

## Introduction

Everything began with the movie *Moulin Rouge* (2001). Since I was so obsessed with this hit film, I couldn't but want to know more about this particular genre - musical films. Then I started to trace the history of this genre back to Hollywood's classical musical films. It's interesting that musical films have undergone several revivals and are usually regarded as the products of escapism. Watching those protagonists singing and dancing happily, the audience can daydream freely and forget about the cruel reality. What are the aesthetic artifices of this genre so enchanting that it always catches the eye of audience generation after generation? What kinds of ideal life do these musical films try to depict? Do they (musical films) merely escape from reality or, as a matter of fact, implicitly criticize the society? In regard to the musical films produced by Hollywood, what do they reflect the contemporary social, political or economic situations? To investigate these aspects, I start my research project on the Hollywood musical film genre from the 1950s (its Classical Period) to 2002. However, some people might wonder that among all those Hollywood movies, what is so special about the musical films that makes them distinguish from the other types of movies? On the one hand, the musical film genre indeed has several important contributions to the Hollywood industry, and its influence never wanes even until today. In need of specialty for musical film production, many talented professional dancers and singers thus get the chances to join in Hollywood and prove themselves as great actors (actresses), too. Take the 50s' Hollywood musical star, Gene Kelly, for example. His capabilities to dance, act, direct, write, and even sing turn him into a Hollywood legendry icon, which is hard to find any competitor in the history of the movie

industry. Besides, due to the efforts of the musical production teams, this genre continues to obtain high achievements on the Hollywood cinematic aesthetics, especially the applications of new technologies (e.g. synchronization of sound) or the creative designs of mise-en-scène (e.g. danceable studio settings and impressive musical numbers). On the other hand, for the audiences, like what's been mentioned above, the musical films provide a singing and dancing dreamland for people to absorb themselves into and escape from the reality for a little while. In my observation, the construction of an ideal world within each musical movie apparently involves the representations of "what America is."

Just as the title of my thesis suggests, the musical films do connect with the themes of "Simulacra Machine" and "American Dream." Concerning Hollywood's production of the musical films and its relation to the American society, here, by appropriating Baudrillard's theoretical concept of "simulacra," I consider Hollywood's big studios identical matrixes, which constantly produce various kinds of musical films as the simulacra machines. Then through the operation of each musical movie, the past or present of the American society is simulated and changed into an imaginary musical copy of the reality. In other words, a Hollywood musical film can be regarded as a miniaturized Disneyland, a "simulacrum space" which manipulates and combines shreds of the American history and communal memories to invent a seemingly half-real yet half-dreamy (or fake) musical world. It is exactly the blur of the real and imaginary that makes a musical film so appealing to the audiences.

Furthermore, the aesthetic artifices of the musical genre itself, in my opinion, also help reinforce the effect of simulacra. For instance, the tendency to recycling the previous musical films plays on the nostalgic feelings for the old days. Social facts and the film plots are often interweaved in dance sequences

so as to create dream-like simulacra for pure entertainment. Or the rationalization of the characters' singing and dancing and the fabrication of the musical star images (aura) efface "the difference between the real being and its assumption into the imaginary" (Baudrillard 28).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in the process of simulating "an ideal America" inside the musical film, there must be certain "imagination" of American Dream presented with it. The original idea of the American dream is that through hard work, courage and determination one can achieve prosperity, which was in fact the value held by the earliest European settlers in America and still has its influence on people in the U.S. today.<sup>2</sup> Later on the success of many industrialist personalities redefines the American dream as the belief that talent, intelligence, and a willingness to work hard lead to great accomplishments in life. More interestingly, immigrants from other countries around the world, such as Europe and Latin America, also have their own visions of the American dream. In those immigrants' mind, America is generally pictured as a land of freedom and opportunity. Meanwhile, the black people living in the U.S. also build part of their American dream on the hope for the egalitarianism in the American society. Doubtlessly, during such a long period of time the concept of the American dream has undergone several changes and faced many challenges as well as criticisms. Nevertheless, I observe that all these different assumptions of the American dream are partially re-presented within the musical films. That is, the "fragments" of the various "American Dreams"

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from *The Evil Demon of Images*, Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> All the historical information about the American dream is from the website, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Dream](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream)>

are simulated and reunited to construct a musical world. In my thesis, the discussions of the musical films I choose would demonstrate clearly this genre's deep relations with the multiple assertions of the American Dream. For example, the pursuit of "the perfect family," which was one of the major concerns of the 50s' American dream, is obviously portrayed in the musical *On the Town*. In addition, the themes of immigrants (lower-class people) gaining success in the end or minority groups (e.g. African-Americans) fighting for the racial equality are also presented in the musical films like 70s' *Saturday Night Fever* and 80s' *Flashdance*.

Therefore, in regard to my thesis as a whole, I would conduct the survey with historical studies of Hollywood's musical films from the 1950s to 2002. Besides, according to the aesthetic development of this genre, I'll divide the subject films into three categories: I. The Classical Genre – including Gene Kelly's two musical movies *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). II. Genre in transition – including *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Fame* (1980). III. Musical films interacting with MTV – including *Flashdance* (1983) and *Chicago* (2002).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, I'll analyze these films in two main directions: First, the aesthetics of musical genre such as the directing styles, acting and dancing techniques, mise-en-scène, and production strategies. In addition to generalizing the common genre formulas from the 50s' musicals<sup>4</sup>, I'll discuss the inheritances or innovations of this genre following the Classical period. Second, I will conduct inter-textual studies

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<sup>3</sup> I'll give more detailed description of the genre's aesthetic development while analyzing those subject musical films. And since part of my research focuses on the American cultures portrayed within Hollywood-produced musical films, *Moulin Rouge* is excluded from the subject films because of its French setting and the aesthetic appropriation from India's

of these musical movies as well as their social context. With close examinations of the plots and characters, I would like to analyze how these musical movies (partially) reveal or “cover up” some crucial facts of American society and how they reflect and deal with contemporary issues such as gender, race and teenage sub-culture. Moreover, my further understanding of American history and the important information my research relies on are drawn from Alan Brinkley’s work, *American History: A Survey*. And parts of my discussions about the genre’s historical development as well as its formulas are based upon two works: Jane Feuer’ *The Hollywood Musical* and Chiao Hsiung-Ping’s *A thorough Study on the Musical Films*.<sup>5</sup> It was a pity that both the two authors’ researches stopped in the 1980s because of the death of the genre in the 90s. But who knows that the musical films won’t revive again in the upcoming twenty-first century? So I’d like to expand their previous study of this genre and contribute to this field my own thoughts, particularly of the recent New-Revival musicals from year 2000 till now.

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Bollywood.

<sup>4</sup> After World War II , one of Hollywood’s major studios, MGM, created the Golden years of musical films with its “stable of stars.” Thus most of this genre’s formulas were set during this Classical period (from the mid-40s to early -50s). Here I especially take Gene Kelly’s two MGM works in the early 50s as my analytic subjects.

<sup>5</sup> Because this book is all written in Chinese, I try my best to translate its Chinese title into English one. And if there is any misinterpretation of the authors’ meaning, I apologize first and welcome all of you to give me corrections and advices. For the original work, see Chiao Hsiung-Ping’s *A Thorough Study on the Musical Films*. (歌舞電影縱橫談): Yuan-Liou Publishing Co.,1993.

## Chapter One

### Classics and Naivety: The Rising of the Kingdom of Gene Kelly, the Dancing King of the 50s

Before I start my own analysis, I'd like to give a brief introduction about the historical development of musical films from the initial stage (the late 1920s) to the Classical era (the mid 40s-50s), for the films of this period have a continuous influence on this genre up to the present. According to Rick Altman's study of the musical genre, during the Depression period (from 1929 - 1932), with the advent of sound, the musical films went through their initial stage of style-construction. Musical backstage dramas and Al Jolson's tear-jerker sequels<sup>1</sup> were popular with their "performance-heavy plots, unhappy love affairs, and an unabashed display of the latest technology" (Altman 297). More importantly, as Jean Feuer observed, these earliest musical films "took their subjects the world of entertainment: Broadway, vaudeville, the Ziegfeld Follies, burlesque, [ ... ] 'Putting on a show' was a formula that made breaking into song and dance plausible, thereby justifying the inclusion of musical numbers in a film" (Feuer preface ix). Then after a "short-term" death, this genre revived in the mid-30s through the success of Busby Berkeley's geometric choreography<sup>2</sup> and RKO's charming dancing couple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.<sup>3</sup> It's worth noticing that during this period the backstage musical plot began to be mated with romantic comedy

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<sup>1</sup> Al Jolson was originally a successful performer on Broadway and then he stepped into the sound cinema with two pioneering Hollywood musicals, *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Singing Fool* (1928). He constructed his film acting style by bringing in the audience-participation formats borrowed from the music hall live performance.

and “redesigned to further the young couple’s romance while celebrating their love through the energy of song and dance” (Altman 298). After World War II, especially with MGM’s musical production team Arthur Freed Unit<sup>4</sup>, the genre made a greatest leap not only in qualities but also in quantities. Furthermore, during this Classical era (from the mid-40s to early 50s), the “average Joe-like” Gene Kelly became the Dancing King, taking over the place of elegant, tuxedo-wearing Fred Astaire in the 30s. Meanwhile, the formation of musical films’ standard aesthetic styles was also completed since the genre had reached its maturity.

Next, I’d like to point out three general characteristics of this genre during its Classical period. I need to state beforehand that most of my observations about the genre’s Classical characteristics are appropriated from Feuer’s work and I combine with them my own extending thoughts. Now let me start from the first characteristic: The Flowing Mise-en-scène.<sup>5</sup> As Richard Maltby asserted in his book, *Hollywood Cinema*, mise-en-scène should not be regarded as “a list of devices or techniques, such as set design, lighting, or camera placement” (328) and its function was making the image meaningful and “maintaining the viewer’s involvement in the action by allowing for understanding and interpretation without impeding its progress with intrusive explanation” (328-29). But in my opinion, it’s exactly these devices or techniques that make

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<sup>2</sup> As David A. Cook described in his article “The Sound Film and the American Studio System”, Berkeley “developed a flamboyant visual style which turned the production numbers of pedestrian backstage romances into surreal fantasias for the eye” (Cook 274).

<sup>3</sup> Again according to Rick Altman, “the Astaire-Rogers films had a stabilizing effect on the genre, for they bridged the gap between the fancy costumes and faraway upper-class sets of operetta and the down-to-earth plots and hummable music of the Tin Pan Alley, vaudeville, or folk traditions” (Altman 298).

a musical film so convincing, enabling the protagonists and audience to come and go freely between the imaginary fabricated in singing and dancing sequences and contemporary world depicted in the storyline. Therefore, I regard the mise-en-scène of musical genre as the Flowing Mise-en-scène because it not only rationalizes movie scenes but also transforms the impossible into normality. For example, the scene of walking suddenly “flows” into the scene of dancing or the main plot “flows” from reality to the character’s dreamland. There are four types of artifices for Flowing mise-en-scène: 1. *Dislocation and mixture of constructed and real settings*; 2. *Various dance numbers as the film-within-the films*; 3. *Amateur spontaneity*; 4. *Participating audience*. Here the latter two artifices certainly need to be clarified. “Amateur spontaneity,” which is termed by myself, actually contains two elements, “amateur” and “spontaneity.” “Amateur” indicates that the leading actors (actresses) who are professional dancers in real life are usually disguised as ordinary people like us and dance “naturally” at anytime, anywhere. Or to quote Feuer’s words, “the professional entertainer could play the part of the amateur without ever having to be truly amateurish” (Feuer 14). As for “spontaneity,” it functions through the practice of bricolage and non-choreography<sup>6</sup>; the former means “the performers make use of props at

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Freed was a famous producer of MGM’s musical films. He relied on the talents of his cast and crew to create many classical musicals in the film history, such as *Singin’ in the Rain*. Great directors and actors (dancers) like Stanley Donen, Vincente Minnelli and of course, Gene Kelly, were all members of this production team.

<sup>5</sup> The definition of mise-en scène, as Richard Maltby puts it, is the “arrangement of screen space as a meaningful organization of elements [ ... ] literally, the “putting into a scene” or staging of a fiction” (Maltby 328).

<sup>6</sup> Both the two concepts, “bricolage” and ‘non-choreography’ are directly taken from Jeuer’s book.



hand – curtains, movie paraphernalia, umbrellas, furniture – to create the imaginary world of the musical performance” (Feuer 332) and the latter requires that dance numbers “employ completely ordinary movements rather than ‘steps’” (Feuer 9) to conceal the effort of calculated choreography in reality. Then how about *Participating audience*? Within a musical film, there is often certain “set-up audience” during the dancing sequences. Some “audience within the film” just takes their seats in a theater watching the main characters dancing on stage while the other, such as passengers on the street, happen to witness the miracle of “Amateur spontaneity.” In fact, these participating audiences are created for the real audience of the film to identify with and thus involve themselves more deeply in the dance numbers.<sup>7</sup>

Now, let’s turn to the second characteristic of musical genre: Recycling the previous musical films with self-reflexive style and nostalgic effect. Like what’s been mentioned above, the earlier musical films borrow performing style from a variety of live entertainment such as Broadway or vaudeville. Later the musicals in the Classical Era similarly “quote from the same live forms but also begin to use material from earlier Hollywood musicals and from familiar star personas” (Feuer 94). In other words, the “self-reflexive” style of this genre is to recycle the story, music or even star images from musicals of the previous generation. Then it effectively results in the nostalgic effect on the audience by freshening up their memories of those early movies. In this way, musical films always offer “the best” of both their present and past works, so as to guarantee the success of the box-office and huge profits for Hollywood industry.

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<sup>7</sup> To learn more about the participating audience within a musical film, please check out Jane Feuer’s incisive analysis in *The Hollywood Musical*.

Especially the recycling of star personas is most notable because the image of a famous musical star is instantly identifiable and serves as the best “agents of nostalgia” (Feuer 113). For instance, Fred Astaire, Dancing King of the 30s, made his comeback in the 50s’ musicals through quoting from his own professional autobiography. As Feuer once wrote, “references to Astaire’s career aid in the legendizing of his persona, [ ... ] the continuity of his persona, and his importance to the audience” (116).<sup>8</sup> After all, the nostalgia for an old dancing super star helps the sale of musical films!

Finally, it’s time to bring up the last characteristic of this genre: Celebration of love and domestic values. As everyone can see clearly, during the Classical Era most musical films tend to construct their plots around the romance of the protagonists. And they always end with happy coupling; that is, a man successfully wins the girl he wants and the girl is more than willing to be married regardless of her career or the objection from her family members. This kind of musical story pattern seems not only to reinforce the conservative social values but to simplify every conceivable problem as well. According to Rick Altman’s observation, the musical genre during its heyday “always diverts attention from the underlying cultural problems to the easily resolvable difficulties of the central couple” (301) and it merely provides one single solution – the final union of the lovers.

To exemplify musical genre’s three Classical “golden rules,” I’d like to analyze Gene Kelly’s two musical films, *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin’ in the*

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<sup>8</sup> Later on after the end of musical genre’s Classical Era, Gene Kelly would also become one of the “agents of Nostalgia” when he appeared with Liza Minnelli (Judy Garland’s daughter) on TV shows or co-starred with Olivia Newton-John in the musical *Xanadu* (1980). And I’ll discuss more about this interesting phenomenon in the next chapter.

*Rain* (1952). Both the two movies are produced by MGM's Freed Unit during the Classical Era and co-directed/choreographed by Stanley Donen and Kelly himself.<sup>9</sup> Aside from demonstrating the general characteristics with the two films, I'll discuss other aesthetic artifices and examine the film texts to see how they might reflect some social reality at that time.

## **The Classical Genre: Case Studies of Kelly's two musical films, *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)**

### **A. *On the Town* (1949)**

*On the Town*, originally a hit Broadway musical in 1944, turned into a Hollywood musical film in 1949 and was the debut team work of Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen (co-directing /choreography). Furthermore, this movie also made many other "first-times" in the history of musical genre. The film is about three sailors, Gabey (Gene Kelly), Chip (Frank Sinatra) and Ozzie, who take a day off in New York. They wander around the Big Apple, have all kinds of fun and find the perfect girls they are always dreaming of. And the sailors are not the only ones who get what they want. Likewise, the three city girls, Ivy, Hildy and Claire, who have jobs and earn their own living now meet their ideal lovers for one-day romance. The opening sequence begins with a dock worker's solo singing "I Feel Like I'm Not Out of Bed Yet," which immediately announces that the film is a musical because the man doesn't just say the words but sings them out loud! In addition to dancing, singing is another indispensable element

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<sup>9</sup> Besides, both films' scripts are co-written by Adolph Green and Betty Comden, whose long-term collaboration created many great screenplays.

for the musical genre. The musical film, according to Feuer, “privileges song over speech, that is, sung words over spoken words” (52). And the musical film-makers share a “mysterious” communal belief that “in becoming song, language is in a sense transfigured, lifted into a higher, more expressive realm” (52). In other words, within a musical movie singing represents a better way to vocalize one’s feelings through lyrics, especially when it comes to courtship.<sup>10</sup> Besides, it often functions as the bridge between the storyline and dancing sequence. After the dock worker finishes his song, the film unexpectedly continues with the three male protagonists’ trio singing “New York, New York.” This singing sequence is very famous for it was the first time in the history of musical genre to have a film shot in real locations instead of studio settings.<sup>11</sup> With the three sailors singing “*New York, New York, It’s a wonderful town...*,” the camera keeps capturing those familiar landmarks in New York City. Here the film not only depends upon lyrics to vocalize the characters’ feelings but also projects them onto the real world. At the same time, praising the beauty of New York seems to envision the promising future in the post-war era. Thus, there is always an atmosphere of overflowing optimism throughout the whole film. More interestingly, at the end of this singing number, while the camera tilts up at Rockefeller Plaza, we can see clearly the skating rink lined with spectators watching the three stars performing their trio song.<sup>12</sup> This time there is no need for “set-up audience” within a musical number because many “true

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<sup>10</sup> About the relation between music and love in a musical film, Feuer wrote, “in order to link music and love, it must first redefine music as singing” (51).

<sup>11</sup> This information came from Stanley Green’s wonderful work, *Encyclopaedia of the Musical Film*.

<sup>12</sup> This amusing discovery was from the section “Trivia for On the Town” at the website *The Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041716/trivia>>

passengers on location” volunteer to take part in! Then after this amazing singing sequence, the three males lead step into the studio setting right away without hesitation. And the first artifice for flowing mise-en-scène hence appears with the mixture of New York scenic spots and fake studio city settings. Later they get on the subway and Gabey meets his girl, “Miss Turnstiles for the month of June (Ivy Smith),” though actually just the picture of hers in the poster. Next the dissolving effect<sup>13</sup> brings everyone to Gabey’s imagination of Miss Turnstiles. The following dance number “Miss Turnstiles Ballet” shows Ivy (Vera-Ellen) in various activities. And from my own observation, it is also the first solo dance of a leading female character especially designed by Kelly and Donen to “dance out” the leading male protagonist’s fantasy about his ideal lover.

More interestingly, I notice that during this dance sequence the background color is bright yellow, which is in highly contrast to the colors of these dancers’ costumes. I think this design of contrasting color produces a dreamlike effect, emphasizing the whole sequence as one man’s imaginary world. In fact, the application of color in Hollywood film production has a lot to do with the development of musical genre. During the early years of musical films, Hollywood industry used Technicolor<sup>14</sup> only for the musical sequences “because they appeal by virtue of costume and artificial settings” (Bordwell 355). Meanwhile, the industry became aware of the fact that “the spectacle of “natural” color had the potential to distract from a movie’s narrative and its

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<sup>13</sup> The dissolving effect is “an optical transition between two shots, in which the second shot is gradually superimposed on the first” (Maltby 582). And the musical films use this effect very often when the main storyline is going to turn into a dance number.

<sup>14</sup> According to David Bordwell and Janet Staiger’s influential research in *The Classical Hollywood*

other spectacles” (Maltby 249). To solve this clash between color usage and Hollywood’s narrative conventions, as Richard Maltby claimed, the solution “to the problem of motivating color was to reserve its use for fantasy movies” (249). The classical fantasy musical, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), stands for the best example of this trend of production.<sup>15</sup> Within the film Technicolor was merely used for the central Oz fantasy while Dorothy’s everyday life in Kansas was in black-and-white. Therefore, in my opinion, the dance number “Miss Turnstiles Ballet” inherits from the early musical films the tradition to connect the use of color with the demonstration of dreamland. But since the movie *On the Town* is already a color film itself, the highly-contrasted color settings creates the same effect of fantasy for a musical sequence.

Quite different from “Miss Turnstiles Ballet,” another female character’s solo dance number, “Prehistoric Man” by Claire (Ann Miller), emphasizes amateur spontaneity, one of the devices for the flowing mise-en-scène. During this sequence, Claire, a scientist working on her research about ancient men, falls in love with Ozzie (Jules Munshin) and starts singing as well as dancing within the Museum of Anthropological History. While Claire is dancing with any exhibits nearby, the other four protagonists (Gabey, Ozzie, Chip and Hildy {Betty Garrett}, the female cab driver) are also busy making a clown of themselves with these exhibits such as drums and full-feathered chief's hats.

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*Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, Technicolor was a monopolistic company for the service of Hollywood color filming until the 1950s. And Technicolor’s first boom came during the years 1929-31, which was identified with the rise of the musical genre.

<sup>15</sup> Again from Bordwell and Staiger’s historical research could we know that there were probably two films of 1939 which played a decisive part in defining color’s generic range; *The Wizard of Oz* was for the musical while *Gone With the Wind* for the historical epic spectacle.

Here the artifice of bricolage is plain to see because the film offers the seemingly natural yet convenient environment (a museum) which contains plenty of props (exhibits) as dance accessories. Moreover, this dance number suddenly changes a museum into a stage for performance. Actually, this kind of “Environment choreography”, as Feuer observed, “abounds in the Kelly-Donen collaborations” (5). In addition to bricolage, there’s a special artifice, “clowning”, invented for the effect of non-choreography due to the frequent casting of non-dancers in Hollywood musical films. According to Feuer, clowning is a type of musical routine “in which a thin line separates normal from choreographed movement” (9) and thus “compensate for the lack of choreography in the usual sense” (9). That is, in order to let a leading actor (actress) who can’t dance participate in a dance sequence and to remain the feeling of non-choreography, the real choreography must be adapted to clowning as a form of dancing. Hence, throughout the dance number “Prehistoric Man,” Jules Munshin, himself a comic actor but not professional dancer at all, has to substitute Ozzie’s clowning behavior for dancing. Meanwhile, teamed with non-dancers like Munshin and Sinatra, even Kelly the Dancing King needs to be a clown, too! Besides, everyone can tell easily that the five protagonists (three sailors, one cab driver and one scientist) are pretending as amateur dancers, be they tap dancing or clowning! After this funny number, Gabey accidentally finds Ivy in the dance studio within Symphonic Hall. Then for the first time in this film, the romantic Kelly -Ellen couple-dancing shows up during the number “Main Street.” This dancing sequence seems to follow musical genre’s early tradition to let the main protagonists dance for courtship in a suitable space like a ballroom or theater stage. However, it makes a twist by transforming the dance studio into the

street of Meadowville just through singing and dancing. In other words, the song lyrics and the continuity between walking and dancing help create the same effect of “film-within-the film” without actually dissolving into another new dance setting. Soon after the short meeting between Gabey and Ivy, the three sailors and their girls gather again on the top of the Empire State Building, happily performing the dance number “On the Town.” It’s fun to discover that within this sequence the usual duo couple-dancing extends to the dancing by three pairs of lovers. More surprisingly, the observatory of the Empire State Building is in fact rebuilt in Culver City<sup>16</sup>, which turns out to be the best demonstration of dislocation for flowing mise-en-scène.

Furthermore, to add more funny points to the story, the movie uses clowning as dancing again during the next sequence “Count On Me.” This time even a clowning version of duo couple-dancing appears when Kelly “reluctantly” dances the tango cheek to cheek with Hildy’s “not-so-pretty” roommate, Lucy. Noticeably, near the end of this number, the other four people start holding Kelly’s limbs and spinning his body around like a wheel on the bar’s table. Here Kelly’s body is automatically used like a prop, which, as another type of bricolage, corresponds to Feuer’s claim that “if no props are at hand, the performer may simulate props using his body as a tool” (4). Moreover, we can’t miss the “participating audience” since the bartender happens to be there witnessing the whole crazy performance! Next, when Gabey stands alone beside a poster which says, “A Day in New York: A Comedy in 3 Acts with Music,” the film finally reaches its choreographic climax. Immediately the dissolving shot takes over and bring in the dance number “A

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<sup>16</sup>This interesting fact is again from Stanley Green’s *Encyclopaedia of the Musical Film*.



Day in New York Ballet.” Like what the poster has suggested, this ballet number does encapsulate the main plot of the film with Kelly and Ellen showing their true professional dance skills.<sup>17</sup>

This number can be considered the demonstration of “film-within-the films” but only with a simple three-layered structure. To put it in another way, the first layer is undoubtedly the main storyline, the second layer three sailors’ courting dance and the last layer (the core part) Kelly and Ellen’s couple - dancing. In regard to the function of multi-layered “film-within-the films,” Feuer once wrote that “in the Hollywood musical, heterogeneous levels are created so that they may be homogenized in the end through the union of the romantic couple” (68). Therefore, at the end of this dance sequence Kelly still loses the girl, but everyone knows he certainly will win her back in the end of this film. Although I quite agree with Feuer’s statement above, I think, to be honest, this final ballet number is partially designed for Kelly the Dancing King to “show off” his talent. During this sequence, Kelly takes the Miss Turnstiles poster stand as the substitute for Ivy and dances with it for a while. Apparently, the poster stand serves as a prop of bricolage as well as Kelly’s dance partner. Feuer used to make interesting comparison of this prop-as-girl dance between Kelly and Astaire: “Astaire appeared to use the prop dance out of a kind of despair – no partner of flesh could match his grace. Kelly made of it a peculiarly American institution, giving *bricolage* the stamp of good old American inventiveness” (6). As for the poster-as-girl dance in this movie, my own

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<sup>17</sup> According to the information at the website *IMDB*, it was for the first time in a musical film that four trained ballet dancers replaced four of the leading stars (except for Kelly himself and Vera-Ellen) in one dance sequence.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041716/trivia>>

interpretation is that Kelly not only presents “good old American inventiveness” but also emphasizes the wonderfulness of coupling for an American citizen. Just see how happy Kelly is when he falls in love and never cares to dance with a poster instead of his real lover!

In addition to all these creative dance numbers, there are still some traces of the genre’s conventions in this film. First, in three short scenes, the chorus girls of different races dance in night clubs, and then near the end of this film, Ivy is seen doing an exotic dance for the sideshow on Coney Island. In my opinion, these references to live performing styles follow the tradition of early musical films to “take their subjects the world of entertainment.”

Nevertheless, this musical grabs the chance to make fun of the live shows by letting the three sailors dress up as Arabian dancing girls, twisting the exotic number into a clowning one. Besides dancing, singing is equally important for a musical film. Thus, Frank Sinatra, a popular singer rather than dancer at that time, surely has his solo singing sequence with his girl, Hildy, such as “Come Up to My Place” and “You’re Awful” in this movie. Last but not least, the film *On the Town* itself soon becomes a material source of nostalgic effect of its somewhat sequel musical *It’s Always Fair Weather* (1955).<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, since the originally cheerful and naïve spirit has no longer existed in this sequel, it doesn’t share the same box-office success as the previous one and foretells the decline of the genre’s Golden Age.

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<sup>18</sup> This film was produced by the same team of *On the Town*. And it was also the last time for Kelly and Donen’s collaboration on directing and choreography. The film tells about three ex-soldiers’ reunion in New York after ten years. However, the original characters (and most of cast as well) were changed into army buddies and both Ozzie and Chip were replaced by two new roles, Dailey (Doug Hallerton) and Kidd (Angie Valentine). The latter two actors are professional dancers in real life.

Now, after I've finished the analysis of genre aesthetics in *On the Town*, I'd like to concentrate on its plot and characters, examining closely their connections with American social and cultural situations at that time. In terms of my observation, there are a lot of contradictions presented within this film, particularly through the three female leading characters. First, let's take a look at the three New York City girls, Claire, Hildy and Ivy. As we all know, Claire is an anthropologist, Hildy is a taxi driver and Ivy is a "Miss Turnstiles" who is taking ballet lessons in order to be a real professional star. Without doubt, the three girls are all independent career women, who know exactly what they want and never give up easily. But occupations implies the clear distinction of a social-economic hierarchy. That is, both Claire and Hildy certainly live in a better economic situation because they have formal and "decent" jobs while Ivy actually works as a cooch dancer for the sideshow. Besides, Claire seems to be the richest among all the characters (including the three sailors!) due to her continuous tipping for the restaurant waiters. And the title of "Anthropologist" must at least render her a higher social status than the other two girls. However, as the story goes on, we come to realize that, regardless of work, money or social hierarchy, the biggest concern of the three girls is to find their own Mr. Rights. Comparing the girls' dilemma with the social conditions during the early post-war years (from mid-40s), I find an interesting fact that the film tries to simplify the various conflicts these career women face in everyday life so as to offer them the specious solution and thus erase the gap between the cruel reality and ideal musical world. Here, according to Alan Brinkley's research in *American History: A Survey*, after the end of World War II, the GI Bill of Rights provided economic and educational assistance to veterans, which helped relieve the pressure of unemployment to certain extent.

On the other hand, women and minority groups who had got job opportunities during war were still affected and most of them were now forced to quit their jobs and go back home again. Therefore, career women in the 50s usually have to struggle between family and work since the ideal female image turns out to be a lovely housewife and full-time mother, which fits perfectly the conservative middle-class values of American society.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the movie *On the Town* indeed depicts this kind of struggle through the three working girls. However, optimistically, it “solves” their common problem by getting all of them the right guys and keeping their jobs as well. Especially to female viewers in the 50s, in my opinion, this musical gives a false promise that they can have a job and find their true love at the same time. Ironically, this illusion is under the umbrella of the social convention of family values (after all, every girl needs to find a man). Yet some other scenes indicate the film’s rather ambiguous attitude toward career women. Like what’s been discussed above, at first glimpse the movie seems to agree that a girl can have her own career, but later in some small parts it starts mocking these career women. For example, earlier in the film when the three sailors get on the subway, they stand beside two working girls and hear one of them complaining about working overtime and sexual harassment from her boss. With this woman’s squeaky voice and repeated speech, the unfair working treatments she’s talking about sound really stupid and need not be taken seriously. Furthermore, even Hildy, one of

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<sup>19</sup> According to Brinkley, after the war was over, American people were worried about the rising unemployment rate due to the cease of arms manufacturing and the return of soldiers seeking jobs. Fortunately, the difficult situation was balanced since people saved considerable money during the wartime and now they were willing to spend it. Hence the consumer demand increased rapidly, accelerating the prevailing middle-class lifestyle. That is, the ideal picture of “a family, a house and a dog” becomes middle-class people’s life goal.

these career women, makes fun of her own job, too. When the police come asking Hildy if she sees any female taxi driver, She quickly replies, "Female cab driver? How revolting!" For me, it's quite sad instead of funny to see a hard-working girl unconsciously speaks out the same prejudice as other conservative people do.

Aside from the issue of career women, there is another contradiction between the spirit of New York City and that of small-town Meadowville. When Gabey and Ivy meet in the ballet studio, they praise the friendly and kind atmosphere in Meadowville by dancing out the number "Main Street." Then near the end of the film, all the leading protagonists are charged with speeding and destruction of the dinosaur exhibit in the museum, but Claire and Hildy successfully persuade the sideshow audience and the police to drop those charges with the rationale that they are distracted by New York's great cultures and beautiful scenery and thus ignore the law. Furthermore, the policemen are so moved that they even raise money for taxi fees to let the girls say goodbye with their lovers at the dock. As Feuer once claimed, this film "seems to expand its entire rhetoric upon transforming New York City into Meadowville, Indiana, a friendly, folksy place" (20). Thus, I think the film intends to simulate New York as Meadowville; to state more clearly, it combines the communal spirit of American mid-western small town that has been elevated as American value and the spectacular landmarks of such a metropolitan city as New York. The third contradiction I'd like to point out is the relation between fake celebrity and the image of movie star. Through the character Ivy, we can see clearly that her celebrity image is constructed not only with the vivid description on "Miss Turnstiles" poster but also with the help of Claire and Hildy (they both bribe the waiter to "make a big fuss over Ivy" in front of Gabey). In fact, Ivy is a fake

celebrity, a nobody from Meadowville who wants to be a real dance star in New York. Here the film seems to imply that the celebrity image is always a big lie and in the number “Prehistoric Man,” Claire even sings aloud that movie stars are not for her. Ironically, all of them are movie stars in real life, whose celebrity images are partly built upon the characters they play, too! And the last contradiction within the film is related to the Cold War between U.S. and the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> According to Brinkley, in September, 1949 the Soviet Union successfully exploded its first atomic bomb, which caused great panic among American people. Coincidentally, the release date of *On the Town* was December 8, 1949<sup>21</sup>, three months after the atomic bomb explosion. But within this movie there’s no trace of fear or tension for the bomb but only happy sailors forgetting about their duties and having a marvelous one-day trip. Except for all the contradictions, there is a long car-chasing sequence<sup>22</sup> in this film, which, to my big surprise, shares the similar feeling of the fast-tempo comedy from silent cinema, such as Chaplin’s films. As far as I’m concerned, despite those great dance numbers, it is rare to see such an interesting chasing sequence put into a musical film. The movie *On the Town* definitely creates another “first-time” for itself again! The last scene of *On the Town* brings us to the early morning of the next day, with the same dock worker singing “I Feel Like I’m Not Out of Bed Yet.” While in the background the three girls are waving goodbye to their one-day lovers, a new batch of sailors are

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<sup>20</sup> Again in terms of Brinkley’s historical research, soon after the end of World War II, the United States began its long-term rivalry (competition) with the Soviet Union, which caused the Cold War. To see more detailed analysis, please check out “Chapter 29: The Cold War” from Brinkley’s work, *American History: A Survey*.

<sup>21</sup> This information is from the section “Release Dates” at the website *The Internet Movie Database* (IMDB): <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041716/releaseinfo>>

getting off the ship and three among them might have the same wonderful experience like Gabey, Ozzie and Chip as long as they keep singing” New York, New York”! With this cheerful song, the film tells us one last time that the beauty of New York City will always welcome people to discover for themselves. More important, everyday life in New York is like a miracle and it is the union of the lovers that really matters!

### **B. *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952)**

*Singin’ in the Rain*, the best-known musical of all times, becomes a legendary classical film by its memorable dance and singing sequences, especially Kelly’s solo performance of the main theme “Singin’ in the Rain.” Of course, this great musical appeals to not only audiences from different generations but also scholars writing numerous articles or books about it. I will not only examine the aesthetic devices of this movie but also focus on star images (especially Kelly’s) and Hollywood industry in the 50s to discuss their relation with and significance for the audience at that time. Generally speaking, the story is a parody and retrospection of Hollywood industry in the late 20s. Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) and Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) are super stars and best on-screen couple of the silent silver screen. But off-screen, Don doesn’t like Lina at all while she always regards herself as Don’s girlfriend. One day Don meets the chorus girl Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) and falls for her. Meanwhile, with the advent of sound in films, Don and Lina's new movie needs turning into a "talkie" and a musical. Because of Lina's hoarse

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<sup>22</sup> This car-chasing sequence starts with all the main protagonists (except Ivy) squeezing into Hildy's cab and speeding up over Brooklyn Bridge to find Ivy. There is one take with the taxi quickly hidden under the shelter of food stand and Kelly rushing to climb up into the cab after the police have passed by.

voice, Kathy is brought on to dub her speaking and singing voice in secret. Then everything becomes a mess after Lina finds out the truth. Fortunately, as everyone can guess, in the end the talkie musical is a big success without Lina, and Don and Kathy get together happily. Besides the movie's background being set inside the 20s' Hollywood industry, most of its songs are directly taken from Arthur Freed's works for the MGM musicals of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>23</sup> What's more is that even many costumes and sets in this film are parodies of former musical movies or stars in the silent film era. In my opinion, the film's basic tone of playful self-reflexive irony can be exactly traced to the opening credits. At the beginning of this movie, the three leading actors, Kelly, Reynolds and Donald O'Connor, whose names are shown on their umbrellas wear bright yellow raincoats and start "singing in the rain." Actually, as the credit says itself, this short singing number is "inspired" by the first filmed performance of the same title song in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (1929).<sup>24</sup> While arousing the nostalgic effect, this obviously imitating sequence seems to suggest that the original version be produced by Hollywood's special technologies. With the monotonous blue-colored background and heavy rain coming from nowhere, it satirizes the mechanical construction of its "predecessor" in 1929. Meanwhile, I think this sequence also functions as a singing number performed by Gene

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<sup>23</sup> According to Feuer and Green, Arthur Freed had been a popular lyricist before becoming a MGM musical producer. He cooperated with the composer Nacio Herb Brown, creating many famous songs for the musical films in the 20s and 30s. In fact, the script of *Singin' in the Rain* was built around Freed's song catalogue, except for two new songs especially written for this film: "Moses Supposes" and "Make 'Em Laugh."

<sup>24</sup> This historical information came from Green's *Encyclopaedia of the Musical Film*. In *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*, the main theme "Singin' in the Rain" appeared for the first time with Cliff Edwards and chorus in slickers singing and dancing during a downpour.



Kelly that exists parallel to the movie *Singin' in the Rain* starring Gene Kelly. Here I have to explain this according to my own analysis on the “film-within-the-films” mentioned above, which refers to various dance numbers within one big musical sequence. This opening number “Singin’ in the Rain,” on the contrary, parallels with the film itself, just like that between the number “New York, New York” and the main storyline in *On the Town*. However, most ironically, while Kelly and the other two stars in the 50s are singing cheerfully and confidently during this number, those silent film stars in the 20s were nervously striving for their first “talkie performance” in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. And this old movie just forecast the collapse of careers for some silent movie stars because their natural voices could not match the images they portrayed on the screen.<sup>25</sup>

Next, I will compare Kelly’s stardom with the leading characters’ star images (eg. Lina Lamont) in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Let’s turn to the year 1927 and take a look at the première of Lockwood and Lamont’s silent film *The Royal Rascal*. While the audience in the theater (here it means the set-up audience within *Singin’ in the Rain*) were amazed by Don’s musketeer fighting scene, it was said that this scene was a direct and funny imitation of Kelly's performance in the non-musical film *The Three Musketeers* (1948).<sup>26</sup> So even the audience of the 50s would feel this silent film interesting since Kelly made fun of his own “modern” work! To involve the 50s’ audience more deeply in *The*

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<sup>25</sup> *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* is the first of the no-plot, all-star movie revue featuring MGM's top actors (actresses) at that time. It intended to show the audience of the 20s that their favorite silent stars could still function in the advent of sound movies. Instead, the cruel fact was revealed that some great stars of the silent cinema just couldn't sing or dance well enough to keep up with the talkie boom. Therefore, many silent film stars didn't survive the sound cinema, such as Buster Keaton. And this historical fact came from the introduction page for *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* at the website *The Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019993/>>

*Royal Rascal*, the artifice of participating audience is necessary. Here we can see clearly that to create this effect, one long shot appears first with the set-up audience seated in front of the big theater screen watching *The Royal Rascal* and, next, the camera shifts to the full shot of the scene in *The Royal Rascal*. Through this kind of shot transition, we audience in the real world are tricked into identifying with the audience within the film *Singin' in the Rain*. Moreover, during the whole première sequence, the shots keep changing back and forth between the theatrical audience within the film and the content of this silent movie. This causes the real audience of the movie to “flow” constantly in and out from the viewpoint of the set-up audience, which allows them to share the set-up audience’s responses to the silent movie as well as to see the performance from their own viewpoints. Then with the story going on, the earliest years of the sound cinema are also portrayed in the film. There is a series of quick flashbacks about certain popular musical numbers from the 20s and 30s’ musical films, such as “Should I?” in *Lord Byron of Broadway* (1929) and “I’ve Got a Feelin’ You’re Foolin’” in *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935).<sup>27</sup> Especially during the number “Beautiful Girl,” the whole performance pays homage to Ziegfeld girls on stage and Busby Berkeley’s filmic choreography, making a pastiche of the live show, early dance style and nostalgic song from *Going Hollywood* (1933). Meanwhile, there are other short numbers which have been especially dedicated to the live performing styles before the talkie pictures. For example, like Ivy as the dance girl on the sideshow stage in *On*

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<sup>26</sup> This information is from the section “Trivia for *Singin' in the Rain*” at the website *The Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045152/trivia>>

<sup>27</sup> The historical fact is from the introduction on the cover of *Singin' in the Rain* DVD.

*the Town*, during the sequence “All I Do Is Dream of You,” Kathy also has to dance in her “Coconut Girl” outfit at the party. What’s more interesting about this number is that actually, “All I Do Is Dream of You” was merely a song used in the non-musical film *Sadie Mckee* (1934).<sup>28</sup> But now it has been transformed into a dance number which tries to re-present the chorus girls’ live performance. For me, it looks like “the dislocation of music instead of settings!”

Later even during the final highlighting dance number “Broadway Melody,” the film still calls up the audience’s memory of the earliest live theatrical shows by a brief demonstration from burlesque, vaudeville to Ziegfeld Follies. In my viewpoint, all the three scenes are similar to one another when Kelly continues singing and dancing the same song together with the same chorus girls around him; the only biggest change is their costumes. I remember in the film, Cosmo (Donald O’Connor), Don’s best friend, used to describe silent movies as things that “if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.” I think this line is definitely suitable as well to describe the three short scenes. In my interpretation, the most serious mockery behind them lies in the film’s secret implication that the old live performing styles are clichés without new ideas, while the 50s’ musical films are the most creative! Furthermore, unlike *On the Town*, the duo dance sequence appears twice here with the leading male characters’ co-performing instead of the couple-dancing. And since Kelly and O’Connor are both professional dancers, their two duo performances are designed as the combination of delicate dance skills and clowning, too. For instance, during the number “Fit as a Fiddle” in the early part

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<sup>28</sup> *Sadie Mckee*, a 1934 sound film starring the famous actress Joan Crawford. And the song “All I Do Is Dream of You” was originally sung by Gene Raymond, one of the leading actors in this film.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025740/soundtrack>>

of the film, Kelly and O'Connor have to tap-dance on the theater stage and do funny magic tricks, growing flowers out of their violins at the same time. More surprisingly, the curtain set behind them is exactly the same one used in the sequence "The Gay Nineties" in the musical *Strike Up the Band* (1940).<sup>29</sup> This time it's neither "the dislocation of music" nor "the mixture of real and fake settings" but "the reflexive settings" that I'd like to call it! Then during the second duo number "Moses Supposes," the artifice of bricolage is plain to see when Kelly and O'Connor take the diction coach as a prop and move him around like furniture. Sometimes during this number the diction coach also serves as the set-up audience watching the two male leads dancing. Besides, they two use the window curtains to make a clown of themselves by Kelly "dressed" like Moses and O'Connor as his follower. Aside from the duo dances, a great trio dance sequence "Good Morning"<sup>30</sup> shows up later in this film. However, again unlike the trio male leads' number "New York, New York" in *On the Town*, Kelly's choreography needs not to be adapted to the non-dancer partners any more because now the other two are professionals and one of them is the female lead, Kathy. For the clowning part of this sequence, Don, Cosmo and Kathy demonstrate several kinds of dance styles in an ironic way, such as practicing basic ballet postures at a bar or doing a funny version of bullfight dance. Moreover, "the reflexive setting" appearing here again for the furniture in Don's mansion in fact came from the set of the silent film *Flesh and*

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<sup>29</sup> This film is one of the popular musicals starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland as the on-screen lovely pair. And the information mentioned in my discussion is again from the section "Trivia for *Singin' in the Rain*" at the website *The Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*:

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045152/trivia>>

<sup>30</sup> "Good Morning" is originally a number used in the first Rooney-Garland musical *Babes in Arms* (1939). This fact is again from the introduction on the cover of *Singin' in the Rain* DVD.

*the Devil* (1926).<sup>31</sup> In the eyes of the film's production team, these reflexive settings seem not evident enough for their intention in deconstructing the 20s' Hollywood behind the scene. Thus, they make an exposé of engineering in the Hollywood silent cinema by two dance and singing numbers, "Make 'Em Laugh" and "You Were Meant for Me." Apart from the tradition of Kelly's personal solo dance number, here Cosmo gets his own solo sequence "Make 'Em Laugh" as well. Compared with Ivy's (Vera-Ellen) solo performance in *On the Town*, this time there is no female lead solo to dance out the main protagonist's fantasy but one-man show to please the leading male star. Before this sequence, Don and Cosmo wander around at the studio with the pan shot following them from right to left to demonstrate the filming processes and those fake studio-built settings used for different silent movies. When Don and Cosmo stop at the left side of the studio, I discover that the background happens to be the settings of *The Dueling Cavalier*, which would show up later in this film as Lockwood and Lamont's "talkie disaster." After we audience are shocked to see the secrets behind the camera, Cosmo begins his solo dance that reassures the "re-mystification" of Hollywood industry in the 50s. In other words, as Cosmo's performance draws our attention to the untruth about the 20s' cinema, his dance is similarly revealed as an illusion created by the use of musical genre's special artifices, bricolage and environment choreography. As Fueur once put it, "Engineering as the mode of production of the Hollywood musical is cancelled by a content relying heavily upon *bricolage*. We lose all sense of the calculation lying behind the numbers and we gain, as a bonus, the

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<sup>31</sup> This interesting fact is from Maltby's *Hollywood Cinema*, p.72. And this movie *Flesh and the Devil* featured two great silent film stars, Greta Garbo and John Gilbert.

aura of absolute spontaneity” (7). During this number, I also find it interesting that Cosmo dances with the camera following his movement from left to right (pan shot) to show all over again the fake studio settings. Nevertheless, they function now as the props for Cosmo and so do his own facial features. At certain moments Cosmo would sing and simultaneously match the song with his nose or mouth twisted in a ridiculous way. What’s funny for me is that his act of twisting facial features is even synchronized by the cracking sounds of machines. It reveals a crucial fact that the 50s’ Hollywood musicals are so confident in their “invisible” engineering because they know the audiences have been “trained” to absorb themselves in the dancing number and ignore right away the real aesthetic mechanism of this musical performance.

Next, I’d like to focus on the second exposé number” You Were Meant for me.<sup>32</sup>” It is also the first and only couple-dancing sequence by Kelly and Reynolds. Before they start dancing in the seemingly empty studio, Don tells Kathy shyly that he can’t say what’s on his mind now without a proper setting. Then the two step into the studio and Don makes use of every filming equipment near at hand to invent a stage declaring his love for Kathy. Instead of “saying,” Don actually sings and dances out his “words.” Like what’s been discussed in *On the Town*, musical films prefer singing words rather than spoken ones. Especially when it comes to courtship, singing and dancing always speak louder than plain words. No wonder in the musical *Summer Stock* (1950), Kelly used to say, “If the boy tells a girl that he loves her, he

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<sup>32</sup> This song is taken from one of the very first Hollywood musicals, *The Broadway Melody* (1929). There are two other songs from the same film, “The Broadway Melody” and “The Wedding of the Painted Doll,” which are both adapted as well in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Please go to the introduction on the cover of *Singin’ in the Rain* DVD.

doesn't just say it, he sings it" (Feuer 49). More importantly, as many critics have pointed out, during this number the film uses Don to reveal deliberately the hardware of the sound stage, such as the wind machine and the soft lighting. Meanwhile, in the middle part of this sequence the camera zooms in to a middle shot of the dancing couple, which excludes the already exposed machines. According to Feuer, at this moment the audience "regress from an exposé of romantic duets to an example of a romantic duet, which, along with all the others, lies about its past" (46).

Therefore, to sum up, I think the film runs a "triple-cheat" within this number: one is singing and dancing replacing saying, another is the fake studio setting taking place of the real proper location, and the final is the exposure of technologies applied in the early sound cinema "covering up" the same production method for the contemporary 50s' Hollywood musicals. Besides the exposé numbers above, a musical film in the 50s surely can't live without the solo performance by Kelly the Dancing King. The number "Singin' in the Rain," here danced and sung by Kelly all alone, has become the most "quoted" musical sequence until today either with its song or with dance.<sup>33</sup> Kelly himself once commented in an interview that "'Singin' in the Rain', you say, ' [ ... ] What a marvelous feeling. I'm happy again.' You state it; now you prove it. You further your thesis by dancing it" (Feuer 49). Hence, from the beginning of this sequence, Kelly sings and dances out his "happy and

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<sup>33</sup> The scholar Stanley Green once commented on Kelly's solo number "Singin' in the Rain" and wrote, "this is a rare case in which a subsequent rendition of a song – Kelly's street-splashing, lamppost-climbing, umbrella-waving solo – has become more famous than the original" (261). Here "the original" indicates the first appearance of this number in the 20s' musical *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. Please go to my footnote 24.

glorious feeling,” bringing back the same kind of carefree, joyful atmosphere we have sensed in *On the Town*. With the playful use of props at hand (e.g. dancing with his umbrella or stamping on the waterholes), Kelly transforms the empty street, originally a public space, into his own private dance stage. And near the end of this number, there is one scene worth noticing: when Kelly dances in front of the “Mount Hollywood Art School,” a police officer comes over, taking a severe look at his strange behavior of singing and dancing in the middle of the street. In my own interpretation, the Hollywood Art School serves as the contrast to the character Don’s “amateur identity,” reinforcing the impression that Don is a Hollywood movie star but by no means a trained dancer in the Art School. In Correspondence to the flashbacks of Don’s childhood memory, this movie convinces the audience to ignore the truth that Don, as the Hollywood star but merely an amateur dancer, is in fact played by Kelly, both the Hollywood star and professional dancer as well. In other words, the artifice of “amateur spontaneity” brings Don’s star image closer to ordinary people. Ironically, Don isn’t any ordinary person but a talented one since he can sing, dance (though amateurishly), act or even be a stuntman, not to mention Kelly,” the real star behind Don.” Moreover, the sudden appearance of the police officer stops Kelly’s dance, making him sing out his last line, “*I’m just singing and dancing in the rain...*” and start walking like a passenger on the street. As Chiao Hsiung-Ping wrote in her book *A Thorough Study on the Musical Films*:

The image of the police is the protector of law and order as well as the representative of rationality. Certainly, this kind of image is capable of threatening Kelly. With the police officer’s blaming eyes, Kelly can’t but turn around and leave. [ ... ] During this number, what Kelly just faces is



no doubt the conflict between rationality (the police) which takes control of the “main plot” and singing/dancing which stands for personal freedom.<sup>34</sup> (57)

Here I quite agree with her viewpoint. Yet I’d like to add that although the police officer shows up to “take back” the public space (the street) and thus breaks down the dreamland Kelly has invented, even “the street” is just one of MGM’s fake studio settings and the whole sequence is only another “dream” visualized within this musical film.

Next, I’d like to move to the final aesthetic climax of this movie – the musical number “Broadway Melody.” As far as I am concerned, it can be considered the most fascinating demonstration of the genre’s aesthetic device, “the film-within-the films.” Besides, like what I’ve been explained in the discussion of the opening credits, here the “film-within-the films” indicates the vertical relations among various dance numbers within one big musical sequence. Therefore, in my observation, this “chain of dance/singing sequences” works from outside to inside: The first layer (the outer frame) is the 50s’ musical film itself, starring Kelly and Reynolds (for us audience in the real world). Then near the end of the movie, we see the Hollywood star Don Lockwood and Kathy Selden embracing in front of the poster stand on which “Singin’ in the Rain” is legible; thus, the second layer is *the musical film* “Singin’ in the Rain” (starring Lockwood and Selden) which tells the story of a love triangle among Don, Kathy and Lina. Going further inside *the film, the film -within-the film* “the Dancing Cavalier” (Don and Lina’s first talkie musical) can

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<sup>34</sup> Since Chiao Hsiung-Ping’s work is in Chinese, I try my best to translate this paragraph I quoted into English. However, if there is any misinterpretation of the authors’ meaning, I apologize and welcome all of you to give me corrections and advices.

be regarded as the third layer. Next, *the film-within-the two films* "Broadway Melody" is the fourth layer with a successful Broadway dancer (starring Don) wearing a black suit singing the song "The Broadway Melody." Surprisingly, there comes the fifth layer, *the film-within-the three films* "Broadway Rhythm."<sup>35</sup> This sequence contains short numbers (e.g. representation of the early live shows, Kelly's solo dance at the bar, and he and Cyd Charisse's couple-dancing) as the flashbacks of this dancer's memory. Finally, the last layer (the core part, *the film-within-the four films*) is the visualization of the dancer's fantasy. That is, through the dissolving shot, the dreamy couple-dancing number is brought in as Kelly and Charisse are tied together by a long white silk scarf. Needless to say, the sequence "Broadway Melody" as a whole, is the most important and complicated choreography within this film. I think it is also the most "extravagant" collage of every best and memorable from Hollywood movies; that is, this number represents an abundant combination among live theatrical flashbacks, reflexive settings, nostalgic songs/dance sequences and 50s' Hollywood musical creativity.<sup>36</sup> Despite all these recycled materials, the most crucial function of this multi-layered number, as I've elaborated above, is to "be homogenized in the end through the union of the romantic couple." Thus, although we are disappointed to see this Broadway dancer lose his girl, the movie itself surely wouldn't let us down and presents the reunion kiss of Don

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<sup>35</sup> The same title song "Broadway Rhythm" (Gotta Dance) used in this number is actually from *Broadway Melody of 1936*. Please see the introduction on the cover of *Singin' in the Rain* DVD.

<sup>36</sup> This "extravagant" collage is rather interesting. For example, according to Maltby, the gangster at the bar is modeled on George Raft in *Scarface* (1932). Furthermore, it is said at the website IMDB that Cyd Charisse's brief number with Kelly at the bar is similar to the one Vera-Ellen did with Kelly, too, in *Words and Music* (1948). Aside from those reused materials, the white-scarf couple-dancing is the original invention of Kelly-Donen choreography.

and Kathy in the very end. However, there is one tricky part I'd like to point out that a gap does exist in "the film-within-the films" because in the second layer, Hollywood stars Don and Kathy's "off-screen" romance is actually unexposed while the audience only see "a film version" of their love story. No wonder the critic Richard Maltby commented, "their story presents a true version of the false love story the fan magazines have told about Don and Lina" (70).<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, I would like to discuss how Hollywood manipulates the star images and how this kind of manipulation is revealed through the relations between the real movie stars and the characters they portray in *Singin' in the Rain*. To support my analysis of genre aesthetics in this film, I'd like to quote Feuer's words, "The early talkie musical may be a product of a show of technology but **Singin' in the Rain** remains, rhetorically at least, the product of magic" (47).

In the famous article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin once claimed that unlike a stage actor, a movie actor

has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. [ ... ] The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity. (228-31)

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<sup>37</sup> Here I'd like to state clearly that about the gap in the second layer, Maltby thinks of the couple embracing in front of the hoarding as two unknown contemporary movie stars whose love story is presented in the *film* "Singin' in the Rain." Contrarily, I consider the embracing couple Don and Kathy

I do agree with Benjamin's thought that a movie star somehow loses his aura since he makes no direct contact with the audience while performing; and a movie star's public image is just an invention by Hollywood industry to help promote and sell the movies. During Hollywood's Classical Studio Era (from the early 1910s to the mid-50s)<sup>38</sup>, the movie industry operates the star system with the aid of the press and other media (e.g. fan magazines), manufacturing the movie star who "provides the studio with a tangible attraction, with an image that could be advertised and marketed" (John Belton 85). However, I think for Hollywood musical films, because of the genre's "self-reflexive" style, the "aura" of a musical film star can be made up, recycled and even rebuilt. That is, I observe that besides "the build-up personality outside the studio," within a musical film the character's persona interacts quite a lot with the star's public image and thus contributes to the establishment, reassurance or re-construction of the musical star's "authenticity." The musical film *Singin' in the Rain*, as we all know, happens to base its whole story upon the satiric depiction of the star system during the early years of the sound cinema. Different from the slight mockery of Ivy's fake celebrity image in *On the Town*, *Singin' in the Rain* plays on this "fake star vs. true star" theme by means of

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since they are wearing the same clothes as the characters they portrayed in "Singin' in the Rain."

<sup>38</sup> According to the scholar Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's research, the coming of sound consolidated the studio system of Hollywood industry. Therefore, five major studios (Paramount, MGM, 20th Century-Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO) came to dominate the industry's filmmaking, distribution and exhibition. Then after World War II, the studio system gradually began to collapse. With the popularity of TV and other social or political changes, the studio system finally ended in the 60s and Hollywood would go through another transition. To know more detail about Hollywood's Classical Studio era, please see the article "The Rise of Hollywood" in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, p.43 – 451. Moreover, for more information about the star system during the studio era, please go to "Chapter 6: Selling Stars" in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, p.143-77.

deconstructing the 20s' Hollywood star images so as to "mystify" the contemporary stars performing in this 50s' musical. In my viewpoint, the deconstruction inside the film functions in two ways: first, parodies of the real Hollywood silent film stars in the 20s; second, exposure of the fake Hollywood stars (characters) of the film. At the early part of the movie, Kathy used to tell Don, "The personalities on the screen just don't impress me. Because they don't act. They don't talk .They just make a lot of dumb shows". This line clearly points out certain weakness of the silent movie stars, foretelling this film's attempt to make fun of it later. Then during the première of *The Dueling Cavalier*, Don and Lina both present the laughable talkie performances, which intend to parody the real events happening to some silent film stars whose acts in sound become disasters.<sup>39</sup> To take it further, these Hollywood star protagonists have to be self-deconstructed by the film as well. For instance, from the opening sequence of the première for *The Royal Rascal*, we can see how the film tries to reveal the phony stardom of Don and Lina. While this on-screen couple walk down the red carpet, Don is asked by a radio columnist to tell the public his personal history. Simultaneously, here appears the juxtaposition between his speech from the studio-made version and the flashbacks of his real less-glamorous past. As for Lina, she is so beautiful and elegant on the screen (a girl even claims during the preview that she'd rather kill herself because Lina looks so refined!) until we are shocked to hear her high-pitching voice which totally doesn't fit the French lady she portrays. At first

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<sup>39</sup> According to the information at *IMDB*, the scene with Lina loudly "tapping" Don with her fan is based on a similar incident with Bebe Daniels and John Boles in *Rio Rita* (1929). Furthermore, part of Don's performance refers to John Gilbert, whose star career soon collapsed after the audiences heard his high-pitching speaking voice. And Gilbert's first sound performance (Romeo & Juliet sequence) in *The*

glance, both Don and Lina seem to be fake stars for sure, but actually that's not the case. As the critic John Belton observed,

Normally, the juxtaposition of real and false images would tend to tear down the latter, yet Lockwood's collusion with the film's audience in the subversion of his own screen image effectively reassembles that image on a more ironic plane. Unlike Lina, he knows how to distinguish the real from the phony, and this is what guarantees the authenticity of his stardom. (86)

In other words, because the film creates the illusion for us audience that Don faces his phony star image honestly and shares his "little secret" with us, he still wins back our trust to regard him as a "not-that-perfect" star. Most important of all, since either *The Dancing Cavalier* or *Singin' in the Rain* itself is a musical film, no doubt the movie stars who take part in them must know how to sing and dance. Therefore, although Don doesn't have that noble breeding like the cavalier he plays, he is a real Hollywood musical star with the talent for singing and dancing, and so do Kathy and Cosmo. On the contrary, Lina is a 100% phony star because she can't act, sing or even dance. Furthermore, Feuer once asserted, "Musicals about Hollywood almost always become musicals about making musicals" (45). In my opinion, the film also unconsciously reinforces the idea that a real Hollywood star must have the talent for singing and dancing, which lifts musical film stars up to the highest position among all the other stars from different genres. Aside from what's just discussed above, I've already mentioned that sometimes the character's persona would interact with the star's public image and thus reassure the musical star's "aura." Thus, like what the film shows us clearly, the character Lina plays just can't in any way be connected with her own public or private

image.

Nevertheless, to my surprise, the biggest irony here is the truth that Jean Hagen, the actress who plays Lina, in fact dubbed the lines which Debbie Reynolds, as Kathy, was supposed to be dubbing for Lina in the film.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the film seems to deny the chance of Miss Hagen to expose the somehow fake star image of Reynolds. As a true 50s' Hollywood star but not a dancer at all, Jean Hagen is definitely not as lucky as Kathy and Reynolds! On the other hand, the character's persona and Kelly's own star image always keep rather correspondent relations. Maltby used to explain this normal situation in the star system and he wrote,

In the production of a star vehicle, the character is adapted to fit the star. A frequently used mechanism centers the plot on a character who eventually displays the skills that the audience already knows the performer possesses. A convincing performance is thus one in which the character becomes the star persona as the movie progresses. (386)

For me, Maltby's words are the most suitable description of the relationship between Kelly and the protagonist he portrays in a musical film. Here I think two layers of "Kelly-character" interaction exist inside and outside the musical *Singin' in the Rain*. The first is the protagonist Don and the hooper in the dance number "Broadway Melody." Through the hooper's professional dancing sequence, the silent film actor Don Lockwood's "star aura" is successfully reconstructed as a real musical star (that is, from an amateur dancer to an

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*Hollywood Revue of 1929* inspired the "talkie disaster" scenes in *The Dueling Cavalier*.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019993/trivia>>

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even Debbie Reynolds' singing voice in certain songs, such as "Would you?," is dubbed instead by the uncredited singer Betty Noyes.

official dancing star) in the early sound cinema. Not only is Don's star aura remade within the film, but also the "image" of the Hollywood actor, Gene Kelly, is reassured owing to the film. That is, through the second layer of interaction between Kelly and the star Don Lockwood, Kelly's own star image - the 50s' Dancing King as well as a "Joe Average-like" star- is reinforced by Don, the 20s' musical movie star. To examine closely, Kelly's public image does resemble the character Lockwood a lot. For example, they "both are fun-loving song and dance men; both possess a boyish charm and a winning smile; and both are ordinary, unassuming, essentially nice guys" (Belton 87). Ironically, it is said that in real life Kelly is a perfectionist and "notorious" for pushing everybody to the exceptional lengths in the rehearsal of dance sequences.<sup>41</sup> To be frank, what we audience see or hear about Kelly, the star, is always the production of Hollywood star publicity. What really matters for this movie enterprise is that the certainty of Kelly's star aura would make stable the popularity of his musical films and the benefits for MGM as well. In addition to reassurance of stardom, I find it interesting that *Singin' in the Rain* also intends to reassure the peaceful and promising present of American society for both the ordinary people and the Hollywood employees.

In addition, there is a carefully-constructed naïve attitude within this musical, which is false enough if compared with the contemporary harsh social situations. As mentioned above, in America during the late-40s to early 50s, the start of Cold War and the Korean War led to a full-scale tension in every corner of the society. From 1947 to the mid-50s, the anti-communist senator

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<sup>41</sup> This "gossip" about Kelly's real off-screen personality is both mentioned in Belton's article "The Star System" in *American Cinema / American Culture* and at the website *IMDB*.



Joseph McCarthy and the HUAC (The House Un-American Activities Committee) continuously investigated the underground communist activities inside the Hollywood industry as well as the government.<sup>42</sup> Under this suppressive atmosphere, many American people including those who worked in Hollywood were actually faced with the terror of being identified as communists and then being put into jail. However, even during this hard time, by returning to the “innocence” of the early stage of Hollywood, this movie “covers up” the crucial fact that people who worked in the 50s’ Hollywood were suffering from the HUAC investigations, not to mention common citizens. For example, Betty Garrett, the actress who played the cab driver Hildy in *On the Town*, was one victim of the communist blacklisting in Hollywood.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Kelly, who usually appears in the musical as a common person just like you and me, helps convince that everyone could certainly solve all the problems in his life through singing and dancing. In fact, according to Jack C. Ellis’ research in his work *A History of Film*, during the first HUAC investigation toward Hollywood in 1947, Kelly and other celebrities, led by the president of the MPAA (The Motion Picture Association of America), went to Washington to protest against the HUAC’s activity. Of course, we will never see this “aggressive” side of Kelly in a musical because his star image should always stay as a happy middle-class white male who never worries too much and

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<sup>42</sup> According to Brinkley’s research, the HUAC (led by McCarthy) started investigating communist activities in entertainment business, the government and private life since 1947. During the early 50s, the HUAC especially aimed at Hollywood and held lots of mass hearings from 1951 until the last time in 1954). Therefore, the “return” of HUAC caused more serious blacklisting inside the Hollywood industry than in the late-40s. For more detail about the HUAC investigations, please see the book *Movie Censorship and American Culture* edited by Francis G. Couvares or Jack.C. Ellis’ work, *A History of Film*.

solves his everyday problems with singing and dancing! After all, the musical films, with the mixture of cheerful courtship and great visual feast produced by Hollywood, can only offer themselves as pure entertainment. Especially for the musical *Singin' in the Rain*, which is all about Hollywood's past, it is more than willing to turn this history of Hollywood into another entertaining material. Finally, as Feuer put it, "The materials with which musical entertainment builds change across time, but the process of nostalgia for the old and mystification of the new never changes. Musicals are rerun, reissued, remade and revived" (92).



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<sup>43</sup> In terms of the information at *IMDB*, Betty Garrett's husband, Larry Parks, was the first actor to admit that he used to be communist from 1941-1951 during the 1951 Hollywood hearing. And he was subsequently blacklisted and his career in Hollywood was apparently destroyed as well. As the wife of a "communist actor," Garrett was undoubtedly suspected as the complicit of communist activities. Thus, she never regained her popularity as a Hollywood musical star that she once had in the late 1940s.

<<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0662972/bio>>

## Chapter Two

### Viva Revival: Encountering Teenage Pop / Minority Cultures and Transforming the 70s' Musical Movies

Up to this chapter, I guess the reader would ask why the great 60s is totally skipped in my thesis? Please allow me to give the explanation as well as retrospection of the developments of Hollywood industry, the musical film genre, and American social and political context during the 60s. Generally speaking, the 60s is often regarded as the Age of Liberty, but it is also the most turbulent era in the American history. Throughout this period, all kinds of social conflicts were finally brought into light and many activists were eager to break down the unfair treatments or social conventions. According to Brinkley's study on the American history, the seemingly liberal atmosphere probably begun during the presidency of young John F. Kennedy (from 1960 to his death in 1963) in the early 60s.<sup>1</sup> From then on, many influential social or political movements took place one by one. For example, the civil rights movements of African-Americans continued and started to expand all over the country.<sup>2</sup> And anti-Vietnam War movements were organized, mostly by university students, to call for the public attention to the issue of warfare.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-60s, although It seemed that people who originally had high expectations of the upcoming

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<sup>1</sup> In *American History: A Survey*, Brinkley wrote that starting from the late 50s to early 60s, American public came to realize that actually the economic growth of the nation were dropping fast with the increase of unemployment every day. After Kennedy "stepped into" the White House, he initiated a lot of policies to stimulate the economy (though having achieved little success). Also, he tried hard to improve the general social welfare system. Due to this young president's personal charm and positive actions, many people in the early 60s tended to believe that Kennedy would lead them to prosperity again. Unfortunately, Kennedy was assassinated and died on November 22, 1963. (p. 819-24)

social-political changes became gradually disappointed, that wasn't the case with the young people. The restlessness and turmoil within and outside the nation actually caused the rapid growth of youth sub-culture. The liberal spirit in the early 60s had been rooted in the young people's minds and they considered themselves the new savors of the society. The hippy lifestyle and big rock concerts were symbols of rebellion against the traditional middle-class values.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the changing society of the 60s, the Hollywood industry itself also started to go through a long-term transition. Most important of all, the gradual collapse of the big studio system marked the end of Hollywood's Classical period. As many scholars pointed out, "the decline of the studio era was the result of three main factors: the Paramount antitrust decrees<sup>5</sup>, the social transformation of the United States with suburbanization and the baby boom, and the emergence of a moving - image rival, television" (John Hill 247). In fact, beginning from the mid-50s, people in America formally entered the Age of TV and by the 60s, the main movie-goers had shifted from the middle-aged, modestly educated adults to the young generation of post-war baby boomers (usually better-educated, more affluent middle-class group).

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Black Americans' civil rights movements could be traced back to the mid-50s. From 1954, both black people and some white "sympathizers" cooperated to protest against the racial segregation and discrimination, especially in the southern states. Martin Luther King, Jr., the famous leader during this period, claimed to make peaceful demonstrations without hatred and violence. But in the early 60s, more and more black people no longer believed the "peaceful" changes would come one day. Then under the leadership of radical Malcolm X, the Black Power movement became prevailing, accompanied with large race riots in urban cities. In 1964, the U.S. Senate passed the most comprehensive civil rights bill for racial equality. However, later the assassinations of Malcolm X (1965) and Martin Luthur King Jr. (1968) represented the setback of the civil rights campaigns. (Brinkley: p.826-31)

While the elder generation preferred staying home and watching TV, these young audiences had no interest in the family - entertainment films which were still produced by Hollywood according to the conventions of the Classical period.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, in the early 60s the musical films proved their continuous popularity with both the young and elder audiences. Especially after the great box-office success of the big-budget supermusical *The Sound of Music* (1965)<sup>7</sup>, many descendant supermusicals were produced and their stunning failures, as David A. Cook put it, “nearly destroyed the fortunes of their respective studios, glutted the public on musicals, and virtually killed the form of the genre” (487). However, it’s worth noticing that during this period some changes also occurred in the production formulas of musical genre. Again, according to Cook’s research, in the 60s’ musicals the stars didn’t have to be professional dancers or singers; that is, many of the main actors (actresses) in the musical films could neither sing nor dance. Their voices were usually dubbed by professional singers. And the professional dancers stood in for the dance numbers instead of these stars. Even the directors were often those who never had experience in filming a musical. Furthermore, the naïve optimism in the 50s soon disappeared and the 60s’ musical films didn’t necessarily have the typical happy-coupling ending. Nevertheless, most of the 60s’ musical films

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<sup>3</sup> In 1965, President Johnson officially announced the full-scale military involvement in Vietnam and thus started the Vietnam War. Then because its apparent brutality and futility, many American people, including university students, journalists and even officers within the government began to turn against the war. Anti-war protests and congressional hearings in public became popular at that time. (Brinkley: p.834-42)

<sup>4</sup> Brinkley: p.849-54.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of Douglas Gomery’s research about the Hollywood studio system, in 1948, the American Supreme Court “ruled for the divorce of production and exhibition, and the elimination of unfair booking practices” (445). Therefore, the five major movie studios that had full controls of the most profitable

were Broadway adaptations and the box-office failures of the big-budget musicals gradually led the genre to its “temporary” death until the mid-70s. Due to all those facts mentioned above, I decide to bypass the “less innovative” musical films in the 60s and instead were adaptations from Broadway musicals, which usually stuck to the conventional genre formulas. So throughout the 60s, the general frame work of the musical genre indeed didn’t alter a lot. Besides, in the late 60s, several focus on the newly reviving ones in the late 70s.

Turning to the early 70s, the expectation of an” Age of Total Revolution” failed and there came the long-term seesaw battle between the restoration of conservative middle-class values and the intensified demands of various minority groups. Under such uneasy social-political circumstances, the Hollywood industry at that time still reached the final stage of transition by creating another new era for itself. The so-called “New Hollywood,” according to Gomery, “dates from the 1975 release of Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*” (479). That is, from the mid-70s on, the “New Hollywood” only showed interest in producing the blockbuster hits<sup>8</sup>, which would guarantee their success in box office and high profits. Meanwhile, for the musical genre, as mentioned above, the audience had become tired of the big-budget supermusicals as well as

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movie palaces during the Classical period were forced to sell their theaters off. This so-called “Paramount decision” served as a starting point for Hollywood to adjust to the new social and economic conditions, such as the great drop of movie theater attendance.

<sup>6</sup> To see more detailed historical analysis about Hollywood during the 60s, please go to the chapter “Hollywood, 1965-Present” in David A. Cook’s book, *A History of Narrative Film*.

<sup>7</sup> According to David A. Cook, beginning from the mid-50s, the musical films were in favor of stage play adaptations instead of original scripts. During the early 60s, many successful musical films, such as *West Side Story* (1962), *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), were actually Broadway adaptations. Particularly the film *The Sound of Music* grossed more money than any American film produced before the 1970s. (p.487)

Broadway adaptations, which caused the retreat of musical film productions. Thus, to try to recapture the lost audience, some great masters of musical films, like Bob Fosse<sup>9</sup>, started to combine contemporary social issues with part of the traditional genre formulas (e.g. the professional singer or dancer as the leading actor). Unfortunately, this kind of highly -critical and self-reflexive musical achieved less success than expected.<sup>10</sup> Not until the appearance of two teenage-oriented blockbuster musical films, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978) in the late 70s did this genre get its chance for resurrection. Seeing that up to the late 70s the main audience of the musical films had become teenagers, Hollywood produced more and more teenage-targeted musicals. This production trend even resulted in the teen-pix phenomenon throughout the 80s.<sup>11</sup> In addition, as Rick Altman pointed out, the musical genre in the 70s were also appropriated for cult and gay uses. The midnight movie, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), served as the best example.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I'd like to take three interesting '70s musical films as my analytical subjects: one is the midnight movie, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), another is teen-targeted disco-film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the other is pre-teenpix musical *Fame* (1980).<sup>13</sup> Apart from discussing their genre aesthetics respectively, I'll also try to illustrate the ways they reflect the confusing social, political, and cultural situations during the entire 1970s.

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<sup>8</sup> The "craze" for blockbuster films in Hollywood started with Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* in 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Fosse is one of the masters for musical genre in the 70s. His famous works include *Cabaret* (1972), *Lenny* (1974) and *All That Jazz* (1979).

<sup>10</sup> The historical overview of musical genre's development in the 70s was again from Cook's *A history of Narrative Film*.

<sup>11</sup> According to Cook, from the early 80s, Hollywood finally took seriously the fact that teenagers had turned out to be the major consumers of movies at this time. To exploit the young audiences, over the

## Genre in transition: Case Studies of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Fame* (1980)

### A. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

“Give yourself over to absolute pleasure,” this line was like a bomb, drawing attention from the stunned audience and seducing them into the world of the movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). First, as a successful theater play in London, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (RHPS) became a popular mid-night movie<sup>14</sup> in America (and later other countries, too!) since its screening. What’s the charm of this film? The story starts with an engaged young couple, Brad (Barry Bostwick) and Janet (Susan Sarandon), on their way to visit their matchmaker, Dr. Scott. Unfortunately, they get a flat tire. Soon they discover a castle and meet its owner, Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry) and his servants, Riff Raff (Richard O’Brien), Magenta (Riff Raff’s sister) and Columbia. More surprisingly, these people are all aliens from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania. Dr. Frank-N-Furter is not only a transvestite but also a mad scientist. He “invites” the couple to join the celebration of his new creation (and his lover), Rocky. From then on, Brad and Janet both experience a night full of extreme horror and sexual orgy. Although

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next several years Hollywood produced numerous teen and preteen comedies with sexual or social themes. The master of great teen-pix in the 80s was the producer-director John Hughes. For more detail of the teen-pix phenomenon, see Cook’s “Hollywood, 1965-Present” in *A History of Narrative Film*.

<sup>12</sup> Here I call the musical film *Fame* as “pre teenpix” movie because it happens to appear few years earlier before the teen-pix phenomenon.

<sup>13</sup> Please see Altman’s article “The Musical” in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*.

<sup>14</sup> The mid-night movie refers to a low-budget film which usually shows on the late Saturday night in some suburban small theaters.



the plot sounds like a cliché, this seemingly ridiculous movie, however, is definitely one of the most satiric musical films which not only makes fun of the genre itself<sup>15</sup> but also parodies contemporary social issues, especially about gender “problems”. Besides, RHPS relates some of its characters to the ‘70s pop culture (rock music) and even Fine Art can’t escape from its mockery. More importantly, as a mid-night movie and a typical B-film<sup>16</sup>, this double-minor film position of RHPS assures that its director and scriptwriter can “experiment” with anything they want regardless of the traditional film narrative. Thus, the “sub-culture” gets its chance for self-expression though the power of “subversion” within RHPS, the “sub-production film.” Moreover, this movie appeals to numerous devoted fans who are more than willing to become the “sub-audience.” Now let me begin my discussion about the film’s ironic twist of the aesthetics of musical genre. During the opening sequences, the duo-singing number “Damnit, Janet,” at first glance, seems like a standard musical courting scene for the couple, Brad and Janet. Nevertheless, I notice that while the two are holding their hands together in front of the altar, Riff Raff and Magenta, who pretend to be the church-attendants, put a black coffin

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<sup>15</sup> Actually, this film is a pastiche of film genres such as horror, sci-fi, and musical. It parodies the formulas of these genres and creates a subversive version for the audience. It’s a pity that since my research only focuses on the musical genre, the film’s funny appropriations of the other two genres are excluded from my discussion. For more complete analysis of genre appropriations in RHPS, please see my article, “Alien, Transvestite, and Free Sex: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Its Subversions,” which was presented on “Psychoanalysis, Gender, Visual Culture: The Second Annual Graduate Conference of Taiwan” at National Chiao Tung University on May 29, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> According to Brain Taves’s research, the B films start to develop quickly in Hollywood during the 1930s. They are usually low-budget productions and made within short time (sometimes even less than one week!). Because of the rise of “double bills” (movie theaters show two films for the price of one), a B movie is often paired with an A film (and of course, it always shows after the A film). Although B movies

down behind them. In my opinion, here the black coffin represents the film's playful irony of musical genre's happy-coupling tradition. Moreover, back to the very beginning of the movie, when a group of people are taking photos in front of the church after the wedding ceremony, there have been Riff Raff and Magenta (and Dr. Frank-N-Furter dressing as a priest) standing right behind these people and posing like the American middle-class couple in Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*.<sup>17</sup> Without doubt, this sarcastic version of Wood's work intends to make fun of the conventional value of family and marriage originally conveyed through this picture. Next, jumping to the ending sequences, RHPS obviously applies the story pattern of backstage musicals; that is, to put on a final show as the climax of the film. However, it certainly won't miss the chance to twist the performance into a funny floor show. Then during the show's first number "Rose Tint My World / Fan Fare/," Brad, Janet, Rocky and Columbia, all wearing leather corsets and fish-net stockings, are "de-Medusa" by Dr. Frank-N-Furter<sup>18</sup> and start dancing stiffly. In fact, they are forced to dance because Dr. Frank-N-Furter takes control of their bodies by his magic machine. Except for Columbia (Little Nell), the other three actors are not professional dancers in real life. Thus, I think this dancing number can be

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seem unworthy, Taves argues that "B's had many advantages over A's, stemming from the fact that they could target smaller audiences, such as youth or ethnic minorities, instead of the usual wide appeal of Family entertainment A's" (331). And RHPS certainly correspond to the definition of B-films.

<sup>17</sup> Here the discovery that Riff Raff and Magenta are imitating Wood's painting is actually from Barry K. Grant in his article "Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film". I borrow his idea and make my own interpretation about the meaning of this imitation. Besides, according to the information at the website *Artcyclopedia*, Grant Wood is one important member of the American Regionalist painters. This group of artists is most popular during the 1930s. They like to depict everyday life in a humble, anti-modernist style.

<<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/history/regionalism.html>>

regarded as a subversion of “amateur spontaneity” since most of the actors are true amateur non-dancers and their unnatural performances are by no means spontaneous-like choreography. Later in the second number “Don’t Dream It Be It,” some part of this sequence is again dedicated to the mockery of Fine Art. Here with the four characters singing “don’t dream it, be it...,” Dr. Frank-N-Furter jumps into a swimming pool whose bottom is painted with Michelangelo’s mural *Creation of Adam* (or so-called “Genesis”). When he “floats” right on the “gap” between Adam and God’s fingertips, it seems to suggest that a transvestite alien can bridge the communication of God and Adam (anyway, who needs Eve!). To make this number more “anti-Platonic,” even the four join Dr. Frank-N-Furter right away and hold a polymorphous sex party over this mural!

After the parody of famous art work, there comes the highlight of the whole floor show, Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s solo singing number “I’m Going Home.” In my observation, this sequence deliberately tries to make clumsy imitations of Kelly’s numbers in *Singin’ in the Rain*. For example, before Dr. Frank-N-Furter starts his performance, he orders that Columbia turns on the stage lighting and Rocky draws the curtains. The exposure of engineering is somewhat similar to Kelly’s acting in “You Were Meant for me.” But that’s surely not enough for a “bad imitation.” Therefore, next we see Dr. Frank-N-Furter (he is now all wet and his heavy make-up begins to melt), with a short black silk scarf around his neck, stands still on the middle of the stage while suddenly the wind from nowhere blows, making the scarf fly on the air. For me,

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<sup>18</sup> In the middle of the film, Dr. Frank-N-Furter simply zaps those who make him angry with the razor-beam and turns them into “bad replicas” of Michelangelo’s sculpture of David! Not until the final floor show begins do these bad replicas be changed back (de-Medusa) into humans again.

it is definitely the most “graceless” version in contrast to Kelly and Charisse’s white silk scarf couple - dancing. Finally, to create a totally ironic ending for this movie, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is killed by Riff Raff and Magenta because they think his lifestyle’s too extreme. Then Riff Raff and Magenta start to do their “Elbow Sex” couple- dancing. Here I’d like to explain more clearly about Riff Raff and Magenta’s couple relationship. As we already know, Riff Raff and Magenta are brother and sister. Furthermore, Amittai F. Aviram points out that actually the two are never seen having sex within this film, but they do have some striking gestures involving contact of the upper arms, which the audience call “Elbow Sex.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, I assume that in this movie, Riff Raff and Magenta stand for a brother-and-sister alien couple due to their somehow incestuous behavior strongly implied by the “Elbow Sex” gestures. Meanwhile, this “Elbow Sex” couple-dancing also brings up a double-subversion. On the one hand, it serves as the funny reversal of musical genre’s Classical formula, letting the alien couple complete the final union of lovers instead of the human couple, Brad and Janet. On the other hand, the appearance of this incestuous couple breaks the taboo of the cinema narrative tradition as well as the mainstream society. Yet the biggest irony of this ending comes from the film’s playful “set-up”: it is an incestuous alien couple who in fact break the greatest taboo of human beings that save the order of American society!

Besides those numbers mentioned above, I especially leave the number “The Time Wrap” as the last for discussion since its relation to the audience participation is rather interesting. During this sequence, all the party guests

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<sup>19</sup> Please see Amittai F. Aviram’s article “Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr. Frank N. Furter” in *Journal of Popular Culture* (1992): 183-192.

(including the three alien servants) line up dancing wildly while the criminologist (narrator), now directly facing the camera, gives dance instructions to the real audience in the movie theater. However, to many people's surprise, it was reported that the 70s' audience, especially those devotees of RHPS, would really follow the instructions and started doing the same dance in the theater. It was even said that throughout the movie's screening, the audience would fire water pistols because of the storm scene or throw toasts when Dr. Frank-N-Furter said "Toast!" at the dining table. Usually, according to the musical genre's tradition, the function of "participating audience" is to make the true audience identify with the spectators (set-up audiences) within the film and thus involve themselves more deeply in the dance numbers. But here, instead of identifying with the spectators, Brad and Janet, the audiences seem to be encouraged by this movie itself to become extremely active in joining these characters' dance party. In comparison with the audience of a Classical musical film, you may wonder what's the magic of RHPS that makes its audience leave their seats and participate so eagerly? I think the answer is simply: RHPS is more than just a musical; it's a cult film. In the inspiring article "Beyond All Reason: The Nature of the Cult," Critic J. P. Telotte defines that cult film "is a type marked by both its highly specified and limited audience as well as a singular pleasure that this audience finds in the film's transgressions [ ... ] it seems to speak meaningfully (or *lovingly*) to a select group" (7). To be more specific, Telotte classifies the cult films into two different types: First, "a number of conventionally successful films, usually resurrected from Hollywood's past, the period of classical film narrative" (8). For instance, the Classical Hollywood movies, *Casablanca* (1942) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). And the audience of the "classical cult films, "as

Telotte points out, is generally heterogeneous but shared some characteristics, like the fondness of the conventions and appeals of classical narrative and the cultish worship for some iconic stars from Hollywood's Classical Era. Second, the midnight movies whose stories mainly concern the subculture's interests, such as rock music, sexual experience or alienation from the conservative society. Films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the most popular of all, RHPS, belong to this category. Moreover, different from the classical cult films, the audience of the midnight movies is "usually the middle-class teenager and young adult, the 17-to 24-year-old group that often-as a sort of rite of passage - sees itself as separate from the cultural mainstream" (10).<sup>20</sup> From Telotte's analysis, we can see clearly that RHPS happens to reveal an early sign of musical genre's future trend for teen - targeted productions. Meanwhile, due to the film's inversion of genre formulas and social taboos, its audience are evoked with "a kind of subcultural desire, a desire not simply for difference, but for an identifiable and even *common* difference" (Telotte 11). Here the "*common* difference," in my own interpretation, indicates particularly the group rebellion of social norms (e.g. a good audience should never throw toasts in the movie theater) from the audience's shared viewing experience. In other words, while watching RHPS, the audience seems to constitute a communal space within which all the "deviant" behaviors of film viewers are treated as tolerable self-expressions, and some of these expressive actions even turn into regular "communal rituals" for the audience (e.g. do "the Time Wrap" dance). Therefore, both as a musical and a cult film, RHPS surpasses the

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<sup>20</sup> For more complete analysis of cult films, please see J. P. Telotte and other critics' articles in the book *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*.

constraint of musical genre (classical film narrative as well) to make itself a real "audience-participatory" movie!

Apart from the subversive aesthetics of RHPS, I would like to compare this 70s' musical with the 50s' classic, *Singin' in the Rain*, and discuss their rather unexpected connections. First of all, the contents of both films are "collages" to some degree. Like what I've mentioned previously, RHPS is a pastiche of Hollywood film genres, Fine Art, and 70s' pop culture as well as social issues. *Singin' in the Rain*, though not that "wide-ranged," is also a pastiche of materials from Hollywood's silent cinema, early talkie pictures in the 20s and mature musical works of the post-war era. To take it further, the two films, in my opinion, are both Camp. Prior to my comparative study of these two films, I would like to refer to the original concepts of "Camp" in Susan Sontag's famous article, "Notes on "Camp". Besides, I will appropriate her ideas and elaborate the camp aesthetics and politics of the two musicals. Camp, to note Sontag, "is a certain mode of aestheticism. [ ... ] the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (277) as there exists the incongruity between the subject and its context. Coincidentally, when it comes to musical genre aesthetics, especially singing and dance numbers, the two films match Sontag's definition of Camp quite well. *Singin' in the Rain* dedicates certain sequences to re-presenting the styles of the live theater show or the earliest talkie musicals; likewise, RHPS follows the conventional pattern of backstage musicals and yet "twists" some dance numbers in a joking way that makes no harm to their musical styles (e.g. Columbia's half - unsuccessful solo tap - dancing). In addition to the musical numbers, I think the mise-en-scène of the two films also proves themselves as Camp. Sontag once pointed out, "Clothes, furniture, all the elements of visual

décor, for instance, make up a large part of Camp” (278). She further added, Camp is “the love of the exaggerated” (279) and “even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love” (283). Like what’s been mentioned in Chapter I , within *Singin’ the Rain*, there are various “exaggerated” imitations (dresses or hair styles) of Hollywood stars from the silent cinema and early musicals; even the studio settings of many famous movies are “rebuilt” here for nostalgic spoofs. To take the “exaggeration” to extremes, in RHPS, not only an old - fashioned movie palace with a proscenium becomes the stage of the final show, but all its protagonists, lining up as chorus girls of a musical, wears extravagant make-up and prostitute-like corsets to do their “messy” dance.<sup>21</sup> Needless to say, all the mise-en-scène described above are surely self - parodies to some extent. However, generally speaking, only the most classical and memorable, the most “loved,” would be taken as the subject for parody. As Sontag put it, “Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it’s not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism)” (291). Hence, in my observation, the self-parodies (either mise-en-scène or musical numbers) in the two movies, though quite ironic indeed, somehow reveals the appreciation of those things they make fun of. After all, Hollywood can afford to be cynical about entertainment in the Camp musical films as long as they’re still entertaining the audience in the campy process. And these “bad imitations” within the two films do maintain the entertaining values indispensable of

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<sup>21</sup> Besides the exaggerated musical mise-en-scène, there are also many campy mise-en-scène about horror and sci-fi films. For instance, during Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s entrance number “Sweet Transvestite,” he appears with a black cape and bloody-red “painted” lips, which obviously remind us of the image of vampire. And Rocky, actually a beautiful blonde with strong muscles, becomes the reverse version of King Kong while he tries to climb the RKO broadcasting tower in the end of RHPS.



Hollywood musical films.

Besides the campy *mise-en-scène* and musical numbers, here the images of musical star or the characters they play turn out to be Camp as well. I'd like to take two representatives, Kelly at Hollywood's post-studio era and Dr. Frank-N-Furter in *RHPS*, to demonstrate how Camp relates to the aura of musical star and the characters portrayed in the film. As everyone knows, Gene Kelly is famous for his star image: the talented Hollywood musical actor (director) and the 50s' Dancing King. Especially with the all-time popularity of *Singin' in the Rain*, Kelly has become the star icon for musical genre's Classical Period and never fades away even during the post-studio 70s. Sontag once claimed that if a person were called a camp, the best example would be a movie star. Later she continued to elaborate that "Persons, however, respond to their audiences. Persons begin "camping" (283). Interestingly, I think Kelly's stardom during the 70s corresponds to the situation Sontag just described. For instance, in the nostalgic musical documentary *That's Entertainment, Part II* (1976)<sup>22</sup>, Kelly, as the narrator himself, appeared with Fred Astaire and the two even danced together in new numbers specially designed for this documentary. Apparently, the reunion of the two legendary musical stars tends to show that both Kelly and Astaire can dance and sing forever regardless of their age. On the other hand, in my opinion, the two stars are actually camping their "original" star images because, as iconic figures

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<sup>22</sup> This famous 1976 documentary film was directed by Kelly himself and became somewhat a sequel to the 1974 MGM documentary, *That's Entertainment!*. In *That's Entertainment, Part II*, there are more film clips presenting the golden moments from the MGM production, including comedy, drama and of course, classic musical numbers.

IMDB : <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075323/>>

surviving the 70s, they have to sustain the illusion of their eternal star auras from Hollywood's Classical period. To quote Sontag's words, "What the Camp eye appreciates is the unity, the force of the person" (285-86). Thus, for the audience in the 70s, the aging Kelly that can still dance proves himself the great musical star living on through history. Aside from Kelly's own stardom, some of the characters he played during the Classical era, in my viewpoint, are camping themselves in the 70s' musicals, too. Kelly's appearance in the disco roller-skating musical *Xanadu* (1980)<sup>23</sup> can be regarded as the most obvious example. Feuer once pointed out an important fact that within this movie, Kelly again played the same character, Danny McGuire, who showed up for the first time in the musical *Cover Girl* (1944).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, though this time Danny has become an old man with gray hair, he can't but dance with the female leading character, Kira (Olivia Newton-John) during the number "Whenever You're Away From Me." For the camping of characters, Sontag also wrote, "Camp is the glorification of "character"" (285), but "Whenever there is development of character, Camp is reduced" (286). Here by stating this, Sontag meant that when a character has been repeatedly played by a certain star, the glamour of Camp will be reduced due to over-recycling. I have to argue that it's not the case with Kelly and his character, Danny. At first, the elder version of Danny in *Xanadu* does represent "the development of character"; however, I think at the

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<sup>23</sup> According to the website *IMDB*, the film *Xanadu* was originally meant to let Olivia Newton-John become the solo leading star after her successful co-starring (with John Travolta) in the hit musical *Grease* (1978). Unfortunately, the film turned out to be a big flop at the box office.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081777/trivia>>

<sup>24</sup> Again according to the website *IMDB*, the musical movie *Cover Girl*, starring Rita Hayworth and Kelly, contains many creative dancing sequences from Kelly's ideas.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036723/trivia>>

same time, the camping of Kelly's star image somehow has reduced the effect produced by the camping of the character, Danny. In other words, whether to camp the musical star icon or the characters, Kelly is always a double-winner for his everlasting popularity!

Next, let's take a look at the more deviant character, Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Compared with Kelly, Tim Curry, who played Dr. Frank-N-Furter both in the theater and film version, was a movie star exactly born with the 70s. Equally, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is definitely related to Camp due to his being a "sweet transvestite". About the issue of Camp and transvestite, Sontag used to claim that "As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility" (279). Likewise, with the shocking cross-dressing and extremely sex-dominant behaviors, Dr. Frank-N-Furter turns out to be an androgynous camp figure by his "exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (Sontag 279). Furthermore, in the latter part of her notes, Sontag particularly explained the relation between Camp taste and homosexuality; for this she wrote, "While it's not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap" (290). Then with the help of many scholars like Richard Dyer and Alexander Doty, the queer reading of the musical films gradually becomes popular among academics, which even reinforces the idea that "musicals express a gay sensibility, especially in their embodiment of camp" (Feuer 140). Consequently, now the term "camp" has directly related to queer or homosexuality. Dr. Frank-N-Furter, originally an androgynous camp figure, also changes into a "gay-camp" character as most film critics have argued. For me, what's more surprising is that in contrast to my analysis of Kelly's camping

stardom in the 70s, the critic Alexander Doty actually suggests an interesting queer look at Kelly's camp image in the Classical 50s as well as post-studio 70s. In the article "There's Something Queer Here," Doty asserts that Kelly's male-trio musicals (e.g. *On the Town*) or his classical works (e.g. *Singin' in the Rain*) in the 50s revealed the gay desire between Kelly and his male co-stars through these numbers they danced together.<sup>25</sup> Further he pointed out that Kelly himself even referred to the queer erotics of his image in both the '70s musical documentaries *That's Entertainment!* and *That's Entertainment, Part II*.<sup>26</sup> Actually, the rise of queer studies or homosexual movies has much to do with the social movements concerning gender issues during the 70s. In the following analysis, I'll focus on the complicated love relations among these characters of RHPS and demonstrate how they reflect on the 70s' gender movements.

To begin with, let me give a brief historical review of the "queer" social campaigns in the 70s. As I've mentioned at the start of this chapter, the 60s could be seen as a turning point for the awakening of minority consciousness and thus resulted in many social or political movements. Entering the 70s, according to Brinkley, the gay rights movement, which emerged in the late

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<sup>25</sup> For Kelly's male-trio musicals, Doty claims that they usually contain two typically sexy men and a comic "buffer" "who is meant to diffuse the sexual energy generated between the two male leads when they sing and dance together" (11). And for the classical film *Singin' in the Rain*, Doty "can't help but read Donald O'Connor maniacally unleashing his physical energy to entertain Kelly during the "Make 'Em Laugh" number as anything but a case of overwrought, displaced gay desire" (11).

<sup>26</sup> Here Doty quotes Kelly's reply to the question about "who's your favorite dancing partner" in *That's Entertainment!*. While showing a clip of the dance he did with Astaire in *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), Kelly commented "It's the only time we danced together...but I'd change my name to Ginger if we could do it again" (12). As I've mentioned, they two did dance together again in *That's Entertainment, Part II*. Therefore, Doty claims that their reunion as "a dancing couple" is certainly queer enough.

60s<sup>27</sup>, continued to bring its impact on the American mainstream society. Meanwhile, the Second Wave Feminism (or the Women's Liberation Movement) made its announcement and called for everyone's attention on the issue of lesbians.<sup>28</sup> In short, during this period either the gay men or lesbians "came out" claiming for the equal rights and social acceptance. Produced in 1975, RHPS more or less camped along the socio-political atmosphere caused by the gay and lesbian movement with comic twist. I'd like to examine closely some characters in RHPS and see how they deal with their various "gender troubles." First, let's start with the "messy" love affairs among the four protagonists, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Brad, Janet, and Rocky. As far as I'm concerned, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is obviously a bisexual because he sleeps with both Brad and Janet. Here I need to make clear that in my own interpretation, the term "bisexual" means either making love with both sexes just for sexual pleasure or truly falling in love with both sexes. And I think Dr. Frank-N-Furter belongs to the former kind. In fact, as many critics have argued, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is a gay instead of bisexual in regard to his "real love subject." That is, under the disguise of a transvestite, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is biologically a man, who is madly in love with another "man," Rocky.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, while it's no mistake about Dr. Frank-N-Furter's gay identity, Rocky, who is just seven hours

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<sup>27</sup> The gay liberation movement actually began with "The Stonewall Riot" in 1969. After this violent incident, the gay men and lesbians set up organizations to call for public attention to the issue of homosexuality. (*American History: A Survey*. 858-59.)

<sup>28</sup> According to Chris Straayer in the article "Transgender Mirrors: Queering Sexual Difference," in 1970 the Radicalesbians presented a paper entitled "The Woman-Identified Women," in which "they posited lesbianism as a feminist practice and feminism as the defining characteristic of lesbianism" (151). From then on, the so-called "Lesbian Feminism" became the main appeal of the women's movement in the 70s.

old like a new born baby, hasn't even recognized his own "gender" or sexual preference. It is Dr. Frank-N-Furter that wants to confirm Rocky's gender identity by "making him a man in seven days." Besides, Rocky seems to be the only character that fits perfectly my definition of "bisexual" since he makes love with both sexes (Dr. Frank and Janet) purely due to his irrepressible libido. Then how about the ambiguous sexual relation between Dr. Frank-N-Furter and Brad? As I've just stated above, Dr. Frank-N-Furter's true love is Rocky alone, so Brad is merely a "dessert" for him to satisfy his gay "sexual pleasure." By contrast, Brad, in terms of my observation, is a typical model of heterosexual male. With his huge penis (which everyone can tell clearly under his '50s underwear), Brad represents the dominant yet conventional male power in the society. However, some critics assume Brad's "one night stand" with Dr. Frank-N-Furter has everything to do with the '70s gay movement and claim that Brad finally "comes out of the closet!" Frankly speaking, I don't quite agree with that declaration. In my opinion, Brad is catalyzed by sexual liberation rather than being imbued with gay sensibilities. Furthermore, he never truly enjoys the result of sex liberty because throughout the whole movie, he keeps resisting this kind of "deviant behavior" except for the "one night stand" scene. Just see how painful his facial expression is when being forced to join in the final polymorphous orgy inside the swimming pool. Even during the floor show dance sequence, Brad is always crying out, "*It's beyond me; help me Mommy! I'll be good; you'll see. Take this dream away!*" Thus, I conclude that in the end, Brad is still a straight guy, not gay at all! Compared

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<sup>29</sup> Besides, in RHPS there is another character, Eddie, the rock' n roll motorcyclist (a human), who is Dr. Frank-N-Furter's ex-lover. Thus, as the film itself implies, Dr. Frank-N-Furter is doubtlessly a gay.

with Brad, his virgin-like fiancée, Janet, is surely more open-minded. Besides making love with Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Janet also “screws” with Rocky while singing “*Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch me....*” Doubtlessly, she is really an eager participant in sexual liberation. Yet there’s something worth extra noticing about the affair between Janet and Dr. Frank-N-Frank. Like what’s been pointed out, Dr. Frank-N-Frank is actually a gay passing through the disguise of a transvestite. As the feminist critic Gaylyn Studlar argued,

The surface confusion of masculinity and femininity in Frank’s costuming and manner does not denote any confusion about the privileges of *being* masculine. Frank is “not that weird” because the perverse Otherness of transvestism and bisexuality are normalized by his comforting sameness - the very apparent masculine qualities that confirm his active, phallic power “(148).<sup>30</sup>

Further she added that “the more vulnerable “feminized” side of Frank is not the image with which his fans, male and female, straight and gay, seem to consciously identify” (149).<sup>31</sup> In my own extending thought, not only the audience but many critics of RHPS as well tend to ignore Dr. Frank-N-Furter’s “feminized side,” which probably results from the prevailing gay movement in the 70s. In other words, I think Dr. Frank-N-Furter is generally recognized as a powerful gay, who is a successful transvestite preferring “on top” and in control in a “masculine” way. To quote the comment on transvestism from the scholar

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<sup>30</sup> Please see Studlar’s article, “Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of “Femininity” and the Perverse” in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*.

<sup>31</sup> Studlar quoted the words from a female fan who dressed up as Dr. Frank: “As Frank, I have a chance to be on top of things [ ... ] Frank-N-Furter may wear Joan Crawford makeup and high heels, but he’s still so masculine there’s no way you could mistake him for a woman” (Henkin 23)” (149).

Bette Robbins and Roger Myrick, “This move flips conventional positions of male/female but maintains a binary structure of dominance and submission and thus the power of the phallus” (271).<sup>32</sup> Therefore, concerning the sexual relation between Dr. Frank-N-Furter and Janet, I’d like to claim that Dr. Frank somehow reproduces, not subverts, the traditional heterosexual power hierarchy between male (himself) and female (Janet). What’s more ironic is that Janet’s sexual liberation is ultimately completed with the help of a gay man and his “non-human” lover! As another feminist critic Kate Davy wrote, “Female impersonation, while it certainly says something about women, is primarily about men, addressed to men, and for men” (233).<sup>33</sup> I would like to appropriate Davy’s statement to point out that RHPS is basically “about gay, addressed to gay, and for gay.” In my opinion, this film totally excludes any implication for lesbian love and ignores the influence of lesbian feminism in the 70s! Aside from the theme of gender troubles, in RHPS there is one character, Dr. Scott, who is rather associated with the political events at that time. As a scientist working for the U.S. government, Dr. Scott seems to represent the father figure (for Janet and Brad) and the guardian of the social law and order within this film. However, to everyone’s surprise, he turns out to be a handicap in a wheelchair, which, I think, deliberately suggests the paralysis of his power as well as the loss of order. Especially during the final floor show, when he slowly lifts his legs with fish-net stockings on them, we all know too well that he’s inevitably under the control of Dr. Frank-N-Furter! Then how does the failure of

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<sup>32</sup> Please See the article, “The Function of the Fetish in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.” in *Journal of Gender Studies* 9.3 (2000): 269-80.

<sup>33</sup> See Davy’s article, “Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp” in *Critical Theory and Performance*.



Dr. Scott connect to American people's distrust and cynicism against their government in the 70s? According to Brinkley, in the early 70s the Watergate scandal not only forced President Nixon to announce his resignation in 1974 but also caused among American people the distrustful and cynical attitude toward their government.<sup>34</sup> It is not a coincident, the film critic Barry K. Grant notices, that before Brad and Janet get a flat tire, they are actually hearing Nixon's resignation speech on the car radio.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Dr. Scott's appearance happens to resemble President Nixon a lot. Combining this two small facts, we can tell that the film intends to insinuate Nixon's dishonorable scandal and thus remind the audience of the untrustworthiness of any "Mr. Big in politics!"

Next, let's examine the relation between RHPS and the 70s' pop culture. The scriptwriter of RHPS, Richard O'Brien (playing Riff Raff), once said in an interview, "I wanted to write a show that was as exciting as a rock concert" (Jewel 164). As a result, RHPS turns out to be a "mutant" musical film, which dares to absorb the elements of 70s' rock music and integrate them into its "conventional-styled" musical numbers. To take it further, I find out that within this film, some characters are also designed to imitate or parody 70s' rock star icons. Hence, I'd like to point out the rock stars whose images are appropriated in RHPS and discuss their unexpected connections with its characters as well as the gender issues I've just analyzed above. First of all, I would like to review briefly the development of rock music during the 70s. According to the music critic Wen Han<sup>36</sup>, the 70s was "the Age of Rock Music." Supergroups like Zed

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<sup>34</sup> Brinkley: p.874-76.

<sup>35</sup> See Grant's work, "Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film" in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason.* p.129.

Zeppelin and Genesis emerged rapidly and swept the mainstream music with their high performing skills. However, as usual, there came a “sub-genre” of rock at the same time, the so-called Glam Rock (or Glitter Rock).<sup>37</sup> Its pioneering artist was David Bowie, who was famous for his various impressive personas (e.g. spaced-out aliens or cocaine-sniffing white duke) and dramatic performances on stage.<sup>38</sup> Especially during his *Ziggy Stardust* period (1972-73), Bowie invented this bisexual drag queen image, which, as the critic Kurt Loder put it, “presented to the world rock’s first completely prepackaged persona [ ... ] and took rock theatrics and pan-sexuality to a new peak” (351).<sup>39</sup> To make this persona *Ziggy Stardust* more convincing, during a magazine interview Bowie even admitted that “I’m gay, and always have been” (Loder 353).<sup>40</sup> Due to Bowie’s androgynous Ziggy persona and his gay identity as well, I think to some extent, he can be regarded as the role model for Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Ironically, a couple of years later, according to Loder again, Bowie denied his early remark about his own gay identity and claimed it was the biggest mistake he had ever made<sup>41</sup> (Bowie did get married twice and both with women!). I bet if Dr. Frank-N-Furter discovers this fact, he’ll be so angry that he immediately “Medusa” Bowie into a postmodern stone statue!

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<sup>36</sup> In this section, my general understanding of the rock music history in the 70s mostly came from the author, Wen Han’s book, *The Apocalypse of Pop Music*, which is a Chinese reference and I translate its title into English. Besides, another important reference for me is the book, *L’âge du rock* by Alain Dister.

<sup>37</sup> During the late-60s to mid-70s, Hard Rock and Art Rock were the most prevailing styles for rock music as well as pop music. Those so-called “Supergroups” emphasized the skills for musical instruments, such as experimental playing skills for electronic guitar. Meanwhile, in contrast to Hard Rock and Art Rock, the Glam Rock preferred the visual effect rather than the music itself. That’s exactly why it’s called “Glam (Glamorous)” Rock. (*The Apocalypse of Pop Music*: p.60-85,131)

<sup>38</sup> The information about Bowie’s music career is from two websites, *David Bowie Wonder World Fan*

Besides Bowie and those Supergroups, during the 70s there was still one living legend of the Rock music history -Elvis Presley in his late years (He died in 1977). In terms of Richard Carlin's research<sup>42</sup>, Elvis, so-called "the King of Rock' n Roll," maintained his popularity in the 70s mostly by his great success in the 50s. During Elvis's early years of fame (1956-1959), he constructed his own star image as the combination of Marlon Brandon and James Dean. When he started wiggling his hips on the stage, the music critic George Melly argues,

Presley's breakthrough was that he was the first male white singer to propose that fucking was a desirable activity in itself...He was the master of the sexual simile, treating his guitar as both phallus and girl, punctuating his lyrics with the animal grunts and groans of the male approaching an orgasm. (Rodman 58)

Therefore, Elvis is often considered the "macho" rock star, a virile stud that female audience can never resist. Nevertheless, in fact not only women but also men are crazy about Elvis. Later on many critics discover that Elvis does possess both the qualities of masculinity and femininity since he gyrates his pelvis like a stud and yet paints himself like a beauty in black mascara and royal-blue eyeshadow. Because of Elvis's "sexual mobility," even some analysts, such as Marjorie Garber, connect his star image to transvestism.

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Site: <http://www.bowiewonderworld.com> and *David Bowie Fan Page -Teenage Wildlife*:  
<http://www.teenagewildlife.com>.

<sup>39</sup> See Loder's article, "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" in his book, *Bat, Chain, Puller: Rock & Roll in the Age of Celebrity*. p.351-53.

<sup>40</sup> According to Loder, Bowie's "coming-out-of-closet" statement was published in the January 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Melody Maker*, 1972.

<sup>41</sup> Loder: 353.

<sup>42</sup> The general history of Elvis's music career is from Carlin's article, "Legends: Elvis, Little Richard and Buddy" in the book *Rock and Roll 1955-1970*. p.26-30.

In the book *Vested Interests*, Garber asserts that Elvis is one example for “unmarked transvestism”, which refers to “some entertainers who do not overtly claim to be “female impersonators,” for example, may in fact signal their cross-gender identities onstage, and that this quality of crossing [ ... ] can be more powerful and seductive than explicit “female impersonation” (Rodman 68-69). Needless to say, due to Elvis’s affinity with transvestite, he certainly becomes another rock star icon for imitation in RHPS. Only this time instead of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Dr. Scott’s nephew, Eddie (Meat Loaf) <sup>43</sup>, is the imitator of Elvis. When Eddie bursts out of the lab freezer with a leather jacket and motorbike, singing “I love Rock’ n Roll,” everyone can tell that his appearance is the mixture of Brando and Elvis. In common sense, Dr. Frank-N-Furter ought to love Eddie. Unfortunately, he kills Eddie with a hatchet because Eddie is a failure especially with his obesity. That statement is definitely the mockery of Elvis’s star image in his late days as well as the end of his stardom.<sup>44</sup> It seems that Dr. Frank-N-Furter doesn’t show much respect for his earthly “colleague” of transvestite. Coincidentally, the death of Eddie even foretells Elvis’s own death in 1977!

In conclusion, the musical *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with its multiple subversions, provides the audience with the secret joy for

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<sup>43</sup> According to *IMDB*, interestingly, the actor Meat Loaf himself is actually an American rock star in real life. During the 70s, he was quite popular for his vulgar, lower-class style of rock music.

<<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001533/bio>>

<sup>44</sup> According to Carlin, after the military service, Elvis spent lots of time performing in some Hollywood B films. As for his music career, he could never recover the popularity he had achieved in the 50s. So Elvis’s late years were quite a sad parody of his early success. He began to get fat, perform with extravagant costumes and become a drug addict. Finally he died of an overdose of drug in 1977.

(Carlin: p.30)

transgression. And Hollywood promises American people that they can enjoy the orgy again and again as long as they buy the tickets! Therefore, if you haven't seen this interesting musical movie, "Don't Dream it, Be It" !

### **B. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977)**

As a blockbuster Hollywood film in the late 70s, the teenage-targeted musical *Saturday Night Fever* proved that the musical film genre could keep "stayin' alive." Meanwhile, its worldwide success not only made John Travolta one of the top popular movie stars and 70s' Teenage Dancing King, but also brought about the disco craze for the dance floors as well as the Bee Gees music. What's more, unlike the previous musical movies, this film was somehow true to life and portrayed vividly certain teenage troubles happening at that time. The story starts with Tony (John Travolta), an uneducated Brooklyn teenager who goes to the local disco club every weekend and is the king of the dance floor. One day Tony meets Stephanie at the club and they agree to be dance partners for the disco competition. Later on Tony wants Stephanie to be his girlfriend as well, but she refuses because she aspires to greater things, such as moving across the river to the "more cultural" Manhattan. Soon Tony also feels dissatisfied with his present life, and then he and Stephanie decide to help each other find a new way of living. Here I have to point out one crucial fact that although the film does touch upon the real life dilemmas of Brooklyn teenagers, when it comes to genre aesthetics, this film actually presents musical genre's skillful way to produce "innovation as conservation" (Feuer 91). That is, as Feuer has already observed, the teen musicals

represent a 'reconstruction' in the sense that they are not parodic or

deconstructive of the conventions of the classic musical. Rather, they introduce new conventions – the main one being the use of ‘non-diegetic’ rock music over the images rather than the use of diegetic music that defined the older form of music film. [ ... ] they also maintain in fragmented form many of the mainstays of the classical Hollywood musical... (131)

Instead of the rock music mentioned by Feuer, in *Saturday Night Fever*, the non-diegetic disco music of the Bee Gees is used even from the very beginning of its opening credits. Therefore, I’d like to examine closely several musical numbers in this film to demonstrate how they make “innovation as conservation” and loosely apply the genre’s classical formulas. To start with, let’s take a look at the opening sequences. From the first few shots of the opening, the film gives us an outlook of the whole Brooklyn area and its famous Brooklyn Bridge. Then the background music, the Bee Gees’s song “Stayin’ Alive,” slowly fades in after the scene of a train passing by. This immediately reminds me of the opening number “I Feel Like I’m Not Out of Bed Yet” in *On the Town*. Like what’s been discussed in Chapter I , this dock worker’s solo singing number (“I Feel Like I’m Not Out of Bed Yet”) shows one important characteristic of musical films – a character doesn’t just say the words but always sings them out loud. Slightly different from the dock worker of the 40s, later throughout the opening credits Tony just walks on a street of Brooklyn, his every step following the tempo of “Stayin’ Alive” while the Bee Gees is singing for him. Being the main protagonist in this 70s’ musical, Tony certainly seems luckier than his “ancestor” because he has no need to sing his words!<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in my own observation, Tony’s “Stayin’ Alive” walking sequence can be seen as his solo “dance” number to certain extent.

Meanwhile, I also consider it the “evolved” version of Don’s (Kelly) solo dance number “Singin’ in the Rain” In the musical *Singin’ in the Rain*. How come the two relate to each other? Let me explain more clearly by comparing the two dance numbers. As I’ve just said, during the sequence “Stayin’ Alive,” Tony’s walking steps keep following the tempo of the background music. In my opinion, this behavior somewhat corresponds to the non-choreographic spontaneity within a classical musical, which requires the normal body movements “flowing into” dance steps to conceal the effort of calculated choreography in reality. Likewise, during the number “Singin’ in the Rain,” Don’s spontaneous singing and dancing certainly matches this classical formula. However, while Don performs joyfully inside the MGM studio setting, Tony in fact dances his disco beat along the real street in Brooklyn. Aside from the difference in dancing space, I notice there are some interesting contrasts between the two numbers and their protagonists as well. First, after the sweet date with Kathy, Don dances out his glorious feeling in the rain on the empty street. On the contrary, Tony walks on a crowded street in the daylight, always chasing girls he meets on the road but never succeeding once. Don and Tony have certain shared qualities: for instance, they both are active in courtship and have a kind of boyish charm and naïve attitude.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the different results of their sequences, in my viewpoint, are caused by the fact that Don is a successful Hollywood star and Tony is only a young kid from the

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<sup>45</sup> According to *IMDB*, In Travolta’s next musical film *Grease* (1978), which co-starred him with Olivia Newton-John, the “Teenage Dancing King” did do both singing and dancing himself throughout this movie.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077631/maindetails>>

<sup>46</sup> For Tony’s naïve attitude, I think it’s quite obvious to see during the opening sequence. On his way down the street, Tony enters a store and pays five dollars in advance to do layaway on a blue shirt.

working-class. To take it further, Don represents the seemingly carefree and glamorous star that the audience dreams to be and expects to see in a classical musical film. By contrast, in this more realistic 70s' musical, Tony leads a normal, lower-class life as many people do in the modern world. In other words, to satisfy the audience's fantasy, Don, the Hollywood superstar, will always win the girl's heart with his glamour while Tony, the lower-class nobody, fails like common people in pursuit of girls for the lack of money or social status. Fortunately, as the 70s' successor of the "Dancing King of Musical Films," Travolta is guaranteed a hopeful ending in *Saturday Night Fever*, though not that "happy-hereafter" like Kelly's in *Singin' in the Rain*. And I'll discuss about this hopeful ending later in the section.

Next, I'd like to focus on the various couple-dancing sequences as well as Tony's rather ambiguous relationships with his female dance-partners. At first glance, the film seems to adapt the regular pattern of Astaire-Rogers musical comedy. That is, two people become dance-partners for a dancing competition or a show onstage, then the man also wants to turn the girl into his "life-partner" in the process of practicing, and finally the two lovers get together doing a great duo performance in the end. Similarly, here we have Tony the Disco King, his dance-partner Stephanie whom Tony falls for, and the final disco dance competition. Nevertheless, the film still makes some little twists of the classical formulas. For example, Tony and Stephanie finally don't become lovers but just friends. What's more, unlike Astaire who only dances with either his dream girl or those lifeless props, Tony actually dances with different girls at the club<sup>47</sup> besides Stephanie. In my opinion, Tony's complicated

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The shop owner asks him to take the receipt but Tony just refuses and says, "I trust you!"



dance-partnership is doubtlessly the most ironic twist of Astaire-Rogers musical coupling and yet presents again the effect of “innovation as conservation.” To be more specific, I’d like to analyze the love triangle among Tony, Stephanie and Annette (Tony’s ex-dance partner). First of all, in this film the first couple-dancing number “Disco Inferno” is performed by Tony and Annette, not him and Stephanie. Moreover, before this number Tony and Annette are in fact having a quarrel because Annette regards herself as Tony’s girlfriend but Tony just wants to maintain the professional partnership. Obviously, this Tony-Annette couple-dancing is quite different from the lovely duo-dance in a classical musical film. Instead of a growing love usually shown through the classical duo number, Tony and Annette only “pretends to love” (at least Tony does) during their couple dance (just see how Tony gives a sexy smile to Annette!). After that “fake” duo performance, soon Tony notices that Stephanie, who he has never seen at the club before, can really dance as well as himself. Then Tony gets rid of Annette and takes Stephanie as his new partner. Needless to say, with his dream girl, Tony is more than willing to “play real” this time. Throughout the whole musical, the Tony-Stephanie couple-dancing number appears twice: the first one is when they two practice new steps in the dance studio and the second one is when they dance in the final competition. During the former dance sequence, with the Bee Gees singing “More Than A Woman” in the background, Tony and Stephanie dance together happily for the first time, which, for me, is very similar to the Kelly – Ellen first couple-dancing number “Main Street” in *On the Town*. In the

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<sup>47</sup> During the film, Tony is often seen dancing with girls at the disco club who beg him to have a dance with them. One of the girls even kisses Tony voluntarily.

sequence “Main Street,” as I’ve pointed out in Chapter I , the two protagonists’ spontaneous singing and dancing help transforming the dance studio into the street of Meadowville without actually dissolving into another new setting. However, in this 70s’ version, the film uses soft lighting to create this dreamy effect in order to turn the dance studio into Tony and Stephanie’s private world. Later in the last disco sequence, though with the same music and dance as the previous couple-dancing, Tony finally kisses Stephanie and they two look so in love. Now we will guess that Tony and Stephanie’s last duo number apparently follows the genre’s classical rule to end with a happy couple and a great show. Nevertheless, that’s not the story of this film. In fact, after the competition, Stephanie confesses to Tony that she never loves him but just plays with his feelings for her own good. Tony is so shocked and disappointed just as we audience are. To reconcile the cruel love betrayal with the musical genre’s classical tradition, the film chooses an open ending with the two promising to be friends again but not lovers at all. I consider this ending hopeful because there’s definitely certain “sparkle” between Tony and Stephanie when the last scene shows them embracing each other, accompanied with the music of the Bee Gees’s “How Deep Is Your Love!”

To sum up, in *Saturday Night Fever*, the result of the love triangle, as a whole, corresponds to the musical genre’s golden formula. In other words, Tony, the Dancing King, must be the active one in every courtship. Relatively, a girl like Annette, who chases Tony too eagerly, will always fail as Lina does in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Now that Tony is the King of the Dance Floor, the film can’t live without his solo disco dance sequence. During the number “You Should Be Dancing,” Tony’s marvelous solo performance not only makes the set-up audience at the club cheer for him but also enchants the real audience at the

theater into his disco world. After all, to be a Dancing King of Musical Films, no matter in the 30s, 50s or even 70s, one has to be really good at dancing and awfully charming with every move! Meanwhile, this film is fair enough to have Stephanie, the King's female partner, perform her own solo sequence. During Stephanie's solo dance number<sup>48</sup>, she does great Ballroom dancing while Tony watches beside the dance floor. This is obviously a "fragmented" imitation of Ivy's solo dance number "Miss Turnstiles Ballet" in *On the Town*. As I've argued in the previous chapter, the sequence "Miss Turnstiles Ballet" is especially designed for the female leading character to "dance out" the leading male protagonist's fantasy about his ideal lover. Here in order to fit this film's appeal to reality, Stephanie dances not for Tony but he "happens to" witness her great performance and senses right away that "she's the one!" Apart from those "partly innovative" dancing numbers, I find it interesting that there are two scenes featuring a strip show at the bar. Compared with Ivy's exotic dance for the sideshow in *On the Town*, this time the strip show is certainly more sensational since the female dancer is half-naked swinging with her bare breast. While Ivy's dance stands for the tradition of early musical films to refer to live performing styles, the striptease in *Saturday Night Fever*, in my viewpoint, demonstrates only visual sexual pleasure rather than homage to live shows.

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<sup>48</sup> In fact, during this sequence, Stephanie indeed has a male partner who just keeps stand still and seldom move with the beat. Besides, the camera follows Stephanie most of the time and ignores her male partner. That is exactly why I think of this sequence as Stephanie's solo dance number.

After the discussion of genre aesthetics, I'd like to turn to the film's plot and characters to point out how they reflect the contemporary economic or social situations during the 70s. Now let me start with the leading protagonist, Tony. He is basically a "good kid" except for his occasional rebellious remarks or behaviors. Actually, he has a proper job as the best salesman in the paint store and gives away his wage to support his poor family since his father's been unemployed for a long time. According to Brinkley, throughout the 70s, the decline of American economy had become a disturbing national crisis, which mainly resulted from the serious inflation and the increasing cost of energy of the Third World. With the economy getting worse, the long, painful process of deindustrialization thus began and caused millions of workers to lose their jobs overnight.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Tony's father, originally a construction worker, can't escape from that, either. However, although Tony helps maintain the basic living of his whole family, neither his parents appreciate it because they think Tony is never good enough if compared with his big brother, Father Frank Jr.. Fortunately, Tony finds a new place to prove himself as "somebody" - the disco club. In *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*, Jon Lewis comments that movies like *Saturday Night Fever* "counterpoint the boredom of dead-end day jobs with the furtive glory of success on the dance floor [ ... ] The compensation for a relatively low status in one world was the easy purchase of an elevated status in another..." (84-85). At the disco club, Tony becomes "the King of the Floor" and finally gets a sense of fulfillment through the disco dancing. What's more interesting, in the early part of this film, when Tony's dressing up for the disco night in his bedroom, the

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<sup>49</sup> Brinkley: p.872-73.

camera gives a close-up of Bruce Lee's poster, then suddenly jumps to the full shot of the dance floor with people dancing "Night Fever," and later back to Tony. This kind of cross-cutting repeats several times during this bedroom sequence. In my interpretation, the film deliberately connects the image of Bruce Lee to the disco club and Tony, suggesting that like Bruce, Tony is also considered a hero in the disco world. Ironically, Bruce can only "be a hero" within the movie and so does Tony at the disco. As a matter of fact, Tony simply knows too well about this while he said to Stephanie on the street, "*I get high at 2001. [ the short name of the disco club ] It's just dancing...I'd like to get that high on someplace else like that in my life...Dancing, it can't last forever....*" As what Thomas Doherty described in *Teenagers & Teenpics*, the '70s teenpic hero is "a hapless kid seeking direction, not a tough rebel fleeing restriction" (237). Without doubt, Tony is indeed one of these so-called "teenpic heroes." Besides, in the article "Inspiration and Polarization," critic Martha Bayles studied the disco history and wrote that in the late 70s, the disco club has become "the province of inner-city youth and gay men pursuing hard drugs and an aggressively hedonistic life-style" (278). Likewise, during this film we can see the clear portrait of Tony's friends taking drugs or making love with girls they meet at the disco club. By contrast, being a Disco King and a faithful Catholic as well, Tony definitely never takes drugs or sleeps around with every girl he meets but only dance until midnight. Who can say he isn't a good kid and teenpic hero! Nevertheless, in the film although there are drug addicts at the disco club, but weirdly no trace of gay men at the same place. Still related to the '70s queer issue, the film lets Tony and his friends encounter a gay couple on their way out of the basketball court. When Tony's friends make fun of that gay couple, Tony doesn't join them but just steps aside saying, "*This is*

*drag, you know.*” For me, this scene intends to make the impression that Tony is not only a typical “not-that-bad” kid from the lower-class but also a special teenpic hero who expresses more concern about the minority groups like gay people. As a result, following Kelly’s camp star image during the 70s, Tony, or I should say Travolta, turns out to be another new camp idol of musical films for these gay men.<sup>50</sup>

Apart from the queer issue, in my opinion, two sequences in this film also deal with the continuous racial conflicts in the American society. The first one is that Tony and his friends fight with the Latinos in revenge for the injury of their friend, Gus; the second one is that in the final disco contest, Tony and Stephanie compete with the Puerto Rican team. In the former sequence, the conflict between Italian-American (Tony) and Latinos is simplified as a teenage group fighting, especially with its sarcastic ending when Tony and his buddies find out later that Gus may mistake the person who has hit him. More interestingly, during the disco contest sequence, although Tony wins the championship, he realizes that it’s an unfair result due to “the privilege of race” and give the prize money to the Puerto Rican team. However, at the end of the film, Tony wants to get that money back since he probably needs it to start his new life in Manhattan. Here, the focus on the racial problem revealed again during the disco competition has been shifted deliberately to the life decision of Tony’s future direction. After all, Tony is the leading protagonist who deserves the full spotlight! Furthermore, I notice that an African-American team also participate in the final dance competition and even has a short dance

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<sup>50</sup> In the article “There’s Something Queer Here,” Doty not only put Kelly and Frank Sinatra, but John Travolta as well to his list of queer idols in musical films. (Doty: p. 11)

sequence of their own, but that's all. Frankly speaking, it seems to me that within this film, only the conflicts between "white-skinned" races are somehow depicted while African-Americans who are involved in the racial wars as well are totally ignored.

Aimed at more teenage troubles of the 70s, this film dedicates certain part to the issue of "religion vs. modern law" which happens to reflect on the serious controversy between the abortion rights and Christian belief during that period. According to Brinkley, in 1973 the women's liberation movement made one substantial achievement - the legalization of abortion. And it was immediately opposed by the Christian evangelicals<sup>51</sup> because they feared the legal abortion rights as well as the growth of feminism would destroy the traditional family values. Hence, throughout the 70s the conflict between the supporters of the legal abortion rights and the Christian evangelicals never stopped and even lasted during the 80s and 90s.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in *Saturday Night Fever*, the pregnancy of Bobby C.'s girlfriend forced him to face the dilemma between abortion and marriage. As a Catholic, Bobby C. can't violate his religious doctrine by having his girl abort but he doesn't want to get married, either. Sadly, in the end the film doesn't try to work out any solution to such problems but just lets Bobby C. die by accident. I think maybe the film is telling us that everyone should just behave himself like Tony and he may have a better future. Moreover, while Tony obeys the Catholic doctrines even at the

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<sup>51</sup> During the 70s, religious revivalism was prevailing in the American society and evangelical Christianity was the most powerful and influential. Its believers are usually called the "Christian right."  
(Brinkley: p. 887)

<sup>52</sup> For more detailed information about the history of the legal abortion rights or the conflict between its supporters and the religious groups, please see Brinkley's *American History: A Survey*, p. 862-64, 913-14.

disco club, his big brother, Father Frank Jr., has quit being a priest in the church. For me, that serves as the biggest irony of the Catholic religion since the most faithful believer is Tony, the “no-good” kid in the eyes of common people, instead of Frank Jr. the ex-priest!

In brief, the musical film *Saturday Night Fever*, as the disco’s name “2001 Odyssey” suggests, is actually about the living odyssey of Tony, the ‘70s lower-class teenager in Brooklyn. However, unlike the open ending in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), this film provides rather a “promising” end in a “musical” way. Needless to say, Tony and his “disco night fever” will certainly “stay alive” as long as this classic ‘70s musical is still groovy now!

### **C. *Fame* (1980)**



The pre teen-pix musical *Fame* (1980), with its youthfully energetic dance numbers and beautiful song scores, became a hit movie right away since the screening. What’s more surprising, it also turned out to be the first musical film that spawned a popular follow-up TV series and even a sequel theater musical as well.<sup>53</sup> Based on the real life in a public high school of Music and Arts in Manhattan<sup>54</sup>, this film follows a group of young students from their auditions to get into the school to the final graduation. At “the New York City

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<sup>53</sup> The general historical information about this film is from the website *IMDB*:

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080716/maindetails>> For more detail about the TV series, see <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080716/maindetails>> Besides, for the up-to-date and full-scale information of the film, TV series and musical, I personally recommend this great fan website - *Fame Forever*: <<http://www.fameforever.com/>>

<sup>54</sup> The full name of this real “Fame” school is Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Within the film, however, it is changed into “the New York City High School for the



High School for the Performing Arts,” these teenage protagonists, with different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, have to deal with their personal troubles and strive for being professional artists at the same time. Here compared with *Saturday Night Fever*, this film deals with more wide-ranging social issues through the teenage dilemmas and somehow reveals the dark side of reality that is too sharp for such a typical teenpix musical film.

Meanwhile, wrapped under its modern look, the movie *Fame*, as a whole, adopts exactly the classical formulas of musical genre instead of the “fragmented” use in *Saturday Night Fever*. In regard with genre aesthetics, I’d like to elaborate how this film appropriates classical genre formulas and makes certain “harmless” little twists as well. As Feuer has pointed out, *Fame* inherits “the Rooney-Garland tradition of kids trying to break into show business” (Preface ix).<sup>55</sup> In addition to the conventional story pattern, I also notice that the film follows the genre’s “golden rule” to have its main protagonists really dance and sing by themselves in these musical numbers. Besides, all the songs and music scores are specially written and composed for this film, unlike the usual “non-diegetic” rock music in a teen musical. During the opening sequences, the first (and last, too!) couple-dancing has appeared within the scene of the audition for dancers. In this funny dance number “Red Light,” a girl named Shirley, who is the one for audition, takes her friend Leroy (Gene Anthony Ray) as temporary dance-partner but later surprisingly finds out it’s Leroy, not her, that is admitted to the school. Throughout this number, we can see a gradual transition from the two’s hot couple dance to Leroy’s one-man

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Performing Arts,” <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080716/trivia>>

<sup>55</sup> See Note 29 in Chapter I .

show which leaves Shirley totally out of the spotlight. Needless to say, the film makes ironic changes of the classical rule since a usually successful couple-dancing becomes a big failure and the male protagonist dares to get rid of his terrible female partner, starting his own solo just “for the celebration of freedom, not love.” Moreover, with Leroy’s flirtatious yet excellent solo dance, I guess not only those teachers but the audience as well would forgive him for dumping Shirley! Apart from this “mutated” couple - dance number, there are two group dance sequences which present the basic spirit of “amateur spontaneity” and extend it into a modern form. During the ‘freshman year’ part, the musical number “Hot Lunch Jam” starts with students gathering for lunch at the school cafeteria, then the noises they make gradually “fused together” as great music for singing and dancing in this lunchtime party. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in a classical musical film the artifice of “spontaneity” functions through the practice of bricolage and non-choreography. Here these students’ musical instruments (e.g. violins or even pianos) serve as handy props to produce music while their seemingly natural chorus and dancing look really spontaneous enough. Later during the ‘sophomore year’ part, another musical number “Fame” even brings these students out of the school building as they dance wildly on the 46<sup>th</sup> street with Bruno’s unfinished music work played through the amplifier on his father’s taxi. Unlike the trio-couple dance number “On the Town” in *On the Town*, this time the spontaneous dance sequence happens on the real street, not inside fake studio setting. More surprisingly, those cars passing by on the street are changed into props as these students’ dance floor, too. In my analysis above, I consider the two group dance numbers “professional spontaneity” rather than typical “amateur spontaneity” because now these students are true dancers pretending to

receive professional dance trainings at the school and their “spontaneity” has to take place “with a good reason.” That is, within this musical the spontaneous musical numbers are rationalized by these kids being “professional on the route” who have a kind of youth urge to “express themselves.” Different from those protagonists in the classical musical films, these young people just don’t suddenly burst into singing and dancing whenever or wherever they want with music coming from “nowhere!” However, as a teen musical which adopts the genre’s golden rules, it still “recycles the previous musical films with self-reflexive style.” Here the film chooses to pay homage to Kelly, the ‘50s Dancing King and his most memorable solo dance number “Singin’ in the Rain.” Again during the ‘sophomore year’ part, there’s one sequence with Coco (Irene Cara), Lisa (Laura Dean) and some other students waiting for the train on the subway platform while Lisa intends to commit suicide because she has just flunked out of the Dance Department. Within this shocking version of “Singin’ in the Rain,” the camera takes first the shot of Coco and others happily imitating Kelly to sing “*I’m singin’ in the rain...*” and stamp on the wet ground (platform), then changes to the shot of sad Lisa walking closer and closer to the edge of the platform, and finally jumps to the shot of a train approaching. With the shot-reverse-shot speeding up, this sequence deliberately creates the effect of tension instead of the originally optimistic atmosphere in Kelly’s solo number. No wonder people who have seen this sequence would hold their breath until the last moment when Lisa steps back and decides to solve her life crisis by transferring to another department! To be frank, this shocking version in *Fame*, along with Tony’s “Stayin’ Alive” sequence in *Saturday Night Fever*, both have a somehow good ending at least while in Stanley Kubrick’s non-musical film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), its extremely cynical spoof of

Kelly's solo number simply makes everyone creepy even after the film's finished. Within *A Clockwork Orange*, after breaking into a writer's house, the leading protagonist, Alex, imitates Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain" when he and his gang beat and rape helpless victims. As Lewis puts it, Kubrick's subversive imitation "revels in Alex's "ultraviolence," using slow and fast motion and a synthesized classical score to aestheticize the violence (as choreography, as cinematography, as pure imagery)" (43). In my opinion, either the gentle camp (aesthetically) numbers in the two teen musicals or the random-violence version in Kubrick's sci-fi film reveals the same important fact that for post-studio Hollywood, Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain" has become a cult musical number which results not only from zealous worship by audiences but also from various remakes (both demystification and remystifications) by Hollywood films themselves! Now let's turn back to the musical *Fame* again and jump to the final commencement show. As mentioned above, since the film inherits the Rooney-Garland tradition, it definitely ends with "putting on a great show." Nevertheless, within *Fame* this final show of graduation turns out to be quite abrupt with every protagonist performing joyfully at the auditorium and leaves many problems hanging on the air.

To find out what this weird ending tries to suggest, in the next section I'd like to examine the complicated relations among the main protagonists and social context at that time. Comparatively speaking, in *Saturday Night Fever* all serious social issues are simplified to be Tony's teenage troubles while in *Fame*, by contrast, various kinds of contemporary social problems are extended from the lives of these young kids, especially through their frequent conflicts with the conservative adults like their parents or teachers. To begin with, let's take a look at the frivolous black teenager, Leroy. Throughout the

whole movie, Leroy often quarrels with Mrs. Sherwood, the white teacher of the English Literature class, because she thinks that Leroy keeps refusing to turn in any homework just to irritate her. At first glance, the rivalry between Leroy and Mrs. Sherwood obviously represents the continuous racial conflict between black and white people in the American society. However, things are not that easy since later on the film exposes Leroy's big secret that he is actually an uneducated homeless who hardly recognizes any words. In my opinion, it reflects the national economic crisis in the 70s which caused many social problems such as unemployment, poverty (homeless) and widening gap between the rich and poor. Unfortunately, in the end of the film, Mrs. Sherwood still doesn't seem to realize Leroy's difficulty and flunks him anyway. Now that Leroy can never win Mrs. Sherwood's heart, he certainly can have a white girlfriend, Hilary. At first, this cross-racial love between Leroy and Hilary originates from the teenage racial girl-fight between Hilary (white) and Coco (black, Leroy's "ex-girlfriend"). Then it turns out that Leroy is just a tool for Hilary to show her extreme rebellion since her wealthy father only pays attention to the new young stepmother instead of Hilary herself. Apparently, this teenage love affair isn't simply about different races but involves the real social class hierarchy (rich white upper-class vs. poor black lower-class) and certain domestic problems within such a rich family. Again, the film ends this young couple's cross-racial love rather ironically as Hilary sits at a private clinic, explaining to the audience that she can't have a baby right now because that will ruin her chance to be a famous ballerina after graduation. Hilary must have an abortion after her pitiful monologue. Unlike Bobby C.'s girlfriend in *Saturday Night Fever*, Hilary in *Fame* is quite brave to practice women's legal abortion rights without considering religious taboo.

Next, I'd like to move on to the shy Jewish girl, Doris (Maureen Teefy). Basically, Doris's story develops around her constant resistance to her dominant mother who wants her to be a singer and her own persistent change into a confident actress. More importantly, two incidents in Doris's life, which partially relate to certain social phenomena, serve as strong proofs of her growth into independent and mature womanhood. First, the cross-cultural (race) love between Doris (Jewish) and Ralph (Puerto Rican) becomes one source of power for Doris to fight against her mother. However, like Leroy and Hilary, Doris eventually breaks up with Ralph and luckily not due to "abortion problem" but due to different plans about their future. In addition to Doris's unsuccessful first love, there is one scene in this movie, which features Doris and Ralph sitting inside the movie theater, watching the famous midnight film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It was said that during the filming of *Fame*, director Alan Parker wanted a scene that showed Doris' overcoming her stage fright and becoming an actress. Then he happened to witness the audience-participation at the local screenings of RHPS and then decided to re-present it in this film with the casting of Doris, Ralph and many "regular impersonators" from the local screenings, too.<sup>56</sup> As a result, during this sequence Doris finally overcomes all her shyness and runs up joining those people doing the time-warp on stage. This sequence can be regarded as a "half-documentary" of the '70s sub-cultural phenomenon. Meanwhile, although Doris does show her maturity through the active participation, in the end she is just like Janet in RHPS, who experiences a night of extreme liberty but has to

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<sup>56</sup> This interesting fact comes from the section "Trivia for *Fame*" at IMDB:  
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080716/trivia>>

wake up facing the real world the next day. Therefore, the love relation between Doris and Ralph still doesn't work out while Doris's mother seems not to change her attitude at all even at the final commencement show! After the poor Doris, let us focus on her "ex," the abrasive Puerto Rican kid, Ralph (Barry Miller). Instead of getting his girlfriend pregnant as in *Saturday Night Fever*<sup>57</sup>, Ralph and his little sisters are in fact suffering from domestic violence, which, as the film implies, has been a long-lasting problem in the Puerto Rican - American communities. Probably because of that harsh environment, Ralph's unique "cynical humor" soon makes him "the first kid who really breaks into show business." Somehow like his idol, the '70s popular talk-show comedian Freddie Prinze<sup>58</sup>, before graduation Ralph has got a job of performing talk-show at the local nightclub but becomes a drug addict at the same time. Doris, who was still Ralph's girl back then, used to persuade him that he isn't Freddie and doesn't need to end like his idol, either. Nevertheless, it's quite a pity that until the end the film gives no clue about what becomes of Ralph and his comedian career. Compared with Ralph, the ambitious Coco, who is always well prepared for any chance to be a superstar in the entertainment world, doesn't seem to end up any better. Actually, right before the graduation, Coco meets a stranger at the café who claims himself as a director of

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<sup>57</sup> I notice that the actor, Barry Miller, played both Bobby C. in *Saturday Night Fever* and Ralph in *Fame*. As I've already mentioned, Bobby C's girlfriend gets pregnant while Ralph's girlfriend, Doris, doesn't. So I'm just joking about it!

<sup>58</sup> According the biography of Freddie Prinze at *IMDB*, he used to be the student at Fiorella LaGuardia High School of the Performing Arts but dropped out of school because he wanted to pursue his comedy career full-time. After his great popularity on various TV talk shows and a TV series as well, in 1977, 22-year-old Freddie committed suicide and died in the hospital.  
<<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0697905/bio>>

independent art film and asks her to do a screen test for him. After Coco excitedly arrives at the director's shabby "studio," this man just tricks her into taking off her clothes and facing the camera half-naked "for the shake of film aesthetics." Obviously, Coco has been cheated to perform in a porno movie without realizing it. Sarcastically, during the final commencement show, Coco, like other protagonists discussed above, appears as usual singing her solo part happily as if nothing has ever happened. Besides those teenagers from the Dance or Performing Art Department, Bruno (Lee Curreri) turns out to be the only representative of "youth rebellion" at the Music Department of the school. Concerning the issue of music within a musical movie, Feuer once pointed out that "the battle between popular and elite art was waged on every front in the Hollywood musical" (55). Further she took *Fame* as one example and wrote, "1980's **Fame** gives us an update on the classical vs jazz, youth vs age dilemma when a young man forced against his will to study violin literally blows a fuse with his beloved electronic synthesizer during a classical string-ensemble rehearsal" (55). What Feuer described is the continuous opposition between Bruno and Mr. Shorofsky (Albert Hague), the teacher of Classical Music class. What's more, while Feuer confidently asserts that "Those musicals which do raise the classical/popular conflict to a central position in the film's plot always show the triumphant victory of the popular style" (56), the ending of *Fame* is no doubt a big blow to Feuer's statement since Bruno finally gives in to Mr. Shorofsky and plays the classical music using a "normal" piano at the commencement show! As a musical film that intends to present all the existing social problems, *Fame* relates the story to the issue of queer identity. During the 'sophomore year' part, the sensitive Montgomery (Paul McCrane) "comes out of the closet" bravely and announces



his gay identity in front of all his classmates in the drama class. To sum up, from my analysis above we get the clear picture that the film doesn't plan to provide any clear or simple solutions for these young people's troubles as well as contemporary social problems. In the end, every kid suddenly conforms to the adults' rules and performs happily in the commencement show. As to this "fake" happy ending, many critics argue that the director is too busy "digging out" the various illnesses of the American society without any intention to "cure" them. Moreover, in the eyes of the director, all the young "artists-to-be" seem to stick in a hopeless state and are very likely to have a miserable future.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, I think this film's somehow predictable ending happens to anticipate the upcoming domination of conservatism throughout the 80s. According to Brinkley's research, during the 70s the general American public (here means the middle-class) gradually became tired of all these radical protests, economic crisis and failure in international affairs. Their growing resentment against liberal actions soon resulted in the resurrection of conservatism and the presidency of Ronald Reagan in 1980.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, in *Fame* the final victory of the conservative adults, in my opinion, symbolizes the strong comeback of conservatism in the near future!

*Fame*, with its successful and impressive musical aesthetics, invites us to join the world of these teenage future artists and yet leaves us with too many unsolved mysteries hidden under its "happy-hereafter" ending. For me, maybe that's exactly why the film's modern "sequel," *Center Stage* (2000)<sup>61</sup>, shows up and solves every problem of its teenage protagonists without hesitation!

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<sup>59</sup> See Chiao Hsiung-Ping's book *A Thorough Study on the Musical Films*, p. 235-38.

<sup>60</sup> Brinkley: p. 849, 881-90.

<sup>61</sup> In my observation, the story of the musical film *Center Stage* is quite similar to *Fame*. This year 2000

movie also features a group of young people who not only have to face their own life troubles but also works hard to be professional dancers at the American Ballet Academy. For more detail about this film, see *IMDB*: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0210616/>>



## Chapter Three

### Dancing into the New 21st Century: Combining MTV with Teen-Pix Musical Films in the 1980s and Anticipating the New-Revival Musical Films after Millennium

In the beginning of the 1980s, the American public welcomed the full-scale comeback of conservatism as well as the presidency of Reagan (1980-1988) who promised to restore the nation's strength and pride in the world. Besides opposing the communist Soviet Union assertively, Reagan's tax-cut policy, to everyone's surprise, did bring about the sudden economic "revival" in the early 80s and the continual growth of economy stimulated the consumer spending and business investment. In fact, the economic "boom" throughout the 80s also speeded up the unequal distribution of wealth and income in the American society. As a result, more and more minority people lived in poverty than before.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the new and lethal disease, AIDS, first documented in 1981 and soon spreading among the gay communities, caused discussions and controversies on the issues of homosexuality and sexual behaviors in the society, which increased the fear of common people and caused the conservatives' strong attack upon liberal assertions that had contested with the traditional values.<sup>2</sup>

With the conservative political/social atmosphere and seemingly prosperous economic situation, the Hollywood industry during the 80s again faced another new wave of "Media Revolution," such as the cable TV networks

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail about the '80s political and economic policies during the presidency of Reagan, see Brinkley: p.890-96.

<sup>2</sup> See Brinkley: p.912-13 and Matthew Rettenmund's *Totally Awesome 80s*, p.3-4.

and the home VCRs (videocassette recorders).<sup>3</sup> In response, the industry cooperated with the TV broadcast system and even gained great profit from cable and videocassette distributions. At the same time, producing blockbuster films remained Hollywood's main policy and the industry succeeded in drawing audiences into the theaters with wide-screen photography and Dolby sound.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, by the early 80s the majority of film audience had turned out to be teens and their younger siblings, thus resulting in the teen-pix phenomenon throughout the whole decade. In addition, MTV, with its 24-hour nonstop broadcast of music videos, became daily "must-see" for every teenager in the 80s.<sup>5</sup> All these "teen-events" made some Hollywood producers change their original ways into making music-video-like feature films with potential hit soundtracks. Hollywood also began to cooperate with MTV for movie promotion. The popularity of the theme song, whose music video contained film clips as advertisement, often guaranteed a film's success in the box-office. To quote the critic R. Serge Denisoff, "In sum, the album and film were marketed to "sell one another"" (247).<sup>6</sup> Especially for the musical genre, due to the aesthetic characteristics (song and dance) and teenage audience, the '80s musical films (mostly made like feature-length music-video) relied heavily on MTV for "sales." For example,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Cook, in the 50s the invention of TV made great impacts on the Hollywood industry. Then during the 80s, American people not only had TV but were offered dozens of cable channels, some of which would show the recent hit films (e.g. HBO). Moreover, the popularization of VCRs distracted movie goers from theater and more and more audiences prefer to stay home watching the rented video movies. (Cook: p.933-50)

<sup>4</sup> See Cook: p.948 and Gomery: p.475-77.

<sup>5</sup> The birth of MTV was on August 1, 1981. See Rettenmund: p.4.

<sup>6</sup> This interesting comment is from ""We're at the Hub of It All": The Impact of MTV" in Denisoff's book, *Inside MTV*.

the teen-pix musicals, such as *Flashdance* (1983), *Footloose* (1984) or *Dirty Dancing* (1987), all became hit films cashing in on their music videos as well as soundtracks. Most important of all, Feuer pointed out that along with the '80s teen-pix phenomenon, the female-centered teenpic movies (e.g. *Pretty in Pink* (1986)) developed and even became “a format that dominated the 1980s teen musical” (138).<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, soon the musical films became a genre with shallow teenage stories and limited aesthetic values. Therefore, the musical film productions gradually retreated from the market and by the late 80s the genre went for its death again.

However, after a decade's silence, who would have anticipated that the musical films revived vigorously and sensationally while entering the twenty-first century? As we all know, Hollywood during this new age still doesn't change its only concerns for producing potential blockbuster “commodities”<sup>8</sup> and making money more the better. In my own observation, now since the audiences have seen all the “tricks” of Hollywood productions (e.g. 3D-animation films), this industry certainly needs some new stimulus to film-viewing consumption. Hence, to play on the nostalgic feelings for the last twentieth century, Hollywood starts to re-produce some “dead” genre films, including the musicals. Moreover, being an entertainment industry dominated by several conglomerates (e.g. Sony-Columbia and AOL Time Warner)<sup>9</sup>, as the scholar Maltby puts it,

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<sup>7</sup> Feuer claimed that both *Flashdance* and *Dirty Dancing* belonged to the female-centered teen musicals.

<sup>8</sup> According to Maltby, since the 1975 blockbuster phenomenon, the Hollywood movies “have become increasingly commodified, both in themselves as objects forming part of a chain of goods, and as “multipliers” for the sale of other products” (190).

<sup>9</sup> Maltby points out that starting from the 60s, many conglomerates showed up taking over Hollywood's motion picture companies as their branch corporations. Until now it is mostly the global media

the major Hollywood corporations are now involved in the production and distribution of a chain of interrelated cultural products: books, television shows, records, toys, games, videos, T-shirts, magazines, as well as tie-ins and merchandizing arrangements with the entire panoply of producers of consumer goods. (190)

Needless to say, for the sale of music records (either a singer's album or a movie soundtrack), the mutual interactions between Hollywood and MTV are definitely more frequent than ever. As for the recent New-Revival musical films, in my opinion, they share a rather interesting new relations with MTV than those teen-pix musicals did during the 80s. More importantly, the New-Revival musical films even inherit from the 80s the production trend of female-centered movies. To be more specific about my claims above, first I'd like to choose two female-leading musical films from different periods as the subject movies of my analysis: one is the '80s music-video-like teen-pix *Flashdance* (1983) and the other is nostalgic New-Revival Broadway adaptation *Chicago* (2002). Then I'll elaborate my thoughts by comparing the two films from two aspects, that is, the genre aesthetics as well as MTV-cooperation.

### **Musical films interacting with MTV : Case Studies of *Flashdance* (1983) and *Chicago* (2002)**

To begin with, let me give a brief introduction about the female protagonists' stories within the two films. In *Flashdance*, the leading female character, Alex (Jennifer Beals), works as a steel welder in daytime and exotic

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conglomerates, such as Viacom or Sony that owns Hollywood's major movie companies and gain great profits by extending the markets to books-of-the-film, soundtrack CDs, video games, DVDs , etc.. For more detail, see Maltby's *Hollywood Cinema*, p.173-223.

dancer at night. But her biggest dream is to get into a ballet school. Encouraged by her boyfriend (also her supervisor in the factory), she finally goes to the audition and dances to her success. Quite differently, in *Chicago* the female-lead Roxie Hart (Renée Zellweger), is a married chorus girl in the '20s Chicago who dreams of performing on stage again and being the headliner in Vaudeville. One night Roxie kills her lover and then is put into jail. There she meets another murderess, Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a former Vaudeville headliner. Chicago's newspapers love female criminal stories and Velma is at the top of the headlines. Then Roxie comes along and replaces Velma. They find themselves competing for not only the press's attention but also the focus of their shared lawyer, Billy Flynn (Richard Gere). In the end, both girls are released and hold a big show together. After reviewing these girls' "personal histories," I'd like to start my analysis by focusing on the two musicals' genre aesthetics first. In fact, as many critics have pointed out, both the two movies obviously follow the genre's Classical rule to adopt the self-reflexive style and nostalgic effect. Moreover, their narrative patterns are pastiches of the classical genre traditions with some "modern" elements added to it as well. As to *Flashdance*, Feuer asserted that the film's story pattern was

Fragments from the folk musical (everybody dances, even a street cop) combine with a typical fairy-tale plot (working-class girl falls for rich factory-owner) to culminate in the ultimate show finale. After auditioning (successfully we are led to believe) for the ballet, the music from the audition (*What a Feeling*) moves out into the world as the love plot is resolved with the now prima ballerina offering a rose to her real-life partner. As ever, a show is a metaphor for love; and love is what makes a

'show' happen. (133)<sup>10</sup>

She further concluded that although this musical film did seem as “modern creation” in the 80s due to its music-video-like quality, “its basic narrative pattern was as old as the musical itself” (133). Likewise, the movie *Chicago* inherits the long-term production trend of musical genre to adapt an original Broadway musical<sup>11</sup> into the lavish Hollywood version. Furthermore, in my own thought, its narrative pattern is actually the typical backstage musical plot combined with female criminal stories. In other words, the film is just like the '50s backstage musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) with the same female duo-leading style<sup>12</sup> but integrates into its narrative the “femme fatale” of film noir<sup>13</sup> and some black humor, too. To take it further, the musical *Chicago*, quite similar to *Singin' in the Rain*, intentionally “de-mystifies” the world of the Chicago press media and live vaudeville show business in the 20s so as to “re-mystify” the present Hollywood entertainment industry. Now that both the narratives of *Flashdance* and *Chicago* are proved to be self-reflexive, there must be nostalgic effect accompanying the reflexive style within the two films. First, one scene in *Flashdance* is rather interesting when the camera gives a

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<sup>10</sup> Here Feuer applied Rick Altman's influential classification of musical films, which divided all the musical movies into three general categories: the show musical, the fairy tale musical, and the folk musical. For the thorough analysis about the three categories, see Altman's great work, *The American Film Musical* or the simple version from his article “The Musical” in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*.

<sup>11</sup> According to the information at the website *Wikipedia*, *Chicago* was originally a Broadway musical first performed in 1975. And it was directed and choreographed by the '70s master of musical, Bob Fosse. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago\\_\(musical\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_(musical))>

<sup>12</sup> In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the two Hollywood female superstars, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, worked together as duo-leading actresses in this '50s musical film. Here I notice that in *Chicago* the co-starring of Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones are similar to that of Monroe and Russell.



pan shot of photo frames on the table, especially the close-up of the programme for “Ziegfeld Follies of 1931”<sup>14</sup>, in Hanna’s (Alex’s friend, an old lady who used to be a ballerina) bedroom. Here in my interpretation, the film intends to use the programme of Ziedfeld Follies not only to recall some audiences’ nostalgic memories of the earliest musical films in the 20s but also to suggest that Hanna herself might be one of the Ziegfeld girls in her youth. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the musical genre, according to Feuer, tends to present the conflict between the classical and popular styles (e.g. ballet vs. tap-dancing) in the film’s plot and always show the victory of the popular art. Similarly, I think in *Flashdance* the implication of Hanna’s identity as former Ziegfeld girl also partially points out the usual conflict between classical art (ballet) and popular entertainment (Ziegfeld Follies). What’s more, through Alex we can see the battle now has changed into “ballet vs. ‘80s popular dance style (e.g. breakdance).” In my opinion, although Alex’s final dance number for audition demonstrates the mixture of “‘80s pop performance fashions” (e.g. breakdance, exotic dance, and even figure skating), it only serves as an easy tool for the film to grant Alex a chance to enter the ballet school. To state more clearly, just like the ironic “music war” in *Fame*, this time the “dance war” in *Flashdance* ends up as a big blow again to Feuer’s claim above since the classical ballet is still the last winner as Alex certainly has to give up her original popular dance styles after being a ballet school student.

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<sup>13</sup> Film Noir (also called “Black Film”) is a Hollywood film genre whose conventional plot usually involves an anti-social male protagonist and a bad woman (femme fatale) who seduces him to commit crimes.

<sup>14</sup> According to the website *Ruth Etting: America’s Sweetheart of Song*, “Ziedfeld Follies of 1931” was the very last Follies show produced by the legendary Broadway producer, Florenz Ziegfeld because it opened shortly before his death.

<<http://www.ruthetting.com/broadway/ziegfeld-follies-1931.asp>>

Putting aside the “dance war,” let’s turn back to the theme of nostalgia within *Chicago*. This movie takes the nostalgic effect to extremes if compared with *Flashdance*. It manipulates a kind of “double nostalgic effect” and cashes in on that successfully. The musical film *Chicago* is a Broadway adaptation which pays homage to Bob Fosse and his unique choreographic style.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the film re-presents the lifestyle during the earliest years of the last twentieth century with the classical Jazz music, vaudeville show at the nightclub and girls cutting their hair like Louise Brooks’s bobbed fashion. Therefore, the retrospect of both the special choreography of Fosse in the ‘70s and the vanished atmosphere in the 20s functions as the “double nostalgic effect” that not only appeals to the audiences but also helps the box-office of this film as well as the sale of its tie-ins.

Next, I’d like to move on to the discussion of some “innovative” singing/dance sequences within the two films. To begin with, *Flashdance* is generally considered the musical movie which “pioneered the film/video tie-in with videos based on the diegesis of the film” (Feuer 132). Furthermore, I’d like to add that the dance numbers of *Flashdance* follow the genre tradition in their “forms” while appropriating MTV shooting style in their “contents.” How is this aesthetic structure presented through the film’s musical sequences? First of all, I notice that within this movie there are only female solo dance numbers but no couple-dancing or female duo performance, which is quite like the

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<sup>15</sup> According to the information at the website *Wikipedia*, Fosse developed a jazz dance style that combined the gestures of both sinuous flows and rapid kicks and jerks while exuding a stylized, cynical sexuality at the same time. Bowler hats, fishnet stockings, canes and chairs were distinctive trademarks within a Fosse-style dance routine.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob\\_Fosse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Fosse)>

arrangement of all Judy Garland-leading dance sequences throughout the classical musical film *A Star Is Born* (1954).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as Feuer has observed, the '80s teen-pix musical films borrow from MTV “a new way of organizing the sound/image relationship [ ... ] That is to say, the ‘numbers’ may be structured around a non-diegetic popular song to which the characters dance or throughout which narrative segments of an episodic structure are rhythmically cut” (Feuer 132). Likewise, in *Flashdance* I find two musical sequences corresponding to the second type of numbers described above; one is Alex’s solo performance “Maniac” and the other is Alex and her girlfriends’ group performance “I Love Rock 'N' Roll.” More interestingly, in my opinion, both the two numbers can hardly be regarded as normal “dance” sequences since they are actually constituted with “narrative segments” of these girls working out at the gym or at home. It’s also worth noticing that within the two numbers, most of the “narrative segments” are different shots of body fragments, which, in my assumption, is probably influenced by the music video’s visual aesthetics of “the continual return to close-ups of pop star faces” (Andrew Goodwin 109).<sup>17</sup> No wonder in this pioneering video-like musical movie, even “doing exercise” can be turned into very entertaining musical numbers! As for the New-Revival musical *Chicago*, just like the classical *Singin’ in the Rain* whose story is built around Freed’s song catalogue<sup>18</sup>, this film is in fact “a musical revue tied together by a story line” (Richard A. Blake

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<sup>16</sup> For more information about this Garland’s great film, see *IMDB*:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047522/>

<sup>17</sup> According to Goodwin, not only the close-up of a singer but also the display of the body is usually shown within a music video. See “Metanarratives of Stardom and Identity” in Goodwin’s book, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*.

<sup>18</sup> See Note No.26 at Chapter I .

23).<sup>19</sup> Or to state more precisely, it even adopts MTV's method of non - stop broadcasting of music videos and thus "wastes little time with narrative and skips breathlessly from one extravagant number to the next without missing a step" (Blake 23). Besides, at first glance the dance numbers within *Chicago* seem to emulate the famous Fosse style because the movie itself is a homage to this great musical director. However, if we examine it more closely, as the critic Richard A. Blake argues, the film's choreography "is closer to traditional jazz dance and vaudeville styles than the slide-and- strut style of Bob Fosse" (24). In other words, these dance numbers in *Chicago*, which follows the same genre tradition in *Singin' in the Rain*, tend to "recycle" various choreographic trends of the early musical films/live theater shows (Ziegfeld girls on stage, Busby Berkeley's choreography, vaudeville and tap-dance as well) and yet make a pastiche of those performing styles with some obvious "characteristics" (e.g. the costumes of fishnet stocking) of Fosse's choreography.<sup>20</sup> Compared with *Flashdance*, the film *Chicago*, in my viewpoint, no doubt applies the MTV shooting aesthetics to its musical sequences in a much more delicate way. Again, to quote Blake's comment, " Like a contemporary MTV video, it [ *the film Chicago* ] cuts relentlessly during the musical numbers, showing body parts rather than dancers" (23). In addition, I also discover that instead of the conventional dissolving shot, the film appropriates from music videos the typical montage shooting style, hence allowing its narrative to "flow" in and out freely between Roxie's fantasy (the musical numbers) and the real world (the main storyline). For example, during Roxie's first solo singing number "Funny

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<sup>19</sup> Quote from Blake's article "Certainly Chicago" in *America* 188.11 (2003): 23-4.

<sup>20</sup> See note No. 15.

Honey,” we can see evidently the continuous cross-cutting among the scenes of Roxie singing on stage and the police inquiring her husband, Amos, at the bedroom. What’s more, near the end of this sequence, Roxie’s imaginary stage performance and Amos’s final honest testimony are even juxtaposed together on the screen while Roxie is both singing and scolding Amos for slipping out the truth about this murder she has just committed. Most interesting of all, I find one musical number in *Chicago* extremely “innovative” since it apparently copies the idea of a pop music video and then expands on its own choreography. During the musical number “We Both Reached For The Gun /The Press Conference Rag,” Roxie’s lawyer, Billy, shows up as the puppeteer happily manipulating all these human puppets on stage, which are actually the reporters at the press conference as well as Roxie herself. Coincidentally, the same kind of puppet show setting has already appeared a few years earlier within the American boy-band, ‘NSYNC’s year 2000 music video “Bye Bye Bye.” Accordingly, that’s why I consider this particular number a copy of the pop music video and, obviously, MTV has influenced profoundly the aesthetics of the New-Revival musical films!

Nevertheless, when it comes to singing and dancing in a musical movie, one definitely can’t miss out the movie stars who give those excellent performances. Therefore, I’d like to focus on the co-existing relations between musical genre’s “amateurism” and Hollywood’s “star aura” within the two musical films. First, as mentioned above, in the ‘80s teen-pix musical movies some musical sequences are built on non-diegetic popular songs to which these characters dance. *Flashdance* is no exception in letting its female leading protagonist, Alex, dance out all her solo numbers with the ‘80s pop hit music. Furthermore, to generalize from the genre’s conventions, the so-called

“amateurism” within a musical film indicates that the leading actors (actresses), who are professional dancers in real life, usually tend to play the roles as ordinary non-dancers (e.g. Kelly as a sailor) or amateur dance-lovers with great potential (e.g. Travolta as the Disco King).<sup>21</sup> Here rather ironically, unlike Travolta who performs Tony’s solo dance personally in *Saturday Night Fever*, Beals actually can’t dance at all and thus the dance substitutes stand in for her to perform Alex’s solo numbers instead.<sup>22</sup> That is, although in the two musical films the protagonists, Tony and Alex, are both amateur yet talented dancers, the Hollywood stars who play them are in fact quite different since Beals is a “part-time” actress<sup>23</sup> that can’t dance while Travolta is a former Broadway musical actor. In contrast to the certainty of Travolta’s musical film star image, Beals’s stardom is apparently at risk of the exposure that she is a musical movie star who can’t do the dance herself. Without doubt, the director of *Flashdance* has thought of that possibility beforehand and tries to secure Beals’s star image by appropriating certain visual artifices from MTV. For instance, in Alex’s first solo dance number “He’s A Dream,” shots of body fragments (MTV’s visual aesthetics) are frequently used. Likewise, within this number “He’s A Dream,” many shots of body parts, such as the close-up of

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<sup>21</sup> In Chapter I , I’ve discussed about the definition of “amateur” and regarded it as one artifice for Flowing mise-en-scène, the genre’s first Classical characteristic. Here I expand the original definition of “amateur” since now the musical films after the Classical Era have to be taken into consideration, too.

<sup>22</sup> According to *IMDB*, most of Beals’s dance scenes were in fact performed by her dance substitute, Marine Jahan. Even the climactic final audition sequences were completed by three dance doubles instead of Beals herself.

<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085549/trivia>>

<sup>23</sup> Beals was still a freshman at the Yale University when she got the leading part as Alex. *IMDB*:

<<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000884/bio>>

Alex's limbs or her face, appear as well. In my interpretation, on the one hand the close-up of the limbs (e.g. Alex's leg) serves to distract the audience from noticing the existence of the dance double; on the other hand, the close-up of Alex's face reassures the authenticity of Beals's musical star image, which functions precisely like the close-up of a singer lip-synching the song in a music video. Aside from MTV's "close-up device," here I also observe that the director uses the "natural" dark setting (e.g. the stage without much lighting at a bar) to deliberately blur the face of the dancer on stage. After all those artifices are perfectly set, the director finally adopts the montage cross-cutting to make the substitute for Beals's dancing scene even more unidentified by the audience. Being one of the '80s top female musical film stars, Beals is truly lucky enough to have MTV help "invent" her as a dancing queen! Then how about these Hollywood stars dancing and singing within this New-Revival musical *Chicago*? As a matter of fact, unlike their "predecessors," nowadays Hollywood stars performing in a New-Revival musical movie no longer need to rely on the studio system or MTV to construct their "star-aura." Since the audience has realized the fact that during this modern age there is no such "full-scale professional" musical film star as Kelly any more<sup>24</sup>, the Hollywood stars now are quite comfortable to admit that instead of skilled dancers or singers, they are only professional actors who have to accept certain trainings to perform those musical sequences in the New-Revival musical films.

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<sup>24</sup> Here I mean that unlike those musical film stars during the Classical Era, nowadays no Hollywood stars are born with a particular film genre, especially a "dead" one like musical. Besides, the musical film stars during the Classical period are usually real professional dancers, singers and actors (actresses). As for the musical film stars after the Classical Era, I think only these who are Broadway-related or proved as trained dancer/singer (e.g. Liza Minnelli or Travolta) can be seen as "professional" as those stars in the classical musical movies.

Therefore, Zellweger and Gere are both reported to take vocal and dance training lessons for several months before they are “qualified” for the filming of dance/singing numbers in *Chicago*.<sup>25</sup> Besides, with the New-Revival musicals the definition of “amateurism” has changed again to indicate that the leading actors (actresses), who are not specialized dancers/singers at all, are trained for some time to become “amateur” musical performers so as to play the roles of professional entertainer (e.g. Zellweger as the ex-chorus girl, Roxie) or ordinary non-dancers (e.g. Gere as the lawyer that can tap-dance “naturally”). Meanwhile, contrary to the publicity strategies of the ‘80s teen-pix musical films, now Hollywood simply knows too well that “honesty is the best policy”—for the campaign of New-Revival musical movies. Different from the ‘80s *Flashdance* that used Beals’s phony musical star image as one point for advertising (though it did work!), the modern *Chicago* adopts the reverse strategy to announce proudly that their stars, originally non-musical ones, have been trained to sing and dance as well as those professionals and thus call for the audience to “just come seeing these Hollywood hot stars do the swing and tap in front of you!” The leading stars within *Chicago* surely benefit from that same publicity campaign due to the rebuilding of their star images as musical film stars of the new generation!

In addition to the genre aesthetics discussed above, next I’d like to concentrate on the interactions between MTV and the two musical films, especially demonstrating how certain music videos relate to them in an unexpected yet interesting way. Like what’s been mentioned, the ‘80s teen-pix

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<sup>25</sup> This information is again from *IMDB*. Moreover, unlike the other two leading stars, Catherine Zeta-Jones has no difficulty performing her dance numbers because she used to be professional stage musical actress in the U.K. before coming to Hollywood.



musical movies depend heavily on MTV for promotion and the film *Flashdance* becomes the first one to have tie-in music videos that help its box-office success.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, let me begin my analysis with *Flashdance* and the music video of its theme song, Irene Cara's "Flashdance...What A Feeling." In fact, the content of this music video is completely made up of clips taken from the film itself. In this video those film clips are rearranged just as a brief summary of this movie's plot as well as its various dance numbers. Nevertheless, according to Feuer, "music videos cannot be considered musicals if we define the musical by its dual levels of narrative and number. In the music video, everything is subordinated to the song, even the running time. In this sense, videos are more like commercials for musicals than like classic Hollywood musicals" (132). In my opinion, the function of Cara's music video exactly corresponds to Feuer's description above. More interestingly, another scholar, E. Ann Kaplan, stresses instead the music videos' "frequent reliance on classical Hollywood film genres, whether it be incorporation, parody, pastiche, or ridicule of representations from mainstream cinema that is going on" (34).<sup>27</sup> Especially in regard to the relation between music videos and musical film genre, she takes Madonna's 1985 music video "Material Girl" as a clear example that one of the music video's tendencies is to make pastiche of scenes from classical Hollywood musical films.<sup>28</sup> Following the same

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<sup>26</sup> For more detailed historical information about the film's promotion through MTV, see Denisoff: p.245-48.

<sup>27</sup> See the article "MTV and the avant-garde: the emergence of a postmodernist anti-aesthetic?" in Kaplan's book, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*.

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan observed that Madonna's video "Material Girl" "quoted" certain scene from the '50s classical musical movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. For detailed analysis about this music video, see Kaplan: p.116-27.

production trend, recently I happen to notice that the American female singer, J. Lo's (Jennifer Lopez) year 2002 music video "I'm Glad" actually "quotes" the scenes within the '80s *Flashdance*, re-presenting almost everything from the female-lead Alex's costumes to those memorable dance sequences. On one hand, I think J. Lo's video partially reflects on the resurrection of the Hollywood musical film genre as well as the nostalgic effect of these New-Revival musical movies. On the other hand, by the thorough imitation, or I should say appropriation of the female-lead Alex's image, of the video-like teen-pix *Flashdance* (instead of quoting from the old-fashioned classical musical films!), J. Lo's public image as a great dancer-singer is thus reconfirmed again. To be more specific, unlike Beals, J. Lo indeed does all the dancing herself in this nostalgic music video, which, in my viewpoint, "double-reinforces" the authenticity of her "singer-aura" as a talented dancing singer and actress, too. Apparently, concerning the case of J. Lo, during this new century it is through the quoting of the '80s musical films within a music video that a singer's image can be more convincing while in the 80s, it is a music video that "spoke louder than" a teen-pix musical!

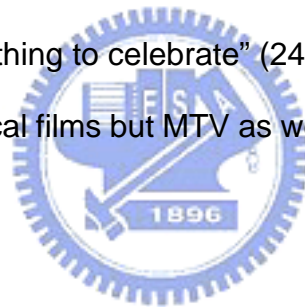
Next, let's examine another type of relationship between the film *Chicago* and the American female singer, Mya's year 2003 music video "My Love Is Like...Wo." First of all, aside from the tie-in video like "Flashdance...What A Feeling" or the nostalgic revival video like "I'm Glad," I consider Mya's music video a third kind that can be seen as the direct extension from a musical film itself. To state more clearly, part of this music video obviously extends from the musical film *Chicago* with Mya tap-dancing on similar stage settings as those within this movie. What's more, even Mya's "persona" within her video is also the extension from the minor character she portrays in *Chicago*. That is, in this

movie *Chicago* plays one murderess, Mona, who only appears shortly performing with the other five female prisoners (including Velma) during the dance number “Cell Block Tango.” Then slightly different from J. Lo, here Mya connects Mona’s dancing and singing image (actually performed by herself, too) to her own “singer-aura” through the dance scenes within the music video. As a result, when watching this video, the audience is immediately reminded of Mya’s character, Mona, as well as the astonishing dance sequence within *Chicago*, which thus “double-reassures” people’s impression of her public image as a brilliant dancer-singer. In other words, Mya has to make use of the popularity of the musical film *Chicago* to promote her single record!

Finally, I’d like to examine how the two musical films relate themselves to the existing social/political/cultural situations in their respective ages. As mentioned previously, during the 80s the teen-pix musical films had gradually developed into a dull and draggy film type filled with light-hearted teenage stories. In other words, unlike the pre teen-pix musical movie *Fame*, those following teen-pix musicals, *Flashdance*, for instance, has no intention to touch upon the serious social issues but desperately tries to allure the audiences into the world of its young protagonist, inviting them to laugh and cry together for the teenage troubles! Then stepping into the twenty-first century, the disastrous terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the continuous threat of bombing inside the main cities of the U.S. make the American people live under endless fear every single day. Meanwhile, similar to the situation that the earliest musical films were born with the Great Depression (from the late 1920s to the 30s), now the sudden revival of the musical film genre, as Blake claims, undoubtedly demonstrates that here comes “another age of uncertainty” and people need to escape again into the musical world full of singing and dancing

but definitely no bombing. Obviously, the New-Revival musical film *Chicago* is one of the products from this unstable new age. Furthermore, the movie *Chicago* adopts the settings of the 1920s while actually criticizing the manipulation of blood-thirsty media nowadays under the disguise of the past Jazz Era in the last century. However, even such a cynical New-Revival musical film as *Chicago* holds on to the genre's golden principle – being a musical film, it can criticize (or parody) whatever it likes (including the Hollywood industry itself) as long as it keeps glorifying the musical genre with the best singing and dancing performances!

In conclusion, as Blake puts it, “In an age of uncertainty such as this, we can’t escape from our problems, nor deny them. Amid wars and rumors of wars, we desperately need something to celebrate” (24). And I’d like to add that not only the New-Revival musical films but MTV as well join happily together in this dream-making party!



## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

To start with the last part of my research, first let me give a review of my findings and extensive thoughts of Hollywood musical films in the previous chapters. In Chapter One through Chapter Three, I explore the evolution and ramification of genre aesthetics of Hollywood musical films with detailed performance analysis on some representative musical films. Furthermore, I investigate how these films of different periods reflect socio-political situations at their times; how they fabricate “American dream” with singing and dancing numbers while simultaneously exposing the contradictions and fissures between the Hollywood simulacrum machine of “American dream” and socio-political realities.

In Chapter One, I investigate the three general characteristics of Hollywood musical films during the Classical period: The first one is “the flowing mise-en-scène,” which includes four types of artifices - dislocation and mixture of constructed and real settings, various dance numbers as the film-within-the films, amateur spontaneity (bricolage and non-choreography), and participating audience. The second one is “recycling the previous musical films with self-reflexive style and nostalgic effect.” And the third one is “celebration of love and domestic values.”

The three common genre characteristics have been exemplified with my performance analysis on Gene Kelly’s two musical films, *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). *On the Town* is a quite unique musical film which creates many “first-times” in the history of musical genre due to its aesthetic artifices. For example, the film includes certain musical sequences

that combine the shots of real scenic spots with fake studio settings. And the dance number performed by the leading female character serves as the first solo sequence especially designed to “dance out” the leading male protagonist’s fantasy about his ideal lover. Meanwhile, the special artifice, “clowning,” is also introduced here for the effect of non-choreography when non-dancer actors are cast within a musical number. Finally, the choreographic climax demonstrates a simple three-layered structure of “film-within-the films.”

Aside from genre aesthetics, I continue to investigate how the characters and plot of this film reflect American social and cultural situations at that time. In my observation, there are several contradictions and fissures inherent within this film. First, the different occupations of the three leading female characters imply the social-economic hierarchy at that time. Moreover, through the three girls the film partially suggests the career women’s common struggle between family and work in the post-war years. In addition to the issue of working girls, another contradiction is presented by the film’s “ambiguous” relation to the Cold War. Most interestingly, there is always an atmosphere of overflowing optimism throughout the film. In particular, praising the beauty of New York functions to envision the promising future in the post-war era.

Next, I turn to analyze the best-known musical film of all times, *Singin’ in the Rain*, examining not only the aesthetic devices of this movie but also star images (especially Kelly’s) and Hollywood industry in the 50s as well as their relation with and significance for the audience at that time. The film’s story is a parody and retrospection of Hollywood industry in the late 1920s. Besides the movie’s background being set inside the 20s’ Hollywood industry, most of its songs are directly quoted from Arthur Freed’s musical works for MGM during the 20s and 30s. What’s more, many costumes and settings in this film

intentionally parody former musical movies or stars in the silent film era. In my opinion, the film's basic tone of playful self-reflexive irony can even be traced to the opening credits. Nevertheless, the movie still dedicates certain numbers to paying homage to the great performances of live shows and early musical films. Apart from mocking or praising the past musical works, this movie also deconstructs the 20s' Hollywood behind the scene with the exposé of engineering construction by its dance numbers. Finally, the choreographic climax can be seen as the most "extravagant" collage of every best and memorable from Hollywood movies, representing an abundant combination among live theatrical flashbacks, reflexive settings, nostalgic songs/dance sequences and 50s' Hollywood musical creativity. This final dance sequence is no doubt the most fascinating demonstration of "the film-within-the films," which contains "a chain of dance/singing sequences" from outside to inside.

After a close look at the film's aesthetic devices, I move on to discuss how Hollywood manipulates the star images and how this kind of manipulation is revealed through the relations between the real movie stars and the characters they portray in this musical. Here I argue that because of the self-reflexive style of musical genre, the "aura" of a musical film star can be made up, recycled and even rebuilt. In other words, besides "the build-up personality outside the studio," a musical star's public image often interacts with the character's persona in a musical film and thus helps the establishment, reassurance or re-construction of the star's "authenticity." Likewise, in this film Don's persona and Kelly's star image always keep rather correspondent relations. What's more, this film plays on the theme of "fake star vs. true star," deconstructing the 20s' Hollywood star images so as to secure the contemporary stars in this 50s' musical. Besides, it also unconsciously

reinforces the idea that a real Hollywood star must have the talent of singing and dancing, which lifts musical film stars up to the highest position among all the other stars of different genres.

Apart from reassurance of stardom, the movie intends to reassure the peaceful and promising present of American society for both the ordinary people and the Hollywood employees. By returning to the innocent stage of the early Hollywood, the film “covers up” the fact that people who worked in the 50s’ Hollywood were suffering from the HUAC investigations, not to mention the American public.

Next, at the very beginning of Chapter Two, I explain why I choose to skip the 60s’ musical films and review briefly the developments of Hollywood industry, musical genre, and American social and political context from the 60s to 70s. Then I select three analytic subjects from the “New Hollywood” era, *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Fame* (1980). To start the discussion of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (RHPS), I focus on the film’s ironic twist of the genre aesthetics and Fine Art. The final floor show, which consists of several dance numbers as the story’s highlights, is one clear example of the film’s teasing irony. However, the biggest sarcasm comes from the film’s “setting-up” that in the end an incestuous alien couple who transgress the greatest taboo of human beings (and the genre’s classical formula, too) resume the order of American society. Meanwhile, the film demonstrates another special relation to audience-participation through its dance sequences. That is, the audiences in the theater would really stand up joining the dance with the characters of the film, which subverts the convention of the “passive” audience seeing a classical musical. This unique response of moviegoers indicates that RHPS is not only a musical but a cult film as well. It



surpasses the constraint of musical genre to become a movie in which the audiences can really take part.

After examining the subversive aesthetics, I turn to compare RHPS with *Singin' in the Rain*, discussing their rather unexpected connections. First of all, the contents of both films are “collages” to some degree. More interestingly, the two films, in my opinion, are both Camp. Here I refer to Sontag’s original concepts of “Camp” and elaborate the camp aesthetics and politics of both musicals. In terms of singing and dance numbers, the two films match Sontag’s definition of Camp quite well. Furthermore, the images of musical stars or the characters they play also turn out to be Camp, especially the leading protagonist of RHPS, Dr. Frank, who becomes a “gay-camp” character since nowadays the term “camp” relates directly to queer or homosexuality. Similarly, many modern studies also point out the queer side of Kelly’s camp image in the Classical 50s and post-studio 70s.

Next, I focus on the various love relations among the characters of RHPS and demonstrate how they reflect on the 70s’ gender movements. Starting with the love affairs of the four protagonists, I assert that Dr. Frank is obviously a bisexual while many scholars claim that Dr. Frank is actually a gay concerning his preference for Rocky. Then I consider Brad doubtlessly a straight man who is influenced by sexual liberation rather than being imbued with gay sensibilities. By contrast, Janet is an eager participant in sexual liberation. To take it further, regarding the sexual relation between Dr. Frank and Janet, Dr. Frank, generally recognized as a powerful gay, somehow reproduces the traditional heterosexual hierarchy between male (himself) and female (Janet). To sum up, RHPS is basically “about gay, addressed to gay, and for gay.”

Besides the issue of gender, in RHPS there is one character, Dr. Scott, associated with the 70s' political events. The movie uses the handicap Dr. Scott to insinuate President Nixon's dishonorable Watergate scandal and suggest the paralysis of power as well as the loss of order. Yet, RHPS relates some of its characters to the 70s' pop culture as well. I find out that the images of certain 70s' rock stars, such as David Bowie and Elvis Presley, are appropriated here for imitation or parody by this musical's protagonists.

After the discussion of RHPS, I shift to the teen-targeted musical film, *Saturday Night Fever*. While the film portrays the real life dilemmas of Brooklyn teenagers, it still follows musical genre's basic rules in a rather skillful way. Here by examining the opening number and couple-dancing sequences, I demonstrate how this musical produces "innovation as conservation." Following the analysis of genre aesthetics, I move on to examine the film's plot and characters and elaborate how they reflect the 70s' economic or social situations. Interestingly, the leading protagonist, Tony, is basically a good kid and a special "teenpic hero" who never takes drugs or sleeps around with every girl he meets and expresses more concern about the minority groups like gay people. In addition, through Tony and his friends, the movie deals with the continuous racial conflicts in the American society, especially the rivalry among Italian-American (Tony), Spanish-American and Puerto Rican- American. Ironically, these racial wars are deliberately simplified as a teenage group fighting or changed into a minor event less important than Tony's future life decision. Finally, the film contributes some parts to the issue of "religion vs. modern law," partially reflecting the serious controversy between the abortion rights and Christian belief during the 70s.

Similar to *Saturday Night Fever*, the pre teen-pix musical, *Fame*, makes

its young protagonists, with different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, face their personal troubles and strive for being professional artists at the same time. More notably, it deals with more wide-ranging social issues through the teenage dilemmas. Besides, this movie, as a whole, adopts exactly the classical formulas of musical genre and yet seizes the chance to make little twists, too. In my opinion, the self-reflexive dance number at the subway station, can be seen as the most sarcastic in the film. It not only pays homage to Kelly but also changes his original version of “Singing in the Rain” into a frightening sequence involving the theme of teenage suicide.

Then I concentrate on the film’s characters and their connections with the 70s’ social context, pointing out various contemporary social problems that are extended from the lives of these young kids and presented through their conflicts with the conservative adults like their parents or teachers. For instance, the opposition between Leroy and Mrs. Sherwood depicts the continuous racial conflict between black and white people in the American society. Meanwhile, Leroy and Hilary’s cross-racial love is not only about different races but also about the social class hierarchy. What’s more, his illiteracy reflects the national economic crisis in the 70s. By contrast, Bruno’s rivalry with Mr. Shorofsky brings out the eternal theme of “classical music vs. popular music” as Feuer has observed in the Classical musical films. Nevertheless, unlike Feuer’s statement that the popular music is always the winner, in the end Bruno gives in to Mr. Shorofsky as well as the classical music.

Finally, I conclude that the film has no intention to provide clear or simple solutions to these young people’s troubles as well as contemporary social problems. Moreover, the films’ predictable ending happens to anticipate the

upcoming domination of conservatism throughout the 80s.

In Chapter Three, I give a review of the social/ political situations as well as the development of Hollywood industry and musical genre in the 80s and years after Millennium. It's worth noticing that female-centered teen-pix movies became a format that dominated the 80s' musicals. As for the recent New-Revival musical films, in my observation, they share a rather interesting new relations with MTV than those teen-pix musicals did during the 80s. Besides, the New-Revival musical films inherit the 80s' production trend of female-centered movies. Here I examine two female-leading musical films from different periods, *Flashdance* (1983) and *Chicago* (2002), and compare them from the aspects of genre aesthetics and MTV-cooperation.

To begin with, both the two movies obviously follow the genre's Classical rule to adopt the self-reflexive style and nostalgic effect. In regard to the self-reflexive style, both musicals' narrative patterns are pastiche of the classical traditions with some "modern" elements added to it. As to the theme of nostalgia, one special scene in *Flashdance* intends to recall the audiences' nostalgic memories of the 20s' musical films. What's more, this scene also partially implies the usual conflict between classical art (ballet) and popular entertainment (Ziegfeld Follies). Compared with *Flashdance*, I point out *Chicago* manipulates a kind of "double-nostalgic effect" and cashes in on that successfully.

Next, I move on to discuss certain innovative singing/dance numbers within the two films. In my observation, the musical sequences of both movies follow the genre traditions and appropriate MTV shooting style at the same time. Apart from those interesting musical numbers, I also discuss the co-existing relations between "amateurism" and "star aura" in the two musical

films. According to the genre tradition, amateurism involves the leading actors, who are professional dancers in real life, playing the roles as ordinary non-dancer or amateur with great talent. On the contrary, in *Flashdance*, the female star, Jennifer Beals, who can't dance at all gets the chance to portray the leading protagonist, Alex. To secure her musical star image, the film appropriates several visual artifices from MTV. All these visual tricks serve to distract audiences from noticing the dance double or reassure the authenticity of Beals's dance performance. Unlike the 80s' musical stars, now Hollywood stars performing in a New-Revival musical movie need not rely on MTV to construct their "star-aura." Meanwhile, the definition of "amateurism" has changed to indicate that the leading actors who are not specialized dancers/singers at all, are trained for some time to become "amateur" musical performers so as to play the roles of professional entertainer or ordinary non-dancers. As a result, different from *Flashdance* that uses Beals's phony musical star image as one point for advertising, *Chicago* adopts the opposite strategy to announce that their stars, originally non-musical ones, have been trained to sing and dance as well as those professionals and call for the audience to come seeing these Hollywood hot stars do the swing and tap on screen.

After examining the stars, I concentrate on the interactions between MTV and the two musical films and demonstrate how certain music videos relate to them in an interesting way. First of all, I start with *Flashdance* and its tie-in music video, Irene Cara's "Flashdance...What A Feeling." Obviously, this video functions as a brief summary of this movie's plot as well as a mini commercial for *Flashdance*. More interestingly, I notice that the female singer, J. Lo's (Jennifer Lopez) 2002 music video "I'm Glad" quotes exactly the scenes from

*Flashdance*. On the one hand, J. Lo's video partially reflects on the revival of musical genre and the nostalgic effect of the New-Revival musical movies. On the other hand, with the full imitation of Alex's performance in *Flashdance*, Lopez's public image as a great dancer-singer is thus consolidated again. Besides the tie-in video or the nostalgic revival video, Mya's 2003 music video "My Love Is Like...Wo" can be considered a third kind that is the direct extension from the musical film *Chicago*. Slightly different from J. Lo, Mya extends her own "singer-aura" from the minor character (Mona) she plays in the film *Chicago*, which reassures doubly people's impression of Mya's public image as a brilliant dancer-singer.

Finally, I come to examine how the two musical films relate themselves to the social/political/cultural situations in their respective ages. For *Flashdance*, it has no intention to deal with the 80s' social issues but tries hard to allure the audiences into the simple world of its young protagonists and their teenage troubles. As to *Chicago*, responding to the continual terrorist threat in America, a New-Revival musical film like it indicate that faced with the age of "uncertainty," people need to escape again into the musical world with singing and dancing but definitely no bombing.

From the analysis of all these different musical films, we can see clearly that the Hollywood musical movies do partially reflect the contemporary social, political or economic situations in the American society. Ironically, Maltby gives a sharp comment that "Hollywood is what they [ *the film audience* ] imagine America to be" (30). Here regarding the relationship of the musical world and the reality, I can't agree more with Maltby's assertion since the "partial exposure" of the social reality in a musical film also indicates the "veiling" of some other truth at the same time. Moreover, I think it's exactly this half-real,

half-imaginary quality of the Utopian musical world that forms the ultimate charm of the musical films for every generation. At last, to bring my whole thesis to a close, I'd like to quote the famous line from Mr. Zidler, the club's owner in *Moulin Rouge*, "The Show Must Go On!"



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< [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)>



## Filmography

### © Chapter One

*On the Town.* Dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1949.

*Singin' in the Rain.* Dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952.

### © Chapter Two

*Rocky Horror Picture Show.* Dir. Jim Sharman, 1975.

*Saturday Night Fever.* Dir. John Badham, 1977.

*Fame.* Dir. Alan Parker, 1980.

### © Chapter Three

*Flashdance.* Dir. Adrian Lyne, 1983.

*Chicago.* Dir. Rob Marshall, 2002.



## Autobiography

I, Alice Chang, was born in the beautiful “Rainy City,” Keelung. My hobbies include reading, listening to music, watching TV and traveling. Most important of all, I’m proud to be a devoted movie fan who loves to stay in the dark theater all day long, laughing and crying with those stars on the silver screen. After graduating from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Chiao Tung University, I continued to study in the NCTU Graduate Institute of Linguistics and Cultural Studies. Now I just finished my thesis about the Hollywood musical films.

