussed in Chapter Three. Indeed, the fact that Leroy's knives, which symbolise his toughness, are hidden from view, suggests that the external persona may be concealing something, and that perhaps there is another side to him than that witnessed initially – a side that, like the knives, is being masked.

Leroy is next featured at Shirley's audition. The pair initially dance as a couple for the examiners, performing to a disco number called 'Red Light,' sung by a female artist, Linda Clifford. The song contains the lyrics 'Who do you think you are / Some kind of star?'¹⁹⁴ Leroy's star quality is plainly in evidence in the number; while it quickly becomes clear that Shirley has little ability, Leroy is a talented dancer. Although Shirley desperately tries to get the attention of the panel members, they only have eyes for Leroy, who blatantly displays his toned body via his bare torso and the wearing of skimpy shorts. He not only outshines his partner, but also looks straight ahead confidently at the all-female panel for the majority of the dance to make sure that they are watching him and not Shirley, confident not just in his dancing ability, but also in his sexual prowess (see Figure 4.1).

¹⁹⁴ The song was written by Michael Gore and Dean Pitchford. For more information on Linda Clifford's career, see <http://baltimoreoutloud.com/wp/the-disco-divas-diva-an-interview-with-the-legendary-linda-clifford/> (accessed 2 January 2019)



Figure 4.1 Leroy looks confidently at the evaluators as he outshines and obscures Shirley (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

The narrative shows that the students and the auditionees are from a racially and ethnically diverse background, which is advanced for a film of its time. However, one could argue that the fact that Leroy, as a Black auditionee, not only presents as untrained, but also displays his body so overtly, reinforces stereotypes about African-American dancers. In his text on male dancers, Ramsay Burt argues that ‘black dancers can often be stereotyped’ (1995: 119-120), noting that anthropologist Joyce Achenbrenner, writing in 1980 – the year of *Fame*’s release – suggested that ‘reviewers often comment on the supposedly innate ability of black dancers rather than acknowledging the work that goes into preparing for performance’ (1995: 120).¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, as noted by David Buchbinder, characters of colour in many Hollywood musicals ‘tend to fall into one or more of several key categories,’ one of which is ‘the exotic Other, highly sexualized and eroticized’ (2013: 66). Leroy’s body is indeed ‘eroticized’ in his audition scene, as well as ‘highly sexualized’ via some of his actions and the reactions of the onlookers, while his performance also offers a stereotypical representation of the supposed natural dance ability frequently attached to the Black male body.

The fact that the panel members are shown looking at and asking about him in the scene encourages the filmic audience – regardless of gender – to do likewise. Even Shirley appears to ‘give up’ grudgingly at one point to watch Leroy. Although he is supposedly partnering Shirley, it appears that, whatever routine they had rehearsed together, Leroy abandons it part way through in order to engage in a freestyle exhibition of his superior dancing talents, reminiscent of Tony’s dismissal of his partner before his solo dance to ‘I Should Be Dancing.’ There are also similarities between both numbers in terms of the favourable and approving reactions from onlookers. In this instance, the other auditionees in the room, both male and female, are so impressed by Leroy’s abilities that they

¹⁹⁵ See also Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (1992: 180).

stop their warm-ups to watch him and clap along to the beat of the music (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Here, however, Leroy's semi-clothed Black body as he dances in a public space contrasts with Tony's white beclothed body, the latter wearing a meticulously-chosen outfit when he performs on the dancefloor. Unsurprisingly, despite the fact that he has apparently not come to audition himself, Leroy is offered a place in the dance department, much to the annoyance of the rejected Shirley.



Figures 4.2 and 4.3 Leroy impresses the other auditionees (Screenshots from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

In similar fashion to Travolta's portrayal of Tony in the bedroom scene analysed in Chapter Three, Leroy's semi-naked body is spectacularised in this number and he thus becomes the object of the gaze via the eroticisation of the male body. However, in this instance, this takes place in a public space. Miles White argues that '[T]he transatlantic slave trade... in the United States began the commercial enterprise in which the black body was transformed into a commodity to be traded in the public marketplace' (2011: 19). It is of note that Tony's scantily-clad body is eroticised in a private space, while the eroticisation of Leroy's body happens in a public space. This can be read as the latter's Black body being viewed as a product on display, and thereby as an object exhibited for public approval in a way that is reminiscent of the slave trade.

The fact that Leroy says very little in this and his opening scene signifies his masculinity as being that of the strong, silent type and gives him an air of authority. At the end of the dance, for example, he folds his arms and stares in silence at Shirley in commanding, almost model-like, fashion. The forcefulness of this defiant pose enhances his position as a 'macho' male figure (see Figure 4.4), something that is emphasised throughout the majority of the narrative in a variety of ways. In his discussion of the female gaze and the construction of masculinity in *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997), Kevin Goddard argues that 'the gaze is never unidirectional. The "subject," who submits himself/herself to the gaze of the other, is able to use that submission as a form of power in itself' (2000: 25). Leroy's steady gaze towards the all-female panel indicates the 'form of power' that he possesses through the confidence he has in his dancing ability, but seemingly also in his sexual allure. He is fully aware not just of his skills as a dancer, but also of his appeal to women,

very much like Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*. The fact that he excels in this 'couple dance' also links to the dance duet towards the end of *Saturday Night Fever* featuring Tony and Stephanie analysed in the previous chapter, during which Tony's dancing abilities clearly surpass those of his female partner.



Figure 4.4 Leroy's 'macho,' authoritative pose (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

As with the noteworthy display of Tony's bare torso as he prepares for his night out at the disco, it may be argued that Leroy's performance similarly allows his body to be 'feminised' in the manner theorised by Steve Neale. This is because, in a comparable way to Tony in his dressing scene, Leroy's sparse outfit and sexualised dance enable him to become 'the object of an erotic look' and, if following Neale's argument that men can become objects of the gaze just as much as women, he is thereby 'feminised' (1983: 14). But, given Brett Farmer's suggestion that 'the musical number frequently offers images and sequences that can be read as... homoerotic' (2000: 85), it is perhaps more accurate to argue that Leroy's performance allows opportunities for a homoerotic interpretation, despite efforts to stress the appreciative reactions of some of the female panel members and onlookers. In *Saturday Night Fever*, there is an attempt to temper any suggestions of homoerotic readings of Tony in his dressing scene through the inclusion of Farrah Fawcett's poster in his bedroom, to give the illusion that it is only female viewers who will admire his body in this scene and on the dancefloor. In order to dissuade viewers from any suggestion of a queer reading in the case of Leroy, the reactions of the females watching him, particularly the panel members, are exaggerated to accentuate his assumed heterosexuality.

The scene is edited in a way that emphasises the admiring female gaze, cutting frequently between the performance, panel and onlookers. The two female panel members initially shown seem to find it difficult to take their eyes off Leroy as they glance at Shirley's application form. One of the women then takes off her glasses to take a closer look at him. When the other two panellists

are shown, one of them, credited as Lydia, is smiling and nodding her head to the music. Just to emphasise even further who the women are watching, panellist Miss Berg (Joanna Merlin) tells Lydia, 'she's a disaster,' clearly referring to Shirley. She then asks where Leroy's application form is and, on being told he does not have one, she demands, 'well, get him one!' Even the female piano accompanist, who has been reading a newspaper because the pair are dancing to a recording, is shown looking over her glasses to view Leroy's dance. The reactions of the females are thus amplified such that they overemphasise Leroy's apparent magnetic masculine appeal to women in a way that matches the admiring look of Farrah Fawcett on the poster in Tony's room in *Saturday Night Fever*, deliberately placed there to augment Tony as heterosexual male as he prepares for his night out. In addition, the reactions of the onlookers at Leroy's audition are comparable to those watching Tony's solo dance, thereby encouraging the filmic audience similarly to admire both performer and performance.

In his freestyle routine at the audition, Leroy engages in some highly sexualised dance moves. Lydia's reactions to these moves are particularly noteworthy, as they situate Leroy as object of the erotic gaze in a manner aimed at enhancing the heterosexual appeal of this male dancer. Lydia is shown responding animatedly to his moves, barely able to contain her excitement, thereby signifying Leroy as a sexually desirable, heterosexual male (see Figure 4.5). However, dancing to this disco number allows Leroy, particularly when he dances without his partner, to display the 'whole body eroticism' identified by Dyer when discussing the importance of disco in the gay male scene of the era (1979: 22). Leroy's performance to a disco song, via his sexualised dance moves and limited clothing, could also, therefore, be coded queerly, given that it can appeal to non-heteronormative male viewers, despite the seemingly blatant attempts to dissuade from any such reading.



Figure 4.5 Lydia and Miss Berg are impressed by Leroy's performance (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

Leroy is performing for an all-female panel, and it is his body (and not that of Shirley) that is put on display in this disco number. This raises questions about the way his masculinity is depicted

not just in this scene, but in his subsequent scenes, particularly as he is the only male character in the dance department upon which the storyline of *Fame* focuses. He knowingly puts his body on display in the audition via his dancing and sexually-suggestive moves in an assured manner that will attract attention. Furthermore, Leroy becomes both the 'surveyor' and the 'surveyed' body John Berger ascribes to women in his 1972 work *Ways of Seeing*, as the manner in which he looks at the panel members shows that he knows he is being scrutinised. It is noteworthy that this scene is punctuated by one showing a young man auditioning for the drama department, but unknowingly reading the part of Juliet instead of Romeo, thereby toying with the topic of gender while Leroy is auditioning as 'macho' male dancer.¹⁹⁶ Placing the drama audition scene at this point can be read as indicating, at this early stage of the narrative, that such a fluidity of gender may also apply in Leroy's case.

The theme of Leroy as a heterosexual male who has a magnetic appeal for women continues in a number of his other scenes. For example, Leroy arrives for his first day at the school in an open-top car with four male friends who all wolf-whistle when they see Coco – who happens to arrive at the same time as they do – catcalling to her to join them in their car. Leroy responds in a way that supports them, whooping at her and smiling knowingly towards his friends as he does so. Although this attitude maintains the lack of respect towards young women that Leroy showed in the scene with Shirley, it also suggests that, in a similar way to Tony, he is confident that women will find him attractive and desirable. Indeed, although Coco's response to the men is disapproving at this point, it appears in a scene during a dance class shortly afterwards that Leroy and Coco may have become more than friends. As the instructor walks among the students to give advice, Leroy looks back at Coco and smiles. She, in turn, winks at him. Leroy appears to embody a charismatic sexual charm, yet it is possible that this appeal may also catch the attention of queer male filmic viewers.

The suggestion of Leroy's sexual magnetism continues when the narrative moves on to the students' Sophomore Year, during which a new female dance student named Hilary (Antonia Franceschi) is shown to be attracted to Leroy. In contrast to most of the other students, Hilary is from a wealthy background, but it is still not a particularly happy one, and she clearly has issues with her stepmother. As the students practise a dance routine, teacher Miss Berg is heard shouting 'where are your tights?' just at the point at which potential rivals for Leroy's attention, Hilary and Coco, make eye contact. There is then an edit that shows that it is Leroy who is being reprimanded. It becomes clear that this is not the first time he has turned up to class with no tights, as he tells Miss Berg that he did get a pair, but simply forgot to bring them. Fellow student Lisa engages in conversation with Hilary, and when Hilary asks Lisa what the problem is with Leroy, Lisa responds

¹⁹⁶ 'Red Light' can be heard quietly in the distance while the young man auditions.

that Leroy is not prepared to wear tights, thereby suggesting that Leroy does not want to be considered 'unmanly.' Mark Anthony Neal argues that Leroy's decision to wear shorts instead of tights 'always highlighted his muscularity and... sexual availability' (2007: 2). His reluctance to wear tights thus comments on the masculinity descriptor being represented in the scene.

The inclusion of the short verbal exchange between Leroy and Miss Berg again exaggerates the depiction of Leroy as macho heterosexual male, given that tights are generally designated as female items of clothing. In an essay which includes a discussion of the style of clothing worn by Gene Kelly in film musicals, Steven Cohan argues that, even though the dancer often wore tight-fitting costumes that accentuated his figure, '[W]earing tights, the costume associated with the female chorus as well as the *corps de ballet*, would have diminished his masculine presence' (2004: 22). Cohan's proposal is being delineated during this short exchange between Leroy and his dance teacher, once more accentuating Leroy as heterosexual male. The association between tights and ballet that Cohan outlines also signifies a class difference with which Leroy may not feel comfortable, given that ballet is classified as 'high art' and he performed his audition number to a pop song/disco track.

As Leroy has not brought his tights and is resisting her authority, Miss Berg asks him to leave the class, but not before he has caught the eye of Hilary, who says to Lisa, 'I dig his black ass.' This is overheard by Coco, who tells her, 'It's taken, Goldilocks,' only for Hilary to respond, 'Don't count on it' as they continue their dance routine. The dialogue between the two female students once again emphasises Leroy's alluring appeal to women. Yet, shortly afterwards, Leroy is shown walking along a street on his own when the male friends who drove him to school on his first day pull up and insult him, calling him a 'cupcake' and a 'faggot.' Lucy Fisher argues that 'boys and men who do ballet... often take abuse for not choosing a more conventional occupation' (2009: 32), and the slurs show how male dancers are often perceived. Although he does not reply verbally to the taunters, Leroy responds angrily by emptying the contents of a nearby dustbin into their car, clearly annoyed at being perceived as anything other than heterosexual. His ability to resist this peer pressure shows that he is determined to follow his dreams of becoming a professional dancer and escape from his current lifestyle, an aspiration being offered to him within the utopian space of the school.

After a short scene that features Doris and Montgomery, the next focuses on new student Hilary. She is in the dance studio on her own rehearsing a ballet routine when Leroy comes out of the boys' locker room. He starts to watch her, captivated by her talent; David Gonthier and Timothy O'Brien suggest that Leroy's reaction is 'an amalgamation of respect, admiration, and lust' (2015: 75). Hilary acknowledges his presence, but continues her dance, finally finishing it in front of the approving Leroy, who once more reveals his bare torso. She then calmly picks up her bag and,

without a word being exchanged, enters the boys' locker room, beckoning to Leroy to follow her. He does so with a smile, shutting the door behind him. The fact that the couple is interracial is progressive for the time, while it is also of note that it is the female, Hilary, who does the seducing, rather than the other way around, and in the knowledge that Leroy is already in a sexual relationship with Coco.¹⁹⁷

Another scene a short time later again accentuates Leroy as a heterosexual sexually-desirable man. Leroy, Coco, Hilary, and another female student, Phenicia (M'bewe Escobar), are shown practising a graceful historic dance together in class, overseen by Miss Berg. After a forthright exchange of words between Coco and Hilary, the nature of which contrasts comically with the sophisticated style of the dance they are performing, Coco begins to suspect that Leroy and Hilary are in a sexual relationship, while it is clear that Leroy and Coco are also lovers. In this scene, once again, Leroy, as a male dancer, is shown in an overstated manner to have a magnetic appeal for women, with the two female students verbally fighting over him while he remains silent, even though he is within close earshot of their conversation. The fact that the quartet is comprised of three females and one male eradicates any suggestion of men dancing together, something that might be read queerly in this scene (see Figure 4.6). Yet the arrangement of the quartet, with Leroy dancing with three young women, Coco, Hilary and Phenicia, may also signify a feminising and queer coding of Leroy.



Figure 4.6 Leroy dances with three young women (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

The storyline moves on to Junior Year. Hilary is shown taking Leroy home and, while the scene is brief, it is Hilary who does all the talking, stressing Leroy's masculinity once again to be that

¹⁹⁷ The Motion Picture Production Code forbade 'miscegenation,' which was defined as a 'sex relationship between the white and black races.' See Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 363. This restriction was lifted in 1956, when parts of the code were revised.

of the strong, silent type that was witnessed in his first scenes. Hilary's stepmother simply stares blankly at her when she walks in,¹⁹⁸ and her father barely acknowledges her when she greets him, nodding silently without lifting his head from his newspaper. Hilary merely states, 'Oh. This is Leroy. Homework,' as the two of them go into her room and close the door, by this time very much a couple and clearly not about to engage in any coursework. This is the final scene in Junior Year that features either dancer, and also the last time that the pair are shown together as a couple.

When the narrative moves on to Senior Year, there is a scene in which Hilary is sitting on her own at the bottom of a stylish staircase in what appears to be an expensive property. An empty chair is positioned to one side of her. Given what is known about her wealthy background, the initial assumption is that she is at home. The scene begins with Hilary, head bowed, saying that she has been offered a place with the San Francisco Ballet company. As she continues her monologue, the camera gradually tracks in towards her. Although she seems upset, it appears at first that this is because she is making a big career move and is nervous about this, perhaps rehearsing how to tell Leroy that she is leaving the school, given that the chair next to her is unoccupied. The camera continues to track forward until there is a close-up shot of the dancer. The ambitious Hilary announces her career plans, explaining that she wants to have lead roles in ballets as soon as possible. It is only after she states that perhaps a ballet will be created especially for her that the visuals change to show a nurse at a desk with her head down, writing. The next shot is of Hilary elucidating tearfully, 'You see, there's no room for a baby.' The nurse then looks up and matter-of-factly asks Hilary how she will be making payment. It is only then that it becomes clear that Hilary is about to undergo an abortion. This is the last time Hilary is featured in the film. Given the previous scenes, one assumes that her pregnancy is as a result of her sexual relationship with Leroy. The fact that Leroy has impregnated Hilary underlines his heterosexuality and sexual prowess, signifying him as male stud while also attempting to eradicate any suggestion of reading his masculinity queerly despite the fact that he is a dancer.

However, towards the end of the film, a queer reading of Leroy becomes more outwardly perceptible. The character has one further main scene, in which he seeks out his English teacher, Mrs Sherwood, at the hospital where she is visiting her sick husband. He tells her it is very important that she does not fail him, as he has been offered a chance to join Alvin Ailey's dance company, but needs to graduate. As Mrs Sherwood argues, it is neither the time nor the place for such a conversation, and she comments on the selfishness of students who only think about themselves. However, the scene appears to be inserted to give an opportunity for Leroy to show his more compassionate, 'feminine' side. Seeing how upset Mrs Sherwood is, he sits down next to her and

¹⁹⁸ Hilary makes derogatory comments about her stepmother to Leroy earlier in the scene, describing her as a 'trainee witch.'

asks how her 'old man' is doing. When she starts to cry, he comforts her by taking her hand in his and offering her his handkerchief. It appears to be a genuine, kind-hearted reaction to her distress, and shows a very different side to Leroy, a side he has perhaps felt compelled to mask in the school environment.

It is significant that Leroy mentions Alvin Ailey by name.¹⁹⁹ Although Ailey did not openly reveal his homosexuality, a number of his choreographed works were designed to be read queerly. As noted by Thomas DeFrantz, 'his work consistently encouraged male homosexual spectatorship in its varied depictions of glamorous masculinity' (2000: 41). Furthermore, DeFrantz argues that 'Ailey's company and choreography provided a veiled but safe performance space for the contemplation of... gay culture' (2004: 181). A number of Ailey's dances from the 1970s thus allowed for queer readings, such as *Love Songs*, premiered in 1972 (DeFrantz, 2004: 185). Those familiar with Ailey's work may therefore interpret Leroy's comments from a queer perspective and question the character's own sexual orientation. In relation to Leroy specifically naming Ailey, it is also of note that the choreographer admired Gene Kelly. In a personal interview with Ailey undertaken in August 1970, Jacqueline Quinn Moore Latham quotes Ailey's reasons for Kelly being so influential: 'He was a "man dancer," one who did not wear tights' (1973: 457). He thus offers a similar comment to that of Cohan with regard to Kelly's clothing. Ailey's contention can similarly be applied to Leroy in the early part of *Fame*, as shown in the initial scenes, as a way of 'masculinising' a male dancer. However, there is change with regard to Leroy's attire at the end of the narrative.

Seemingly, Leroy does pass his exams, as he is next featured participating in the students' graduation show at the end of the film. Although he only appears briefly in this final scene, Leroy dances with abandon and with a smile on his face, in marked contrast to his performance at his first audition, almost as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. While this is possibly because he has graduated and is looking forward to the future, it can also be read as Leroy no longer needing to act in an expected macho fashion, as indicated in his previous scene with Mrs Sherwood, thereby moving towards a more balanced sense of his own identity. Interestingly, Leroy is not with the other dancers initially, but enters the stage on his own, so that his abilities are highlighted. The short dance is modern, but with a balletic base that allows Leroy to engage in spectacular, athletic, but graceful leaps. And, perhaps most importantly, Leroy is not wearing shorts, but tights and leg-warmers (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8).

¹⁹⁹ Ramsay Burt suggests that Ailey 'is recognised as a key choreographer in the development of black dance in the United States' (1995: 2007).



Figures 4.7 and 4.8 Leroy enjoys his dance at graduation (Screenshots from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

As a Black dancer, Leroy's body is initially put on display in a way that presents him as Other and 'exotic,' an object of desire for those watching him. In addition, his talent as an African-American dancer is stereotyped as 'natural,' given that he did not formally apply to audition for the school. Stephen Greer argues that the term queer 'most broadly' accounts for 'identities and performance practices which are defined by an outsider or dissident perspective' (2012: 4), a description that applies to Leroy via his sexualised performance to disco number 'Red Light' alongside his exaggerated macho persona, poor background and African-American heritage. Furthermore, while the earlier scenes overstate the fact that this male dancer is heterosexual and indicate that he is engaging in sexual relationships with at least two of the female students, the end of the narrative offers an alternative reading of the character and presents him in a different light. In his chapter discussing race, masculinity and dance in films, Buchbinder argues that a male dancer 'needs to tread carefully' (2013: 65), as he 'always... remains suspect as to his masculinity and by implication... his sexuality' (2013: 72). The majority of the narrative appears to emphasise Leroy's sexual prowess with women as a way of combatting this argument. Yet the final scenes counteract this attempt and allow for a re-evaluation of how this character can be interpreted. One can thereby reassess the earlier scenes to read Leroy's masculinity as exaggerated in order to try to camouflage the fact that he is spectacularised and 'feminised' as object of the gaze, much like Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*, thereby similarly allowing audiences opportunities to read Leroy as queer.²⁰⁰ It appears that, as he prepares to leave school, he no longer has to engage in a

²⁰⁰ Gene Anthony Ray, who played the part of dancer Leroy in *Fame*, was HIV positive when he died from complications following a stroke in 2003. One newspaper obituary states that, although '[F]lamboyantly camp, he brushed aside questions about his sexuality.' See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1447138/Gene-Anthony-Ray.html> dated 20.11.03; the writer is not stated (accessed 10 January 2019). The first known cases of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which infects cells of the immune system, were reported in the United States in 1981, and thus after the release of *Fame*.

masquerade – symbolically represented in his first scene via the hidden knives – and pretend to be someone he is not.

Closeted Sexuality: Montgomery

Leroy offers audiences opportunities to read him as queer through appearing to mask a more feminine side that becomes more discernible in the latter part of the film. The character of Montgomery similarly masks his identity at first, although in this instance the masking relates to his sexual orientation. However, the fact that he self-identifies as homosexual is presented overtly as the narrative progresses. Montgomery gradually gains the courage to ‘come out’ to the other students in his department, and the relevant scene is presented in an intriguing manner, as he is shown to be a solitary figure when he reveals to them that he is gay. This articulates the trope common in a number of post-Production Code films that feature queer characters. As noted by Elizabeth Bridges, ‘as subtextual coding gave way to acknowledged queerness on-screen, gay characters were nearly always punished within the narrative for their transgression via death, suicide, loneliness, and/or misery’ (2018: 116). Yet, in Montgomery’s case, this trope does not apply by the end of the movie, and he is shown to be poised and comfortable in his own skin.

Montgomery is the first character to be seen in the film, which opens with a black screen and credits in white font, with some background music and sounds that are barely audible. The first image shown is that of renowned actor Laurence Olivier as Othello, from the 1965 film of the same name (dir. Stuart Burge). It is curious that this is the image used at the start of the movie; this is because a white man, Olivier, played the role of Othello in blackface.²⁰¹ The incongruity of the image is particularly striking given the manner in which Leroy is initially presented in the movie, as well as the fact that the narrative includes young people of so many different ethnicities. Furthermore, the auditioner featured in the scene, Mr. Farrell (Jim Moody), is African American.

It gradually transpires that Montgomery, whose voice is heard over the image, is also performing a role, albeit in his everyday life. Rather than being a white man in blackface, however, his mask relates to his true sexual orientation. As the camera pans down from Olivier’s image, Montgomery is shown in close up, and he is speaking to person or persons unseen. At one point, he suddenly stops and looks perplexed. This is followed by a shot of one of the people who has been listening, and it is only then that it becomes clear that Montgomery is at an audition. He starts to

²⁰¹ Olivier’s use of blackface was not received well by film critics in the United States. As noted by Ayanna Thompson, ‘[T]here was a sense that Olivier’s performance mode crossed several uncomfortable lines’ (2021: 56). Blackface was also used by white performers in some Hollywood musicals of the Golden Age. See Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998) and Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

rifle through some papers that he is holding, and film viewers realise that he has, in fact, been reciting from a memorised script.²⁰² Montgomery then continues his monologue with the words he had initially forgotten, namely, 'a kind of a depressed feeling.' One wonders whether the way these lines are emphasised through their initial absence may be significant with regard to the emotional state of this character as well as that of the character in his script.²⁰³ Mr Farrell tells Montgomery that he did well, and viewers thus assume that he will be admitted to the school.

The next major scene for Montgomery follows the 'Hot Lunch' jam number. Fellow Drama student Doris is overwhelmed by the pandemonium in the cafeteria and makes her escape. Montgomery similarly does not feel secure enough to participate in the antics taking place in the canteen as he is shown to be eating his lunch alone while sitting outside on the stairs. He invites Doris to join him and she gladly accepts, telling him, '[T]hat's too wild for me.' As Gonthier and O'Brien suggest, 'the two outcasts share a moment' (2015: 71), the characters thereby being designated as outsiders. In her discussion of queerness, Sally Munt proposes that '[T]he outsider is by designation marginalized but also stigmatized' (2007: xiv), thus suggesting that such a person does not fit easily into society. The fact that Montgomery and Doris do not feel comfortable enough to sit in the lunchroom indicates that they can be read, figuratively and literally, as outsiders in this early scene.

Doris asks Montgomery about his mother, who is a well-known actress. During the short discussion, Montgomery reveals that his mother is paying for him to see an analyst. The surprised Doris asks the reason for this, and Montgomery states that, 'It's pretty technical really. I have problems.' Doris enquires further, and Montgomery explains to her that his problems are 'with women.' There is then a sharp cut to the students participating in a drama class. The specific issues surrounding the 'problems with women' that Montgomery is experiencing to the extent that he has an analyst are thus left open at this early stage of the narrative. He clearly does not yet feel confident enough to reveal his homosexuality, masking his sexual orientation in a way that would have been typical in narratives of pre-Code films, but which would also have been recognised as the experience of many queer people at this time.

Montgomery is next shown rehearsing a scene with Doris. The visuals are initially just a white background and Doris's voice is heard saying 'Why?' as the camera pans up to reveal the two students sitting outside in the snow, dressed in costume for particular roles. As they rehearse, Doris's character is shown to be pregnant. Montgomery asks Doris if they can re-start the scene as 'it sounds phony.' He is referring to Doris's over-zealous weeping, but the theme of dissembling

²⁰² The monologue is from William Inge's 1957 play *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, and Sammy, aged seventeen, is the character in the play who speaks the words.

²⁰³ In the play, Sammy commits suicide.

therein in relation to Montgomery is pertinent. As they talk, classmate Ralph runs towards them and interrupts their discussion to ask Montgomery, 'Seen your shrink lately?' Montgomery responds in the affirmative, and hands Ralph some pills, which allegedly are for a friend. Ralph then taps on Doris's 'bump' and wonders who 'the father' could be. He states, 'It can't be old Gloria over here; he's not into chicks' while tapping the embarrassed Montgomery on the cheek. It is not clear what the prescribed tablets are or, indeed, why Montgomery is not taking them. However, this is the first scene in which there is an indication as to why Montgomery is seeing an analyst, and that the reason could be connected to his sexual orientation. Ralph is clearly aware that Montgomery is gay. Given the fact that Montgomery is not yet open about his homosexuality to the other students, however, one can surmise that Ralph has agreed to keep this fact to himself in exchange for Montgomery's tablets.

Moving on to Sophomore Year, drama teacher Mr Farrell tells the students about their next assignment, which will be to 'recreate emotional states' in order to reveal a hurtful memory. Shortly afterwards, Montgomery and Doris are shown in the street discussing what this memory could be. Although Doris is struggling to think of something, Montgomery appears to have a list of possible options. He makes a decision on what he will reveal, but Doris is unsure if he is making the right choice. She tells him, 'I mean, everybody falls in love with their analyst. There's a word for that, isn't there?' When Montgomery responds 'Homosexual,' Doris is taken aback. This indicates that she has been unaware of her friend's sexual orientation, but it also ensures that the filmic audience knows that Montgomery is homosexual prior to his 'coming out' scene to the other students. Following the earlier scene with Ralph, Montgomery's admission to Doris also elucidates the reason why he has been seeing an analyst, seemingly at the behest of his absent mother. Only a few years earlier, in 1973, the trustees of the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality should be defined as a 'sexual orientation disturbance' rather than as a 'psychiatric disorder.'²⁰⁴ One therefore surmises, given that his mother is prioritising paying for her son to see an analyst ahead of furnishing his flat, that Montgomery's sexual orientation may, at least to some extent, explain her absence.

When Montgomery divulges his sexual orientation in class, the scene starts in a similar way to the film's opening. Instead of hearing his voice over a still of Olivier, however, this time the mise-en-scène shows empty seats in a theatre as Montgomery's voice is heard stating, 'I thought I was going through a stage. That's what everyone told me. And it never worried me when I was ten.' In contrast to the first monologue, whereby the student was quoting from a written script at his

²⁰⁴ See, for example, 'The Issue is Subtle, the Debate Still On' in *The New York Times*, 23.12.73, p. 109; www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/the-issue-is-subtle-the-debate-still-on-the-apa-ruling-on.html (accessed 31 March 2021). The article's author is not listed.

audition, this time his words are his own. The camera pans up to show Montgomery sitting in one of the theatre seats, and at a distance from the other students (see Figure 4.9), as if to indicate visually that he is somehow different or apart from them in some way, once more stressing his outsider status. Montgomery continues that he is not bothered about being homosexual, because he is 'pretty well-adjusted.' However, he also states that he has 'had a lot of help' and suggests, 'Never being happy isn't the same as being unhappy. Is it?' In many ways, he is verbalising here the mixture of 'pain and defiance of the queer outsider identity' that has been identified by Linda Mizejewski (2014: 37). Although Montgomery has been brave enough to 'come out' to his fellow students, the scene is filmed in a way that seems to suggest that identifying as homosexual means not only that you can never be happy, as articulated by Montgomery, but also that you are lonely and isolated, as represented by the empty seats around him. Furthermore, his distance from his classmates and the fact that he is seated in the background appears to signify that this remains the fate of a person who is openly homosexual.

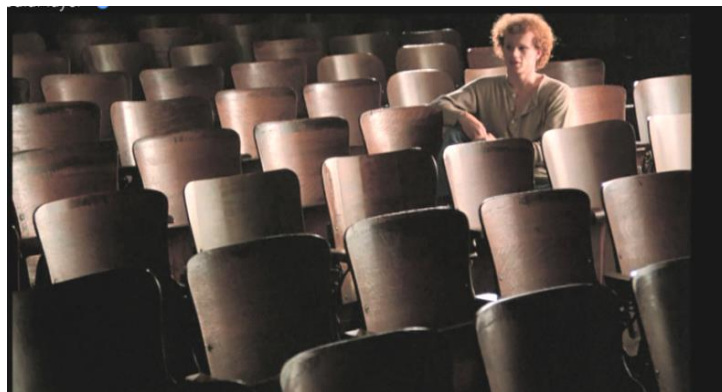


Figure 4.9 Montgomery's revelation to the other students (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

The way the disclosure is filmed therefore appears to suggest that revealing his sexual orientation is not necessarily going to be a positive move for Montgomery, and this idea is underscored in the very next scene. It is of note that the 'unmasking' scene that focuses on Montgomery's sexuality is immediately followed by one involving masking, via the applying of makeup. It begins with a close up of Montgomery wearing eye shadow while putting on some bright red lipstick. The initial shot is deceptive, however, because the next one reveals that he is actually in the school's dressing room, and that there are other students similarly putting on makeup, such that one assumes that they are actually preparing for a performance. However, the narrative appears to be making a direct link in these initial images between the disclosure Montgomery has just made, and stereotypical views about male queerness as feminised via his wearing of makeup.

Montgomery then asks Doris whether she wants to go to see the *Rocky Horror Show* the next evening. The film script thus seems to be making a correlation between queerness and *Rocky Horror*, especially since Montgomery asks the question while wearing cosmetics. Fellow Drama student Ralph then taunts Montgomery about his sexuality while in makeup himself, and wearing a black, pink-trimmed basque and a feather boa reminiscent of characters during the ‘Floor Show’ in the 1975 film discussed in Chapter Two (see Figure 4.10). The dressing room thereby signifies an intermediary space where identities can seemingly be put on and taken off in a way that is similar to audience participation in *Rocky Horror*. Judith Butler argues that ‘*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*’ (1990/1999: 175).²⁰⁵ In his ‘female’ clothing and makeup, Ralph exemplifies this suggestion. Indeed, it is intriguing that not only is Montgomery wearing makeup, but so is his taunter, Ralph, who puckers a kiss in Montgomery’s direction and mocks him in front of the other students in the dressing room by suggesting they have sex. It is perhaps noteworthy that there is a poster advertising Alvin Ailey on the wall behind Ralph, given Ailey’s queerness and the fact that Ralph is in drag, especially given readings of Ralph as potentially queer himself in a later scene. As with Leroy’s audition and the interpolation of a short scene involving a young man reading the part of Juliet, this scene further suggests the fluidity and performativity of gender, both via Ralph’s ‘feminine’ clothing and Montgomery’s ‘feminine’ makeup.



Figure 4.10 Ralph taunts Montgomery (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

With the exception of Doris, none of the other students present challenges or reprimands Ralph for his comments, instead seeming to find the situation entertaining. After taunting Montgomery, Ralph then rushes over to Doris, telling her excitedly that there are some auditions taking place for a movie at a local hotel, and that they are looking for ‘her type.’ When she questions what ‘type’ that might be, Ralph responds, ‘a teenage fag hag,’ much to the amusement of the other students in the dressing room, and indicating that Doris’s friendship with Montgomery is

²⁰⁵ Italics in the original text.

seemingly now being perceived in a different light by her classmates following Montgomery's revelation.²⁰⁶

It is noteworthy that Doris supports Montgomery and that his disclosure does not impinge upon their friendship. The presentation of such straight/queer couplings in film is discussed by Christopher Pullen. Pullen proposes that such a pairing is 'a kind of union,' and rightly argues that the slang term 'fag hag,' as verbalised here by Ralph, 'clearly debases the straight girl and the queer guy' (2016: 3).²⁰⁷ The term 'fag hag' is generally used as a belittling expression given that heterosexual relationships between men and women dominate in society; there can be a perceived threat to the expected norm if a heterosexual woman becomes close to a homosexual man. This 'threat' is articulated by Ralph in this scene through his deprecation of Doris's friendship with Montgomery, although, ironically, Ralph and Doris later become a couple. The term 'hag' can be defined as 'an ugly, slatternly, or evil-looking old woman,' and thus is already misogynistic in meaning. 'Hag' also means 'an evil or frightening spirit,'²⁰⁸ thus evoking the supernatural, and thereby something or someone outside the 'natural' or expected cultural norm.²⁰⁹ The term is also noticeably one that is disparaging towards women.

Given Ralph's derogatory use of the term 'fag hag' to describe Doris and the observations just discussed, it is intriguing to explore further the way the close friendship between the straight female (Doris) and queer male (Montgomery) is presented in *Fame's* storyline. Pamela Robertson suggests that texts frequently stereotype such relationships. She proposes that the women in these situations are generally presented as being unattractive, or else as being ignored by the heterosexual man they really desire (1996: 8). Doris is not portrayed as unattractive, albeit that she is initially shown to be dowdy and not as self-assured as the other girls in the main cast. However, she does have a crush on a handsome older student, Michael (Boyd Gaines), who attended her original audition and who is polite to her, but clearly does not view her as a potential love interest.

One can also argue that having a female 'partner' offers homosexual men a safe haven from potential abuse or discrimination, and that Montgomery is conscious of this in having Doris as a close female friend early in the film's narrative. Judith Halberstam suggests that '[T]he "fag hag" role has... become a staple of popular film' (2005: 125) and argues that this has provided an avenue for queer men to be included more openly in storylines. Deborah Thompson proposes that there

²⁰⁶ The term 'fag hag' was starting to be used in the mid-1960s. Ned Polsky, for example, states that although this 'distinctive role in the male homosexual culture' had clearly existed prior to this time, 'it is only within the past several years that homosexual argot has developed a special term ("faghag") to refer to such a woman.' (1967: 129).

²⁰⁷ See also Hoberman and Griffin, who state that the term fag hag 'simultaneously denigrates both women and gay men' (2006: 260).

²⁰⁸ See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hag> (accessed 31 March 2019)

²⁰⁹ See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hag> (accessed 31 March 2019)

has been little 'public discourse on the fag hag and on fag–fag hag relations' and that such discussion is 'lacking in the academic as well as the popular realm' (2004: 40). Her view is that the 'fag hag' has become more visible in popular culture, and is no longer the stereotyped image suggested by Robertson. But in both instances, Thompson argues, the fag hag as an ally of homosexual men is unambiguous, as she 'was hailed into the queer community early on, and that is her home' (2004: 42). This type of relationship is similarly present between Sally and Brian in *Cabaret*, with Sally being aware of Brian's bisexuality, albeit that in the latter case, they engage in a sexual relationship.

The close companionship between the two students can be read as allowing Montgomery (in the early part of the film, at least) to 'pass' as straight. Pullen argues that 'the queer guy potentially relies on the straight girl... to create the illusion that he is coupled with a desirable heterosexual female, engendering him as a normative citizen' (2016: 4). In the movie's narrative, however, the bond also enables two of the more insecure students to develop a steadfast friendship. Doris is clearly shown to be an ally of Montgomery when Ralph makes his derogatory comments in the dressing room; she chases after Ralph and remonstrates with him for what he has said, as she considers his remarks to be insulting both to herself and to Montgomery. As Doris and Ralph fight, Montgomery looks at his own face in the mirror, silently acknowledging that being openly gay means that he is very likely to face derision from many quarters, but seemingly not yet confident enough to challenge Ralph openly about his views. Once again, the narrative appears to be portraying this gay character as sad and alone.

Junior Year opens with Montgomery, Doris and Ralph going to Montgomery's apartment to rehearse, the three students now seemingly close friends, despite the earlier scene. Doris and Ralph are impressed that Montgomery has such a big flat, which is funded by his (absent) mother, although there is hardly any furniture, as his actress mother is apparently not earning enough to buy any for him. The large, practically empty room again seems to symbolise a lonely, solitary existence. When Doris and Ralph start to kiss off-script, Montgomery is shown as isolated from his two friends, sitting on his own. Their next scene together, once more in Montgomery's home, follows Ralph's discovery that one of his younger sisters has been attacked. Doris comforts him and they kiss. Due to the couple's intimacy, Montgomery decides to leave; he throws his keys on the bed, and looks back at them mournfully (see Figure 4.11). The image depicts the student as alone and abandoned, seemingly confirming the fate suggested in the scene in which Montgomery 'comes out' to his classmates, but, as I will discuss, there is potentially more to Montgomery's look of longing than may be obvious at first glance.



Figure 4.11 Montgomery casts a lonely figure (Screenshot from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

After a scene showing Doris and Ralph, who are now a couple, attending a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, there is a shot of New York at night, lit up by the signs for restaurants and theatres. The street is busy with traffic and people, illuminated by the bright neon advertising signs and car headlights. After a few seconds, some acoustic guitar music is heard, followed by a disembodied voice singing along to the chords, over the ambient sounds of the busy city. The camera pans across to the left, as if searching for the owner of the voice. It then homes in towards a solitary window lit up behind the Palace Theatre, where a figure can be seen strumming said guitar. This is followed by an interior shot of the window, showing that the musician sitting on the ledge is Montgomery, in his apartment. The number he is singing is a love song, namely, 'Is It Okay If I Call You Mine?'²¹⁰

Performing the number in his apartment signifies it as being a safe space for Montgomery, as it appears that he is only able to deliver in song, and while on his own in this cavernous room, a message that he is unable to verbalise for some reason. As noted by Heather Laing, numbers in musicals generally take place 'when the need for emotional expression has reached a particularly high point' (2000: 7). The positioning of the song is therefore of interest, being sandwiched between two scenes that show Doris and Ralph at a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It thereby gives the impression that Montgomery is singing about one of his two friends, although the fact that he is in his apartment also suggests that he may simply be missing his absent mother. What is of particular importance here is that Montgomery is performing the song himself, given Laing's argument that a character 'must carry the weight of the emotional content of the song, and therefore becomes sincere for the audience because of this direct, musical expression' (2000: 11). There is an added poignancy to the performance because of its setting, given that he performs the

²¹⁰ Alan Parker states that McCrane sang this self-composed song at his audition, and Parker decided to include it in the film. See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6255909/Sir-Alan-Parker-on-the-making-of-Fame.html> (accessed 4 February 2019)

number while in an almost empty room. Montgomery's solitude, coupled with the gentle style of the song, contrasts with the hustle and bustle of the streets below, but also with the carnivalesque atmosphere of the 8th Street Playhouse, where the screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is being accompanied by boisterous and unruly behaviour from the attendees.²¹¹

The scene is somewhat clichéd in its setting of a person shown as being alone in a bustling city, especially as the camera returns at the end to view Montgomery once more through the window, putting his guitar down and gazing outside, before returning to the heterosexual 'happy couple' Doris and Ralph at the movie theatre. But the setting for this solo performance is again stereotyping a character who has just revealed he is queer as lonely/alone. Yet the scene that immediately follows shows the three friends in a café laughing and joking together, demonstrating Montgomery's sociability and the fact that he has companionship. One does, however, still wonder about the person he wants to 'call mine,' given the song's placing in the narrative.

The storyline moves on to Senior Year, by which time Ralph has been offered an opening at a comedy club. Doris and Montgomery are sitting at a table having a drink before Ralph performs his routine. Clearly, Ralph is finding working and studying difficult and is getting little sleep. He asks Montgomery for some of the pills he used to give him, but Montgomery tellingly responds that he is no longer seeing his analyst, presumably because he has come to terms with his homosexuality. He tells Ralph that he wants to help him because they are friends. However, Ralph, seemingly due to his own anxieties, returns to his old ways, making a jibe about Montgomery's queerness by saying, 'I know what you've been after, you goddamn faggot.' The embarrassed Montgomery temporarily excuses himself; Doris and Ralph argue loudly about the way he is behaving and she leaves the club in despair.

When Montgomery returns, Ralph is on stage, failing miserably. He eventually gives up and storms off into the dressing room, sitting in front of the mirror. Montgomery follows him, and the two young men have a mature discussion about success and failure. Montgomery approaches Ralph and sits behind him, gently placing a hand on Ralph's bare shoulder (see Figure 4.12). As the two young men continue talking, Montgomery takes hold of both of Ralph's upper arms and rests his chin on his shoulder (see Figure 4.13). It is of note that it was not too long before this moment that Ralph was taunting Montgomery about his queerness, yet, in this private space, he does not flinch when Montgomery touches him. It is a short, but challenging scene to evaluate, given that it can be read in multiple ways. The physical closeness between the two young men could be interpreted in a

²¹¹ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum explain that the film's director added this scene to his script after being taken to a screening of the film at this theatre by some of the younger cast members. The writers argue that the scene is 'a pivotal part in the life of one of the central characters,' namely Doris (1983: 195).

manner that suggests Montgomery and Ralph are more than friends, or it could simply indicate that their trust and friendship is such that Montgomery feels comfortable enough to make physical contact with Ralph without this being misinterpreted. Another possibility is that Montgomery secretly loves Ralph, but believes that his love will be unrequited. Given Ralph's earlier disparaging comment to Montgomery in the club, Ralph may well be aware that Montgomery is in love with him. Such a conclusion would also more fully explain Montgomery's yearning look when leaving Doris and Ralph in his flat in the earlier scene, and would place Ralph as the subject of the solo song Montgomery performed in his apartment. Also, when the two students leave the club together, there is no mention of concern for the absent Doris, potentially suggesting that the triangular friendship is a cover for a queer relationship between the two young men. Such a reading implies a fluidity of sexualities and a validity of sexual relationships beyond the binary, as it allows Ralph to be read as bisexual.



Figures 4.12 and 4.13 Ralph and Montgomery share tender moments (Screenshots from *Fame*, Alan Parker, 1980).

Alexander Doty discusses what he terms 'male trio' Hollywood musicals that feature Gene Kelly. He suggests that such musicals, for example, *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen; 1949), usually have two attractive male stars who could be interpreted by some viewers as being lovers, along with a dupe 'who is meant to diffuse the sexual energy generated between the two male leads when they sing and dance together' (1993: 11). However, as he also argues, other Kelly films, including *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen; 1952), incorporate 'the more conventional heterosexual(izing) narrative device of using a woman to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics.' He proposes that, in both cases 'these devices fail to fully heterosexualize the relationship between Kelly and his male costars' (1993: 11). Applying Doty's theory to the 'trio' of Doris, Montgomery and Ralph in *Fame*, Doris becomes the foil who is masking a possible homosexual relationship between Montgomery and Ralph. Such a reading can be substantiated

mainly in the threesome's later scenes together, particularly in the comedy club scene and the final graduation scene that immediately follows that in the club.²¹²

The graduation scene starts with the three characters being measured and fitted for gowns and mortarboards. Doris is shown first, smiling as an ill-fitting mortarboard is placed on her head. As a young woman checks Montgomery's height and head size, Ralph suddenly leans forward, puckers Montgomery's cheeks in his hand, and kisses him very quickly on the lips. It appears in jest, and Montgomery laughs. No words are spoken, but as Doris walks past Ralph, the exchanged looks appear to indicate that their relationship is over, especially as she walks away determinedly with her head bowed and does not wait for either young man. Jennifer Doyle argues that 'fag hag' characters can be used in literature and film to mask a queer relationship between two men. She proposes that a fag hag's 'queerness may be contained and dismissed as a supplement to the "real" story: a story about the men... and their relationships to each other' (2007: 332). The 'fittings scene' lasts only around 30 seconds but, if one applies Doyle's argument to Doris, it leaves viewers wondering about the nature of the three friends' relationships at this point and, indeed, whether Ralph and Montgomery are in a sexual relationship. In her discussion of bisexual readings of mainstream films, Maria Pramaggiore suggests such readings are 'invited by triangulated and temporarily fluid narrative patterns' (1996: 278). Such triangulation may be present in this case, and reading Ralph as bisexual would explicate the placement of the Alvin Ailey poster behind him when in drag in the earlier dressing room scene.

It is curious that, despite not being part of the Music Department, it is Montgomery, Lisa and Coco who sing the only solo verses in the final number, 'I Sing the Body Electric.'²¹³ It appears that openly admitting that he is queer has enabled Montgomery to become more confident, given that the opening scenes showed a shy individual apologising profusely about fluffing his lines at his audition, and later sitting on his own in the stairwell while the students in the canteen engaged in an impromptu, exuberant performance. By the end of his four years at the school, he is secure enough in himself to sing in front of the teachers, other students and their parents, and seemingly has either auditioned or been chosen to do so. Indeed, his verse includes the words, 'I glory in the glow of rebirth,' as if to declare openly that he is no longer hiding his true sexual orientation, and is out and proud.

The character of Montgomery is an intriguing one from a number of perspectives. The fact that he may be homosexual is initially hinted at in the narrative, and is then made explicit when he

²¹² The 'trio' scenario has some similarities to the situation portrayed in *Cabaret's* narrative via Sally, Brian and Max, albeit that in *Fame* a relationship between the two young men is implicit rather than explicit in the storyline.

²¹³ The song's final verse is performed as a duet between two other students. Ralph does not feature in the number.

discloses this fact to Doris (and the filmic audience). But it is also important for the time that he has the courage to 'come out' in front of his classmates during his second year at the school – a public assertion mid-way through his course. The disclosure to his classmates is not presented as a sensationalist 'reveal,' but rather as a sincere and thoughtful admission whereby he explains how the realisation of his sexual orientation has affected him. Although this disclosure is part of the 'painful experience' exercise set by Mr. Farrell, nevertheless, it seems to allow Montgomery to accept his homosexuality more fully, and to the extent that he can stop seeing his analyst. Jaimie Aitkin argues that, '[A]s the soft-spoken, insecure Montgomery MacNeil, a closeted gay teen who is neglected by his famous mother, McCrane gave voice to a community that previously hadn't had one on the screen.'²¹⁴ Such a view is substantiated by Paul McCrane himself, who has stated that '[R]eaction in the gay community was primarily very positive... people still come up and say: "I was really young and very uncomfortable with my sexuality and it helped me to see a character who was gay in a film."²¹⁵ Certainly, including an openly gay character who is well-rounded and self-assured enough to reveal his sexual orientation was advanced for a musical released in 1980. Ian Christie argues that 'films really can change how we think about things outside our day-to-day experience. They can give us role models which may influence how we behave in real life.'²¹⁶ Given McCrane's comments, it is clear that Montgomery was a paradigm of male homosexuality and potentially a role model for a number of viewers.

Indeed, Montgomery's decision to reveal his sexual orientation to his classmates can be read as a brave one for the time, given that he would have known he could face at least verbal, if not physical abuse in some quarters, symbolised initially in the narrative by the character of Ralph. Although the storyline initially implies that Montgomery is lonely/alone, especially in the scenes where Doris and Ralph become attracted to one another and later a couple, nevertheless, the film's finale, in which he is given an opportunity to shine, suggests that Montgomery feels safe and comfortable in his own skin. Initially ridiculed by Ralph, such derision is later shown to be possibly due to Ralph's own insecurities (and possible latent bisexuality) rather than those of Montgomery, and the two eventually become good friends – and possibly more than friends, a prospect the movie leaves open to interpretation at the end of the narrative.

²¹⁴ See Jaimie Aitkin, 'Fame' <https://www.thedailybeast.com/fame> 24.09.09 (accessed 2 January 2019)

²¹⁵ Paul McCrane in Catherine Shoard, "'We were dancing on cars in the epicentre of porn and filth!'" An oral history of Fame, 40 years on.' (19.08.20) See www.theguardian.com/film/2020/aug/19/we-were-dancing-on-cars-in-the-epicentre-of-porn-and-filth-an-oral-history-of-fame-40-years-on (accessed 20 March 2021)

²¹⁶ Ian Christie '10-Minute Talks: Can watching films be good for us?' (03.06.20) https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/podcasts/10-minute-talks-can-watching-films-be-good-for-us/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=podcast%20%7C%2010mintalks%20%7C%20%20%7C%20Events&utm_content=Events&utm_term=20210209 (accessed 8 February 2021)

The two characters analysed can be read as either masking their true identity at the start of the film's narrative, or else discovering that identities are not necessarily stable, but potentially fluid and flexible.²¹⁷ As argued by Efrat Tseëlon, 'masquerade... calls attention to such fundamental issues as the nature of identity, the truth of identity, the stability of identity categories and the relationship between the supposed identity and its outward manifestations (or essence and appearance)' (2001: 3). Each of the characters arguably engages in a type of masquerade, and signifies the ways in which identities can fluctuate. Furthermore, Bakhtin notes that 'the theme of the mask' in folk culture is 'connected with the joy of change and reincarnation' (1968/1984: 39). The extent to which the characters have changed and become 'reborn' during their time at the Performing Arts School is illustrated in the final number performed by the students, 'I Sing the Body Electric.'²¹⁸

Although Leroy participated in both the utopian 'Hot Lunch' and 'Fame' numbers, he arguably did so while still portraying a 'macho' persona, while Montgomery was not present in either of these numbers. However, both young men feature in this final number and do so as their unmasked 'reincarnated' selves. Whilst not meant to be spontaneous within the filmic narrative, and thus in contrast to 'Hot Lunch' and 'Fame,' 'I Sing the Body Electric' still embodies a carnivalesque and utopian sensibility, and exemplifies a sense of community. This is partly because it encompasses so many different styles of performance, including modern dance alongside pop, rock, classical and gospel music, but also because of the unbridled joy the students express in the licensed space of the school. The lyrics of the song demonstrate their hopes for the future, as they sing 'Creating my own tomorrow / When I shall embody the earth.' These words also suggest hope for a time when it is universally more acceptable to be openly queer, and for there no longer to be a need to mask any identity for fear of reprisals, particularly as embodied through the performances of Leroy and Montgomery. It is noteworthy that, as reported by Charles Kaiser, '[B]y 1980, in response to the growing clamor for equality, 120 of the largest corporations had adopted personnel policies prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation' (1997: 270). At the end of the decade, therefore, it appeared that progress was being made in society within the United States in terms of equal rights for those identifying as non-heteronormative.

²¹⁷ It is of note that, although the character of Montgomery was replicated in the television series – albeit played by a different actor – the character was no longer scripted as homosexual. P. R. Paul played the role.

²¹⁸ The title of the song comes from a poem of the same name by Walt Whitman.

Conclusion

The two characters from *Fame* that I have analysed, Leroy and Montgomery, both offer audiences opportunities to read them as queer, albeit from different perspectives. As the featured male dancer in *Fame*, Leroy is initially presented in a way that overstates his racialised presence and macho masculinity. Yet his sexualised moves while displaying his bare torso can be read queerly by audiences in his initial number, as he is filmed as object of the gaze in a similar way to *Saturday Night Fever's* lead character Tony Manero, and thereby in a way that appeals to non-heteronormative viewers as much as to heterosexual women. In addition, the change in character witnessed towards the end of the film suggests that Leroy has been masking his 'true' identity and this is symbolised during the film's finale in the public wearing of the 'feminine' clothing – dance tights – that he previously rejected. He is also shown to be from a poor background. Leroy's potential queerness is thus a combination of the intersecting racial, class and fluid gender identities described by Gopaldas. Montgomery is a closeted homosexual when he first joins the school, masking his real sexual orientation. However, he gradually feels safe enough to reveal to his homosexuality to his fellow students. Despite initially experiencing ridicule from some of his classmates following this disclosure, he rises above this and is shown to have become a confident performer at the end of the movie. Although many of the *mise-en-scènes* appear to present Montgomery in a way that indicates revealing his homosexuality means that he is likely to be lonely and excluded, he presents as self-assured at the end of the narrative, comfortable with his non-heteronormativity. Indeed, he can be read as the symbol of a marginalised voice being heard in a public space at the decade's end.

The eight main students featured in the narrative exhibit the desire for better lives, and the school offers a safe space for them to escape their dysfunctional home lives, denoted particularly via the utopian, community numbers in the film. Yet the movie again does not end with the romantic resolution typical of most pre-Code film musicals – the happy heterosexual couple. Nor is there any indication as to whether the students do indeed find the fame of the film's title. Instead, audiences are left to make up their own minds as to the future of the individual students and how successful they will be. Even so, the ways in which Leroy, a young Black man who offers opportunities for audiences to read him as queer, and Montgomery, who identifies as queer, are shown to develop and thrive within the narrative appears to be encouraging society of the time to be more sympathetic, tolerant and understanding towards those who may be different from themselves. It is particularly noteworthy that there are suggestions about the fluidity of identities as well as a 'coming out' scene within the narrative. Furthermore, although there are some tropes in the storyline about someone who is homosexual also being lonely, the character of Montgomery is

predominantly portrayed as well-rounded. This potentially points the way to overt queerness being accepted more fully in film musicals released during the next decade, thereby capturing the zeitgeist more accurately in terms of emerging societal views of the time.

CHAPTER FIVE - Concluding Thoughts

In this thesis, I have focused on an under-researched but significant area – readings of queer performance in well-known Hollywood movie musicals released between 1970 and 1980. By looking through a queer lens to examine critically performances and narratives in the familiar movies analysed, I indicate the importance of these films as historical cultural artefacts in an era when queer visibility and queer activism were starting to become more prominent. My arguments are framed by the socio-political developments taking place in the United States with regard to a queer presence during this crucial decade, bookended by the demise of the Production Code and contemporaneous Stonewall Riots at the end of the 1960s, and the emergence of the AIDS pandemic in the early 1980s. I have discovered how the musicals analysed, four movies that are popular, mainstream films released at different stages of the decade, signify those socio-political changes and the extent to which they hold up a mirror to the society of the time.

As I indicate, the combination of the end of the Production Code and the resulting impact of the Stonewall riots allowed for more overt queer representations and readings in the important and instructive art form of cinema via the film musical. Before this time, the genre had been construed in the main as simply family-friendly fare, even if this might not always be the case beneath the veneer, as more recent re-readings of a number of Golden Age musicals have suggested. Whilst the study is not meant to be comprehensive, the sample of movies investigated enables an assessment of some of the changing attitudes towards the representation of queerness in filmic narratives through the selected decade, with queer readings of main characters evident in each of the films analysed. It thus adds to the body of work that analyses Hollywood film musicals, and fills the existing gap with regard to how queerness was represented in movie musicals of the 1970s. The investigation signifies that progress was beginning to be made in terms of including more overt queer characters within film musicals.

The fact that musicals have been historically popular with queer communities suggests that non-heteronormative audiences have been able to relate to storylines therein prior to the end of the Production Code and to 'see' themselves on screen through reading certain characters, situations and numbers as queer. However, the 1970s opened up a more explicit and varied depiction of both openly queer characters and queer readings of ostensibly heteronormative characters. The importance of this cannot be underestimated in terms of those identifying as queer being seen to play an active and visible role in society. The period between 1970 and 1980 was therefore crucial in establishing changes in the narrative content of film musicals, thereby recategorising the genre as one that explicitly exhibited or referenced significant issues of the time. Alongside other cinematic genres, film musicals did not steer away from areas such as the depiction of violence, or the

inclusion of profanities and more adult-themed issues like abortion, within their narratives. The subject matter of film musicals was therefore often similar to other genres with regard to the signalling and representing of pertinent issues of the day following the demise of the Production Code, albeit doing so in a distinctive way that still encompassed some of the familiar or expected traits of the musical.

Chapter One of the thesis considered one of the first musicals released in the decade, namely *Cabaret* (1972). The analysis focused on leading lady Liza Minnelli in the role of Sally Bowles. The investigation revealed that the character, although ostensibly heterosexual, can be read as an independent 'New Woman' of the period, and thereby representative of women who were viewed to be a threat to female heteronormativity. In addition, the character's mannerisms and performances connote androgynous actresses of the time in which the narrative is set, such as Marlene Dietrich and Louise Brooks. A potential queer reading of Sally is also suggested through Minnelli's performance, especially in her musical numbers, having resonances to those of one of the most celebrated film musical actresses of the Golden Age, Minnelli's mother and gay icon, Judy Garland. Furthermore, Minnelli's portrayal of Sally allows for camp readings that can be coded as queer, especially through her exaggerated gesticulations and flamboyant personality, such that her 'girl next door' persona paradoxically contrasts with her star quality to queer her image. The cabaret is portrayed as a place where it is safe to demonstrate a sexual freedom, a fact that would have resonated with those identifying as non-heteronormative who were facing discrimination in the early 1970s. Furthermore, the presence of an independent, career-minded woman would have struck a chord with women seeking equal rights at the time of the film's release.

Chapter Two focused on the narrative, characters and numbers in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). The analysis suggested that, as with Minnelli's link to Garland in *Cabaret*, there were allusions via some of the characters' representations to a number of well-known personas of the Golden Age, including Joan Crawford and Eleanor Powell. While it openly flaunts its campness, the production simultaneously offers a futuristic, fantasy environment into which lead character Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry), biologically male while identifying as a transvestite, welcomes the filmic audience. Within the safe space of the castle, the narrative problematises gender as binary, offering instead a prism through which various sexualities are depicted. It also suggests different and exaggerated representations of masculinities, whether through the initial depiction of Brad (Barry Bostwick) as a science geek, or that of Rocky (Peter Hinwood) as a muscular he-man. However, this also indicates that masculinities can be diverse and, indeed, queer. The storyline presents queerness as standard within this alternative world, albeit that this is not the case outside of this space. The colourful queer world of the spaceship can thus be read as a utopic space that contrasts with the

'real' world of the time of the film's release, in which queerness was not necessarily so obvious or acceptable.

Notions of masculinity were again to the fore in the analysis of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), the movie examined in Chapter Three. Although ostensibly offering a more macho depiction of masculinity, the main character, Tony Manero (John Travolta), offers dual readings that present him as both masculinised and feminised. Paradoxically, this allows him to be object of the gaze for heteronormative and non-heteronormative viewers alike. Performing to the falsetto vocals of the Bee Gees adds another layer of queerness to Tony, given the 'artificial' descriptor often attached to such male voices. As argued, falsetto was sometimes used consciously by singers of disco songs to indicate a non-heteronormative otherness, while disco's origins were connected to those who were marginalised, many of whom identified as queer. A queer reading of Tony therefore connects to disco's queer roots at a time when the sub-genre had become more mainstream, but also a time when queer visibility was increasing in the United States, not least through the election of Harvey Milk to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors a few weeks prior to the movie's release.

The final chapter, which analyses *Fame* (1980), considered two of the featured students from a queer standpoint. Both these characters offer opportunities for audiences to read them as queer, albeit from different perspectives, and they can be seen as masking their 'true' identity for part of the narrative. Leroy (Gene Anthony Ray) is presented initially in a way that suggests an exaggerated hypermasculinity, camouflaging a queerness that is increasingly overt by the end of the film. Furthermore, as a Black dancer, his scantily-clothed body is put on display in his audition in a way that underlines stereotypes about African-American dancers and representations of the Black body. However, he presents at the end of the film in a way that shows a more 'feminine' side to his character. It is also of interest that, in the final number, he wears tights and has most of his upper body covered, changing and aestheticising the initial depiction of the Black body as highly eroticised. Although Montgomery (Paul McCrane) does not openly reveal his homosexuality initially, he does 'come out' to fellow students during his Sophomore Year. Despite some familiar tropes in the narrative indicating that the fate of homosexual men is to be lonely and isolated, Montgomery is shown to be a self-assured young man who appears comfortable with his sexual orientation at the end of the movie, which is progressive for the time. This confidence is indicated in part via his friendships, but also through singing one of the solo verses in the film's final number. Furthermore, Montgomery embodies a person who was having to hide his sexuality now being able to disclose this openly, albeit within the safe space of the school. This is a portent of the changes that were taking place in society with regard to equal rights in the United States and signifies the progress being made in terms of queer visibility on screen by the end of the decade.

It is frequently the case that aural and visual elements of numbers, including dance, strengthen opportunities for queer readings in the movies analysed. In *Cabaret*, Sally can be read as queer in her onstage performances, whether via her androgynous persona and awkward body movements in 'Mein Herr,' or her camp and Garlandesque rendition of 'Maybe This Time,' which emulates her mother as gay icon. The queerness of Columbia (Little Nell) in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is portrayed partly through her mimicking of the dance routines of Eleanor Powell, a performer who offers potential lesbian readings in many of her film performances. Frank's queerness is visibly evident in his opening song via his style of dress, makeup and address to camera, and aurally via the song's lyrics. In *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony's queerness is linked in part to the falsetto vocals of the disco songs played at the 2001 Odyssey, such as during his couple dance to 'More Than a Woman,' in which he overshadows his female partner. Leroy's confidence in his sexuality is evident from his style of dance at his audition in *Fame*, but his graceful final dance contrasts with this opening number. The manner in which Montgomery is presented in his solo song in the movie stereotypes the idea of his homosexuality segregating him from others, yet he displays a confidence as a performer in the film's final number that counters this proposal, despite the fact that he has openly 'come out' to his classmates. Song and dance thus play an important role in representations of queerness in these musicals, such that the numbers are intrinsic to the way in which certain characters can be read queerly.

All four films incorporate the suggestion of gender as a social construct. For example, Sally can be read as displaying conventional feminine, masculine and androgynous traits, thereby questioning the essentialism of gender. Frank identifies as a transvestite, while displaying a queerness that encompasses bisexuality, and a gender-blindness that suggests pansexuality. Furthermore, the narrative of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* debates the notion of essentialism through its representation of multiple masculinities, particularly through the characters of Brad, Rocky, and Frank. Tony displays a particular macho-type masculinity when with his male friends, the Faces, and through working in a hardware store, presenting outwardly as heterosexual. However, he behaves differently when on the dance floor of the 2001 Odyssey disco, showing a contrasting queer masculinity. In *Fame*, Leroy demonstrates a gender fluidity towards the end of the film. Presenting gender identity as unstable and as a social construct thus allows for queer readings within these narratives, but also starts to break new ground in terms of what is permissible in film musical storylines with regard to expected behaviours and actions.

In addition, there are elements of performativity in all four films. Sally 'performs' both inside and outside the cabaret, the latter evident in her false *femme fatale* persona, while the other Kit Kat girls can be read as 'performing' as women in 'Mein Herr.' Frank 'performs' in drag, wearing

female clothing although identifying as biologically male. He also literally performs on a stage during 'I'm Going Home,' adding a theatricality that deliberates on identity and gender given his drag persona. Tony has two different lives. He 'performs' a macho role in his everyday life, and a more gender-fluid role at the Odyssey. Leroy similarly initially 'performs' through displaying an overt hypermasculinity in the early part of *Fame's* narrative that diminishes towards the end of the storyline. Montgomery 'performs' as heterosexual when he first starts at the school, not least through his close friendship with fellow Drama student Doris (Maureen Teefy), but openly reveals his homosexuality during his second year at the school. Indeed, his initial camouflaging of his sexual orientation is presented as being due to societal norms and expectations of the period, such that openly 'coming out' indicates that attitudes may be starting to change.

The movies analysed contain elements of masking or masquerade. The stylised choreography and heavy makeup of the Kit Kat Girls during the 'Mein Herr' number contrast significantly with customary representations of femininity in Hollywood musical numbers of the Golden Age. Similarly, Sally performs the number in an awkward and exaggerated fashion while singing about her many sexual liaisons as a self-sufficient woman who does not need a stable relationship with a man. Frank's makeup in the early part of the narrative of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* does not just indicate his self-declared transvestism. It also appears to be camouflaging a vulnerability that surfaces during his number 'I'm Going Home,' during which he smears his makeup as if to indicate that it is a mask, although this claim to vulnerability may actually be melodramatic camp rather than genuine. While Brad seems to be masking his true sexual orientation as bisexual, his fiancée Janet (Susan Sarandon) initially hides her sexual desires. In addition, Columbia, Rocky, Janet and Brad all wear mask-like makeup during the 'Floor Show' while dressed in matching outfits that mirror those worn by Frank, the narrative thus questioning and subverting ideas of clothing as markers of gender identity. The characters analysed in *Fame* are both engaging in a type of masquerade, whether it be Leroy's hypermasculinity concealing a more 'feminine' side, or Montgomery concealing his homosexuality in the early part of the narrative. Tony proves the exception in terms of masking. This is because the film opens in a way that shows the character's dance-like walk, while his friends are all aware of his talents and accompany him to the disco. This indicates the growing acceptability of men on the dance floor without being part of a couple, especially given the admiring glances of those watching Tony perform, and the welcome he and his friends receive on entering the disco.

One of the crucial aspects of my analysis is the way in which licensed spaces and elements of the carnivalesque play an important role in portrayals of queerness in the movies analysed. The films' narratives indicate that there are contrasting places in which characters either act or behave

differently, or are treated differently. They suggest that the freedom to show their queerness openly is connected to licensed or carnivalesque spaces that offer a temporary sanctuary for the characters concerned. In *Cabaret*, the world inside the Kit Kat Klub contrasts markedly with that on the outside, where the rise of Nazism is taking hold in Berlin. While those characters who can be read as queer can act freely inside the tolerant space of the cabaret, this appears not to be the case once they leave that space. Furthermore, all of Sally's numbers take place on the stage at the cabaret, where she has a safe space in which to display an accepted queerness and androgyny. In contrast, the beer garden in which Brian (Michael York) and Max (Helmut Griem) have a drink together is shown to be an unsafe environment for these two queer characters. This is indicated via the other customers joining with a member of the Hitler Youth organisation in the singing of 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me,' thereby indicating the growing presence of right-wing extremists in the city and how the situation will soon change for those who are Other.

In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the castle/spaceship provides a sanctuary and licensed space for queerness to be expressed safely and openly. This colourful space authorises the exploration of sexualities and the acceptance of difference, and contrasts vividly with the (heteronormative) dull, dark and rainy atmosphere outside that space. The 2001 *Odyssey in Saturday Night Fever* offers an escape from the mundane routine experienced by Tony, but it is also a space in which he is treated as somebody special, which contrasts with how people behave towards him at home and at work. He is 'king' on the glistening and colourful dancefloor, and puts his body on display both for those at the disco and for the filmic audience in a way that allows for a queer reading of the character within this magical space. Similarly, Leroy puts his body on display overtly in *Fame* during his audition at the High School of Performing Arts, a place where the students are offered an opportunity to develop their talents in a safe space and exhibit hope for their futures. This idea is demonstrated in the exuberant and seemingly spontaneous numbers 'Hot Lunch' and 'Fame,' which are performed in a free and carnivalesque manner within and around the utopic school environment. In the latter number, although there is some opposition from those outside in the street, the students resist any antagonism, oblivious to this within the environs of their safe space. It is of interest that this licensed space extends, albeit briefly, to an external space, perhaps indicating that attitudes to Otherness were beginning to change. The cabaret, castle, disco and school surroundings are thus all transformative spaces for the characters, as well as places in which queerness can be seen as normalised. However, this queerness is only apparent or acceptable in the main in specific spaces, highlighting the restrictions still in place in the society of the time, despite the progress being made. For example, Leroy is harassed and verbally abused by his former friends when outside the school environs, while Frank does not leave the surrounds of the castle. The

narratives thus show the importance of safe spaces for those characters and point to the fact that society as a whole may not yet fully embrace those who identify as queer, despite a growing visibility.

One of the most noteworthy and somewhat surprising discoveries when analysing the four musicals discussed is the fact that so many characteristic elements of studio-era film musicals are still present. For example, there are often aspects of spectacle and camp in numbers. These aspects are sometimes evident through implicit or explicit references to well-known musical narratives of the Golden Age, or to stars of the era. In the four movies analysed, many numbers, such as Sally's performance of 'Cabaret' and the group performance to the title song from 'Fame,' are spectacularised in a way that is reminiscent of those in earlier musicals. Those familiar with such film musicals and the numbers therein would recognise these intertextual references. Indeed, in many ways, these traits have become part of the distinctiveness and celebratory qualities of this popular filmic genre.

In addition, many of the numbers still demonstrate a utopian sensibility. For example, Tony's solo number 'You Should Be Dancing' from *Saturday Night Fever* takes place in the magical world of the disco, the Odyssey representing a 'better' place in which he does not experience the problems outside this space. The disco is the place to which he 'escapes' and his performance is greeted with cheers and applause by those watching. In *Fame's* final number, 'I Sing the Body Electric,' Leroy performs with a smile and in an unrestrained manner, with Montgomery singing a solo verse, both students participating unreservedly in this group number, despite their Otherness. The school thus similarly presents as a utopian place during this performance, contrasting with the harsh reality of many of the students' lives outside this space.

But the films also display differences from Golden Age musicals that are not just a result of their more risqué subject matter and language. One of the most significant differences in terms of my thesis is that musicals of the era on which I focus did not necessarily end with the heterosexual coupling typical of most classic Hollywood musicals. While there are some exceptions in musicals of the Golden Age – one thinks of the finale of *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), for example – the narratives of the majority of earlier films end with a successful heterosexual relationship or, indeed, marriage. In the four films analysed, this is not the case. *Cabaret* shows Sally declining the offer of marriage from Brian (Michael York), who leaves Berlin shortly afterwards to return to England. Instead, she decides to pursue her career at the Klub. The future of engaged couple Brad and Janet is left open at the end of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, but it is evident that they have both been changed dramatically by their experiences in the castle. The narrative is not therefore bookended with weddings in the way that one might expect; indeed the 'marriage' that does take place later in

the narrative is between two men. Although the final scene in *Saturday Night Fever* focuses on Tony and Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney), it is made clear that they are only friends, and neither want nor are involved in a romantic relationship with one another. The last scenes of *Fame* indicate that the relationship between Doris and Ralph (Barry Miller) is over and, indeed, that Ralph and Montgomery may be more than just friends. The relationship between Leroy and Hilary (Antonia Franceschi) appears to be more to do with sex/lust than love, and it seems that neither student wants nor expects it to be long-lasting. The narratives thereby also show how expectations had changed, such that a heteronormative romantic 'happy ending' was not necessary in terms of a musical's success or popularity.

There are contrasts as well as similarities within the films analysed regarding representations of queerness, with diegetic performances of song and dance differently framed. Minnelli's performances as Sally in *Cabaret* all take place on stage, such that there is a focus on theatricality. The fact that the narrative is set in the past also creates a sense of distance and possible detachment for viewers, although audiences would in the main be familiar with the atrocities that took place shortly afterwards. The world of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is predominantly a mixture of science fiction and fantasy. While Brad and Janet appear to be from an earlier decade, those in the spaceship are a mix of Others, such that the narrative merges past and future in a way that suggests the characters exist in a non-specific era. Some numbers again take place on a stage, including the majority of the songs in the 'floor show' sequence and Frank's performance of 'I'm Going Home.'

In contrast, both *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame* feature more recognisable characters from the decade. Both movies are set during the time of their release and feature young people who are keen to escape from their difficult or repressive home lives. The dancing in *Saturday Night Fever* is framed around Tony, with the inclusion of disco music reinforcing the zeitgeist and adding thereby to the credibility of the storyline. Similarly set in New York, *Fame* again includes contemporary scenes and believable characters. The numbers are performed organically within the narrative in a way that is convincing, highlighting the students' talents while not specifically singling out any one performer. The contemporaneous setting of these later films helps to bring an authenticity to the narratives, with both movies thus engaging with the sensibility of the time in a realistic manner while including recognisable queer characters with whom audience members could easily identify in terms of their everyday lives. The locations also legitimise the narratives in these two films, highlighting the class status of the characters within New York and accentuating this city as a specific, identifiable place. The two films analysed that were released towards or at the end of the decade therefore combine song and dance alongside real-life settings and veritable characters.

Although the number of movie musicals being produced has decreased significantly since the Golden Age, nevertheless, this filmic genre is still popular. Indeed, the success of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame* is often seen as leading to the release of film musicals aimed at the youth market in the 1980s, such as *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984) and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987). Further research could examine queer performance in such Hollywood films, as well as other film musicals produced at this time, particularly in light of the AIDS pandemic. Such research could focus on determining whether the impact of the pandemic led to changes in how queerness was represented or coded in Hollywood movies released during the 1980s and early 1990s in particular. This would demonstrate whether there was a more judgemental attitude that led to a regressive step in the representation of queer characters and different gender identities in musicals of the latter period that contrasted with the progressiveness of the decade on which I have focused, in which there was an increase in queer visibility on screen.

Nevertheless, my analyses demonstrate that film musicals released in the early years following the post-Stonewall era were starting to challenge many of the barriers in society that were in place, but beginning to be broken down, for people self-identifying as queer. This enabled more queer visibility within the popular medium of the Hollywood film musical in the 1970s. All four films analysed have aspects of either non-heteronormative characters offering audiences opportunities to read them as covertly queer, or characters offering overt queer readings. This thesis thereby demonstrates that the decade on which I focus can be seen as signifying a crucial turning point with regard to the reading of queer performance in mainstream Hollywood film musicals.

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