# You Must Love Me:
# Emotional Identification in Hollywood's Post-Classical Camp Musicals

by

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## Introduction

In the original 1982 Off-Broadway production of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken's groundbreaking horror comedy musical *Little Shop of Horrors*, Seymour (originally played by Lee Wilkof) attempts to destroy his evil plant by entering its mouth with a machete to kill it from the inside. The plant, which he has named Audrey II (originally voiced by Ron Taylor with a puppet operated by Martin P. Robinson), eats him and conquers the world. In the translation from stage production to movie musical, something went wrong. Test audiences were in love with *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz, US, 1986), until the demise of the main characters in last twenty minutes. In response, Oz and his colleagues went back to the drawing board, hastily cobbling together a new ending in which the plant (Levi Stubbs) is electrocuted and Seymour (Rick Moranis) and Audrey (Ellen Greene) live happily ever after. Frank Oz has theorized that audiences reacted so poorly to the original ending because of the presence of close-ups creating more audience identification with Seymour and Audrey (Kubas-Meyer 2012). This reaches at something that should be further explored: the relationship between camp musicals and emotional identification.

By "emotional identification" I do not simply mean the process of recognizing the emotions of the characters portrayed on screen. This is a part of it, but not the whole picture. In this case, emotional identification refers to how the visual, sound, narrative, and performance elements of a film distinctly generate an affective interaction with the text on the part of the audience. The emotions generated by this interaction can vary wildly; taking the form of sadness, joy, comfort, pity, laughter, horror, and more. This is similar to Linda Williams' concept of the body genre, or a type of film which elicits a physical response from the audience. Her essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" discusses this phenomenon in terms of melodrama,

horror, and pornography. Of these three, the most relevant to the musical is melodrama, although elements of horror appear as well. Williams discusses these films in terms of their excesses; with the excessive elements of each of these three genres being emotion, violence, and sex (3). This reading of melodrama in particular and the affective responses generated through its emotional excesses provides a link between melodrama and camp.

Camp as a concept has proven to be difficult to define, although many have tried. In Susan Sontag's essay, "Notes on 'Camp,'" she describes camp as an aesthetic sensibility based in artifice and stylization. According to Sontag, camp solely emphasizes style in order to create a contentless, politically disengaged sensibility. She describes camp aesthetics as exaggerated and "off," with examples including The Brown Derby restaurant in Los Angeles, Tiffany lamps, and the films of Jean Cocteau (278). Sontag also makes a distinction between naïve camp and deliberate camp (or "camping") in which naïve camp is rooted in failed seriousness. She considers this type of camp to be the superior form (281).

Some of Sontag's ideas about camp saw pushback in Bruce LaBruce's manifesto "Notes on Camp/Anti Camp" (2015). LaBruce begins by posing a broader conception of camp including subcategories like Classic Gay Camp, Bad Straight Camp, Ultra Camp, High Camp, Reactionary Camp, and more. LaBruce agrees with Sontag's analysis of camp style as being based in artifice and stylization but disagrees with the assertion that camp is apolitical, stating that "[His] perhaps idealized conception of camp is that it is, or was, by its very nature political, subversive, even revolutionary, at least in its most pure and sophisticated manifestations" (2015). His examples of camp filmmaking include *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, US, 1962) and the works of John Waters. LaBruce posits that camp has become pop culture's dominant

sensibility, diluting its power and esoteric means of signification developed through its original uses as a means of communication within the underground queer world.

Raymond Knapp begins to explore the relationship between camp and sincerity in "The Musical Faces of Pirate Camp in Hollywood (Part 1)" (2014), writing that "an important kind of camp intensifies the blatantly artificial in order to divert from, but then bring heightened attention to, what outside a camp context would be understood as the actual content, or essence, of a dramatic event… The sentimental substance breaks the style, allowing both substance and style to matter tremendously and at the same time" (21-22).

These conceptions of camp provide an excellent starting point, but they also have shortcomings. Sontag's essay is important and influential, but she misses the mark on the relationship between style and substance in camp art. Her analysis of style is generally correct, but her ideas about substance are not. She diminishes the importance of political content in camp, erasing the contributions of Black and queer artists in its development. LaBruce points discussions of camp in a direction which emphasizes both form and content; but the discussion of said content is focused mainly on political content and his examples do not include any musicals despite the mode often being prized for its extravagant stylings. Knapp's analysis points toward a conceptualization of camp that involves some level of sincerity and use of traditional narrative structures to create emotional identification that can be seen in *Little Shop of Horrors.* However, he does not concern himself with how the presence of recognizable performers like Judy Garland and Gene Kelly in *The Pirate* (Vincente Minnelli, US, 1948) contribute to emotional identification or how highly referential aesthetics tap into the audience's nostalgia. I want to point the more rounded analysis of camp's style/substance relations as seen in the

writings of LaBruce and Knapp towards how the camp musicals of the late 20th century promote emotional identification.

Central to understanding how these films create emotional identification is the concept of abjection. As theorized by Julia Kristeva, abjection refers not only to the process of casting out, but becomes the expulsion of anyone or anything which is "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Phillips 20). Abjection under Kristeva's formulation is mainly concerned with that which disrupts traditional means of classification. While this is applicable to the films examined here, I will be using the term abjection more in line with Imogen Tyler's book *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, in which the concept "allows us to think about forms of violence and social exclusion on multiple scales and from multiple perspectives" (21). She cites the work of Georges Bataille and his description of the paradoxical nature of abjection, which includes waste populations through their exclusion (20). People and groups are expelled through responses of disgust, which are "symptomatic of wider social relations of power" (24) and are thus rendered in political terms. Disgust is a powerful tool used across political ideologies like racism, misogyny, and homophobia which Tyler describes as being "preoccupied with social hygiene" (25).

Tyler goes on to discuss the Eurocentric, imperialist ideological nature of abjection as a concept, and the field of psychoanalysis more generally. This does not mean that the term is not useful to engage with. On the contrary, this insight allows for the term to be historicized and used to contextualize processes and effects of exclusionary politics in colonialist societies. Citing the writings of Judith Butler, Tyler describes:

> a social theory of abjection wherein abjection is understood as a mechanism of governance through aversion, which… might be *queered* through alternative citational practices… The politicization of abjection… involves both the historicization of abjection… and the collective demand of those made abject to be heard in the political present tense (37).

The films in this project queer imperialist, Western categories of abjection through their sympathy for the abjected figure; who is rendered thus explicitly in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. The disgust-based aversion from and violence inflicted upon these characters is deployed in a manner intended to encourage a sense of emotional identification from the audience. Abjection in these films is not meant to reinforce the process of abjection as necessary for maintaining social hygiene, but to form a kind of resistance to abjection through its sympathetic presentation and aesthetics which align with the quintessentially queer sensibility of camp. This can be done through playful means like slapstick, as well as through explicit depictions of discrimination.

It is also relevant to contextualize the existing scholarship done on the Hollywood musical as a quintessential genre of the classic era. This work by scholars like Jane Feuer, Rick Altman, Jeanine Basinger, Amy Herzog, and Matthew Tinkcom tends to focus almost exclusively on the 1930s through the 1960s, as this is the era in which the film musical was at its most popular and lucrative. These writings often come with an assessment of the period to follow as constituting the "death" of the musical. While it is true that the decades following the collapse of the studio system saw a decline in the output of movie musicals, they never completely ceased to exist. Instead their budgets got smaller, the audience became more niche, and there was an increased level of freedom to break with traditional aesthetic, narrative, and star patterns which pushed the musical forward.

In the first chapter, I explore how *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz, US, 1986) and *The Great Muppet Caper* (Jim Henson, US, 1981) employ the aesthetic of cuteness using the trademark excess and artifice of camp to highlight the emotional and physical vulnerability of the characters, whose emotions are often played sincerely instead of ironically. In the second chapter

I look at how *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, US, 1978) and *Xanadu* (Robert Greenwald, US, 1980) pay homage to classic and contemporary film genres in order to create a sense of familiarity for viewers across demographics. My analysis of genre, homage, and stardom reveals how camp operates distinctively in *The Wiz* as a means of channeling audience experiences of racial difference. Finally, I analyze the role of major stars and their public personae in shaping how audiences are invited to recalibrate their identification with leading characters in high-profile musical adaptations. Focusing on *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, US, 1983) and *Evita* (Alan Parker, US, 1996), I analyze how the shifting power dynamics of Hollywood in the post-classical era enabled stars to influence or advocate changes in the film adaptations of preexisting narratives to emphasize the outcast status of the characters they portray.

This project focuses mainly on individual characters, figures, and performers for analyzing these dynamics of emotional identification, drawing from the insights of star studies to analyze how their personae is or is not made legible by the films. These figures may be the one character central to the story or part of a cohesive ensemble; and the people portraying them range from unknown actors and low-profile puppeteers to some of the biggest stars in the world. In the post-classical era, stardom is increasingly figured as a transmedia phenomenon, and the actors featured in the musicals discussed become imbued with a new kind of "star power" as their performances cross-promote film, music, and theater industries. In the cases examined, the leading performers are the most publicly visible figures involved in the production of the films, and as I discuss, they further serve as a key vehicle for generating audiences' emotional investment in the story and characters.

## In the Gutter: Cuteness and Low-Profile Ensemble Casts

*Little Shop of Horrors* lacks A-List celebrities in its two lead roles—that of the nebbish orphaned florist Seymour Krelborn and his hopelessly lacking in self-confidence coworker Audrey. Yet this was almost not the case, as Cyndi Lauper was strongly considered for the part of Audrey but ended up declining the role (Dee 2020), which eventually went to Off-Broadway originator Ellen Greene. This turn against celebrity characterizes a larger pattern in *Little Shop of Horrors*' casting; in which none of the principal, non-evil human roles are played by major stars. The film's showcasing of lesser-known performers encourages audiences to enter into an emotional identification with the film's abject characters that queerly span the human and nonhuman.

The film does feature some quintessential stars of 1980s Hollywood, but only in small cameo roles. The most notable of these is Steve Martin as Orin Scrivello, Audrey's abusive boyfriend and a sadistic dentist who gets off on torturing his patients. His casting creates a notable dynamic in which the wealthy and powerful star is domineering and physically abusive to an anonymous woman. This creates sympathy for Audrey on the part of the audience. Audrey's abjection is used to endear the audience to her, rendering her suffering in gendered and classed terms, with the violence eliciting a protective response from the audience who recognize themselves in her low self-esteem and want to see her be happy. Nobody wants to watch another person be physically abused, but the shock of seeing the violence be delivered by a huge and well-liked star to an anonymous and powerless victim increases its shock value and thus its emotional impact. This also draws from many classic musical theater works in which the female lead endures abuse from her romantic partner seen most famously with Julie Jordan in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* (1945) and Nancy from Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (1963).

*Little Shop of Horrors* is an exceptionally and deliberately campy film in its emphasis on artifice and insincerity (Sontag 288). In terms of the performances, this is seen mainly in the performances of the villainous characters. Steve Martin's Orin Scrivello is a dentist with an Elvis Presley haircut who rides a motorcycle with no helmet, wears copious amounts of black leather, and speaks with a highly exaggerated pseudo-Southern drawl. He flies into a rage if anyone says his name or even refers to him without including his medical credentials, insists on using dull "antique" drills on his patients, rips the heads off dolls, and gets high on nitrous oxide at work while refusing to provide any to his patients so that they have to feel the pain. His song, "Dentist!" is an anthem to the joys of causing pain and suffering to others. Orin is less an actual dentist than a representation of the fears that young children have of going to the dentist. To paraphrase Susan Sontag, he is not a dentist, but a "dentist."

Orin is the only major character who starts the film off with any amount of financial success, and he thrives on the pain that he can cause to others before callously casting them aside. He is the comparative upper class of Skid Row and actively gets joy out of causing and perpetuating the abjection of others, especially Audrey. Yet while the film adheres to a more conventional camp use of irony in its transformation of the "leading man" (here, Martin) into a villainous sociopath, it also takes on a tone of sincerity in encouraging the viewer's proximity to the abject. Martin's performance is highly comedic, but the violence he inflicts on Audrey is not; he treads the line between the exaggerated silly tone of the first half of the film while not endearing him to the audience enough that there is any doubt immediately cast on the morality of Seymour's decision to feed him to the plant. The film's portrayal of the isomorphic relationship between the human Audrey and extraterrestrial plant-like creature Audrey II further reveals scenes of violence, mutilation, and death to be central to the genre's engagements with a kind of

"thing-character." This filmic adaptation of the Off-Broadway musical celebrates states of abjection not solely in the spirit of ironic play, but as a means to transform "human relations into thinglike ones" (Ngai 844) and vice versa in ways that resuscitate the sincerity of the classical Hollywood musical. In the process the film showcases modes of crossing and reversal that place questions of gender, race, class, and sexuality at the heart of the genre that are suggestive for understanding the post-classical musical's emotional appeals to audiences.

Audrey II, as portrayed by "Four Tops" singer Levi Stubbs, falls into a mode of much more likable cartoon villainy. We find out late in the film that Audrey II's plan is to get Seymour to feed him enough so that he can grow, have his buds sold as commercial product across the globe, the buds will grow, and the Audrey IIs will take over the world. Despite the addition of the R&B/funk/rock song "Mean Green Mother from Outer Space," the film does little to explain much about Audrey II's backstory or why he wants to take over the world in the first place. Instead, Stubbs' vocal performance is so charismatic and expressive in both his dialogue and musical numbers that the audience can get fully on board with his "evil for fun of it" mentality. Audrey II is also given two of the film's catchiest musical numbers—"Feed Me (Git It!)" and the aforementioned "Mean Green Mother from Outer Space," increasing the sense of fun whenever he is on-screen. In these songs, Stubbs uses the full range of his incredibly versatile voice. He possesses a powerful, commanding baritone capable of screlting out the top notes punctuated with high-pitched squeaks and cackles. This is a level of expression not reached by any of the other performances, creating an electrifying energy which succeeds at getting the audience to ironically invest in Audrey II's evil plan without detracting from the more sincere investment in the relationship between Seymour and Audrey.

Audrey II is also racially coded as Black due to his being voiced by Levi Stubbs, in contrast to the almost entirely white main cast (the only other Black cast members are three members of the Greek chorus). The creature's design blends elements of the Venus fly trap and avocado plants, implying a sexed yet nonraced being—those elements of racial coding come through in the music and voice performance. The songs performed by Seymour and Audrey are traditional musical theatre numbers; whereas Audrey II's musical numbers blend African American musical styles like soul, R&B, gospel, rock, and funk. The lyrics and dialogue for the character contain urban slang associated with African American Vernacular English, and organ music reminiscent of Black gospel underscores many of Audrey II's scenes.

The sincerity displayed in the Audrey-Seymour coupling is best observed by focusing on the musical number "Somewhere That's Green" and its reprise. In "Somewhere That's Green," Audrey sings about the middle-class suburban life she dreams of having outside of Skid Row, but that deep down she knows will never come true. Howard Ashman's lyrics are full of jokes about how the things she longs for—such as a washer/dryer unit and a "big, enormous twelve-inch screen" —had become commonplace household items by the 1980s. In many stage productions this number is played for comedy, but the way that Frank Oz and Greene present it in the film version foregrounds the song's melancholy and its ties to a working class subject position in order to forge a stronger emotional connection between the audience and Audrey.

Adapting the performance for the more intimate nature of the film created a version of the song in which Ellen Greene performs the piece in a more subdued way. Instead of ramping up enthusiasm for lines like "a washer and a dryer, and an ironing machine," Greene plays everything with a sense of quiet longing and desperation. Oz elects to shoot the non-fantasy segments of the song in close-ups and medium close-ups, firmly placing the emphasis on the

subtleties of Greene's facial expressions. Oz also elects to downplay the "big, enormous twelve-inch screen" joke by showing us the size of the television in the fantasy sequence before Audrey says the line. This de-emphasizes the humor of the line in favor of creating a sense of pity for Audrey by showing how desperate she is for an ordinary life and how deep down she knows she will never get it because she feels that she does not deserve it. To echo Imogen Tyler, Audrey has been "[stripped] of [her] human dignity and [reproduced] as dehumanized waste, the disposable dregs and refuse of social life" (21). Real life gendered and classed forms of abjection are mimicked around the character of Audrey in order to prompt the audience to form an affective relationship with the character which swaps the dominant culture's response of disgust (Tyler 25) with one characterized by empathy and/or pity.

The song comes back towards the end of the film as Audrey dies after nearly being eaten by Audrey II. She expresses her dying wish to Seymour that she wants him to feed her to the plant so it can continue to grow and bring him "all the wonderful things [he deserves]." This reprise expresses the ironic development that Audrey will in fact be going somewhere green; but instead of the 1950s American dream lifestyle she longed for, she's being fed to a carnivorous alien plant. Once again, Ellen Greene's performance cuts through this dramatic irony and brings forth the core tragedy of the character. At the beginning of the film, we see her condemn herself to a relationship with the abusive dentist Orin out of a belief that she's led a terrible life and this is the only relationship she deserves. She has forced herself to accept her abjection because her constant self-doubt keeps telling her that she brought it on herself. Then when she finally breaks free of that mindset and enters a relationship with the nice guy she always secretly wanted, the consequences of his greed end up condemning her to an early death. We see the contentment in

her face when she sings about living on through Audrey II, prompting feelings of pity for her that she will never get the life that she deserves.

In Sianne Ngai's essay "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005), she describes cuteness as an aesthetic of "exaggerated passivity and vulnerability" (816), which is relevant to how Audrey is presented visually and vocally in contrast with her de facto counterpart in the form of Audrey II. Audrey's costuming combines the silhouette of 1950s fashion icons like Marilyn Monroe (low-cut tops, form-fitting pencil skirts, and a strong hourglass shape) with visual indicators of Orin's abuse. Her first appearance builds to the reveal of her black eye, and the outfit she wears during "Somewhere That's Green" features a sling for her injured arm.

This vulnerability becomes aesthetically linked to the normative ideas of white middle-class suburban living—and in Audrey's case the additional ideals of white womanhood—that the film satirizes. In the fantasy sequence that takes up the middle section of "Somewhere That's Green," we see a major shift in Audrey's wardrobe. Gone is the sexualized Monroe aesthetic in favor of a full A-line skirt and housewife attire reminiscent of Donna Reed, who is directly invoked by Ashman's lyrics. The voice that Greene puts on as Audrey also emphasizes a level of vulnerability through its childish elements of softness, higher pitch, and a lisp. This portrayal of normative 1950s white womanhood sees contrast in the racialized Black Audrey II.

All of these elements come together to create a more sympathetic portrayal of Seymour and Audrey in comparison to the show which presents Seymour as less innocent in procuring Audrey II's meals. Getting the audience to invest in the characters in this way elevates the central cautionary tale by getting the audience to fully buy into their fantasies of white middle-class life, punishing them by killing the characters they like and Audrey II eating the audience because of their complicity in these oppressive fantasies. And this would not be the only time

Frank Oz played a major creative role in a film musical that uses cuteness as a means of promoting emotional identification and also features puppets.

It would make for an incomplete analysis to discuss dynamics of emotional identification in *The Great Muppet Caper* (Jim Henson, US, 1981) without acknowledging how its existence as an entry in a larger franchise impacts how audiences interact with the film. By the time of *The Great Muppet Caper*'s release, fans of the Muppets would have already been exposed to all five seasons and 120 episodes of *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981) as well as *The Muppet Movie* (James Frawley, US, 1979), which had premiered to massive critical and financial success only two years earlier. The Muppets were a true cultural phenomenon, thus most of the audience of their later films will be coming in with prior knowledge of and existing attachment to the recurring characters.

The personalities of these characters are crafted to feel instantly familiar while still maintaining the appeal that comes with their zany antics. Kermit the Frog (Jim Henson) is the leader of the Muppets and host of *The Muppet Show*. He usually occupies the role of the straight man, being a lot more even keeled and calmer than the rest of the Muppets. However, Kermit also frequently gets frustrated with the chaos that surrounds him. In *The Muppet Movie*, we learn that Kermit is the one primarily responsible for the creation of the Muppet family, bringing the characters together on a road trip to Hollywood. In *The Great Muppet Caper*, he plays a version of himself as an American reporter who ventures to England to catch a jewel thief. Kermit is the most earnest of the Muppet characters, wanting to break into show business for the sole purpose of creating happiness for others as opposed to a desire for fame and fortune. He almost resembles an amphibian James Stewart—particularly his characters Jefferson Smith from *Mr. Smith Goes*

*to Washington* (Frank Capra, US, 1939) and George Bailey from *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, US, 1946) —in his wholesomeness, optimism, and dedication to the other Muppets.

Miss Piggy (Frank Oz) fills the role of Kermit's love interest and the ultimate diva caricature. The main inspiration for Miss Piggy cited by Muppet designer Bonnie Erickson is American jazz singer Peggy Lee (the character's name was originally "Miss Piggy Lee"), but ended up being changed as the popularity of the Muppets began to grow as nobody wanted to upset the woman whose work they greatly admired (Gupta 2008). Despite the name change, the Peggy Lee inspiration can still be seen in Miss Piggy's personality and informs the puppet's camp quality that derives from a sense of emotional sincerity. This emotional proximity is further facilitated through the multisensory appeals of the "thing-character" that the Muppets more generally demonstrate, as I discuss later with regard to Kermit.

Theatre and Performance professor Jordan Schildcrout describes Miss Piggy in his essay "The Performance of Nonconformity on The Muppet Show—or, How Kermit Made Me Queer." as:

> deluded about her own fame and talent, jealous of other female performers, sweet and seductive when in need, harsh and aggressive when denied. She carries a torch for Kermit, and his rejection of her affection often causes her to lash out violently against him… Miss Piggy's performance of diva femininity mixed with her aggression and physical prowess might put the viewer in mind… of an old fashioned drag queen. And in a certain sense Miss Piggy is a drag queen… She regularly uses drag queen shtick, such as comically switching from a high-pitched feminine coo to a basso profundo masculine growl. (829-830)

Miss Piggy's biography also bears similarities to Peggy Lee's. When *The Muppet Show* was just getting started, Frank Oz wrote a four-page Stanislavskian analysis of Miss Piggy's life. He describes the broad stokes of this backstory in a 1979 *New York Times* article called "The Muppets in Movieland," saying "she grew up in a small town; her father died when she was young; her mother wasn't that nice to her. She had to enter beauty contests to survive. She has a

lot of aggressiveness, but she needs a lot to survive—as many single women do. She has a lot of vulnerability, which she has to hide, because of her need to be a superstar" (Culhane 1979). This reflects how Peggy Lee biographer James Gavin describes her in an interview with *Lambda Literary*: "Peggy had hot buttons that could be pushed in a variety of ways. One of them was rejection, and another of them was a similar one: abandonment" (Brickhouse 2014). Miss Piggy developed these survival mechanisms described by Oz to resist her own abjection, which reframes them from obnoxious diva behavior deserving of condemnation to unfortunately necessary acts of self-preservation.

The other two Muppet characters with major roles in *The Great Muppet Caper* are Fozzie Bear (Frank Oz) and Gonzo (Dave Goelz). Fozzie is *The Muppet Show*'s resident bad stand-up comedian and Kermit's best friend, although in *The Great Muppet Caper* they play identical twins. His sets are heavily inspired by late 19th and early 20th century vaudeville acts like those of Ezra Kendall and Fred Duprez, but with horrible jokes so earnestly told it's difficult to not find them endearing. Gonzo is *The Muppet Show*'s daredevil stuntman of an unclassified species, whose acts consist of blending the bizarre antics of performance art with elements of high culture. For example, in the first episode of *The Muppet Show* he eats a rubber tire on stage to the tune of Nikolai Rimsky-Korkazov's "Flight of the Bumblebee." In *The Great Muppet Caper*, Fozzie and Gonzo accompany Kermit on his trip to England with Fozzie serving as another reporter and Gonzo as their photographer. His love for daredevil stunt-based performance recalls the physical comedians of silent cinema such as Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton.

In addition to having personalities that resemble familiar archetypes, another way that the Muppets endear themselves to the audience is through their character designs. Some of the Muppets are designed based on real life celebrities, including the Electric Mayhem's saxophonist

Zoot who was visually inspired by the jazz tenor saxophonist Gato Barbieri (Gupta 2008), but the main way that the designs are used to provoke an emotional connection on the part of the audience is through an emphasis on cuteness.

Ngai's writing on cuteness as an aesthetic category is mostly concerned with the relationship between cuteness and avant-garde poetics, but she also dedicates part of her essay to examining the concept of cuteness in its more common commercial context, which is of particular relevance to discussion of the Muppets. Ngai uses the example of a frog-shaped children's bath sponge to illustrate how the aesthetic of cuteness "depends on a softness that invites physical touching" (815). This correlates to the usefulness of a bath sponge because its entire purpose revolves around being pressed against one's body, but someone simply watching *The Great Muppet Caper* is not able to reach through the screen and squish Kermit. Still, the construction of the Muppet characters out of foam, felt, and fur is immediately apparent to any audience member who has touched those materials in another form. Thus the connection is made between those household materials and the Muppets, inviting viewers (particularly but not limited to children) to want to give them a hug in the way a child might to their favorite stuffed animal. In effect, the Muppets make the childhood fantasy of toys coming to life and having personalities into a seemingly real possibility.

Ngai then goes on to discuss the role that anthropomorphism plays in cuteness. She describes how "stylistically simplified and even uniformed its face is, as if cuteness were a sort of primitivism in its own right… [Cute objects] have simple contours and little or no ornamentation or detail. The smaller and less formally articulated or more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes" (815). The simplest and least ornamented design of any of the core Muppet characters is Kermit. The shape of Kermit's head merely rounds out the natural curvature of the

puppeteer's hand, with the only visible facial features being two semi-spherical eyes with simple pupils and his mouth. Inside his mouth is a solid red fleece and a pink tongue. His body is ovular with four cylindrical limbs. The entirety of his body is colored with one shade of light green except for his collar, which is made of eleven triangles of slightly lighter green fleece. While other Muppets like Gonzo and Miss Piggy always wear full costumes and others like Fozzie Bear always wear accessories, Kermit almost never wears any clothing. The only times in *The Great Muppet Caper* that he wears an outfit are when he is on the job, in disguise, or on a date with Miss Piggy. These clothed appearances serve to accent his cuteness, resembling a small child trying on their father's suit more than an adult in a well-fitted garment. Kermit is also notably shorter than the other Muppets, standing at 24 inches high as compared to Miss Piggy and Fozzie Bear's 36 inches. Some of the Muppet characters are human-sized, but the only one of them who appears in *The Great Muppet Caper* is Sweetums (Richard Hunt); who makes a brief appearance in the opening number before vanishing from the film.

Given that Kermit is the host of *The Muppet Show* and the protagonist of all three films made before Jim Henson's death (*The Muppet Movie*, *The Great Muppet Caper*, and *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (Frank Oz, US, 1984)), it makes sense that his design would have the most in common with Ngai's conception of cuteness. The cuteness of the character awakens a desire on the part of the audience to want to cuddle and protect them, creating an emotional connection between the viewer and the character on the screen. The emotional core of the story revolves around Kermit and we are meant to empathize with him the whole time, and one of the ways that the filmmakers accomplish this is by making him as cute as possible.

Ngai also points out that the aesthetic of cuteness does not just bring forth the consumer's desire to cuddle the cute object, but often creates an "exaggerated passivity and vulnerability…

often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control" (816). She cites Daniel Harris' claim from his book *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* that the adorable object is usually at its peak of cuteness while it is being injured or maimed (5-6). Pratfalls and other forms of slapstick are a central part of the Muppets' brand of humor, but *The Great Muppet Caper* shows a unique willingness on the part of the creators to subject the Muppets to acts of physical violence. We do not even have to wait until the opening credits conclude before Kermit, Fozzie, and Gonzo are sent plummeting from the sky and onto the street in a hot air balloon. The opening number alone features the Muppets comically trying to escape from under the collapsed hot air balloon, Gonzo gets hit by a car (but it is okay because he landed on his head!) which causes a pile-up and destroys several crates full of chickens, and Sweetums falls down a manhole and his hand gets stepped on—to say nothing of the human extras who get punched, robbed, hit by basketballs, covered in paint, and left to dangle from a window washer platform. The rest of the film features the Muppets being thrown out of planes, falling, getting tossed around like wet rags, crashing cars, being electrocuted, getting crushed by a Murphy bed, chased by angry guard dogs, screamed at, and more. The Muppets are repeatedly subject to abjection, but unlike *Little Shop of Horrors* where Audrey's abjection is played as tragic, abjection in *The Great Muppet Caper* takes on a more playful tone.

These antics play into the film's sense of zaniness that balances out the cuteness of its central characters. Ngai describes the concept of the "zany" as a performance style defined by its being "intensely affective and highly physical, it's an aesthetic of nonstop action that bridges popular and avant-garde practice across a wide range of media… zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—even endangered by—too many things coming at her quickly and at once" (Jasper and Ngai 2011). The zaniness of *The Great Muppet Caper* comes

largely from the plethora of visual gags physically affecting the characters on screen, but from the sheer number of jokes verbally delivered by the characters coming right at the audience. Hardly a line goes by without someone delivering a joke, the overall pace resembling the rapid-fire delivery of *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, US, 1974) than the more laid-back approach taken in *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. The best example of Ngai's description of the zany as blending popular and avant-garde practice comes in a dialogue exchange during the "Happiness Hotel" sequence, in which references to classical European painters are accompanied by Animal's (Frank Oz) trademark guttural screaming:

> Kermit: What's wrong with the drummer? He looks a little crazed.
> Zoot: Oh, he's just upset about missing the Rembrandt exhibit at the National Gallery.
> Animal: RENOIR!!!

This self-aware meta humor helps to engage audience members not immediately taken in by the cute and lovable Muppet characters. As is tradition in all Muppet media, there are a variety of gags poking fun at the artificial nature of film. Some of these include Kermit and Fozzie commenting on the opening credits as they roll, and after the fantasy water ballet sequence when Miss Piggy is being taken away in handcuffs on suspicion that she stole Lady Holiday's necklace and she yells back at Nicky (Charles Grodin) "You can't even sing! Your voice was dubbed!"

Despite these self-aware jokes and meta-humor about the nature of fiction filmmaking, one line is never crossed: no jokes are ever made that call into question the flesh and blood existence of the Muppets. When Kermit and Miss Piggy run into each other in Battersea Park after Piggy walked out on their date and Kermit realized that she is not really Lady Holiday, the two get into an altercation that quickly leads to them both breaking character. The argument starts off being about Miss Piggy's lies until she starts begging Kermit not to leave, causing him

to break character and tell her that she is overacting. She retorts that she's trying to save the movie by playing "800 different emotions," to which Kermit responds, "Well try to play one of them right." They start screaming over each other until Miss Piggy starts to cry and they both get back in character and continue the scene. It would have been an easy gag if while Kermit and Miss Piggy yelled at each other the camera cut to Jim Henson and Frank Oz lying on the ground with their arms stretched up and screaming into the air, but bringing the perceived realness of the Muppets into question in this way would throw a wrench in the audience's connection to them. The film having emotional stakes that the audience cares about relies on them believing that the Muppet and human characters both occupy the same space, with the Muppets treated no differently than the humans. When they break character, it is not the puppeteers revealing their presence; it's Kermit and Miss Piggy reverting from the characters they play in the film's narrative to the versions of themselves seen in the backstage portions of *The Muppet Show*.

Finally, the film's focus on the ensemble draws the focus away from the central "whodunnit" narrative and onto the innate charm of the Muppet characters. Though the two principal human actors (Diana Rigg and Charles Grodin) give hilarious and delightfully exaggerated performances as wealthy fashion designer Lady Holiday and her scheming brother Nicky, the storyline about Lady Holliday's stolen jewels and the Muppets' quest to solve the crime quickly becomes secondary to the mistaken identity screwball romantic comedy plot of Kermit and Miss Piggy. It is obvious from the opening number that Nicky is the one who stole Lady Holiday's jewels, removing the main suspense element of a traditional caper narrative; so it is up to the Muppet characters to keep the audience's attention.

One of the few times that the film's frantic pace lets up is when Kermit and Miss Piggy have their first dance together at The Dubonnet Club to the song "The First Time it Happens."

There are still jokes, but the first half of the number in particular places all of its emphasis on the budding romance between the two leads before transitioning into a full-out Busby Berkeley homage with Miss Piggy at the center. Like “Somewhere That’s Green,” the song comes back towards the end of the film but this time for non-ironic purposes. It shows up in the instrumental score when Kermit goes to visit Miss Piggy in jail disguised as “Rosenthal,” a lawyer persona he devised to get past security. By this point the couple has since had a second romantic duet called “Couldn’t We Ride?” These scenes both serve to tug at the heartstrings of the audience, providing a sense of closure to the story that the climactic caper by design fails to provide in favor of returning to the film’s default state of non-stop gags.

This usage of the zany and artificial aesthetics in contrast with sincerity coincides with the references made by the film to classic musicals. The most obvious point of references occurs with the “Piggy’s Fantasy” number invoking Esther Williams’ aquamusicals like *Bathing Beauty* (George Sidney, US, 1944); but more relevant in this instance is how the number “Steppin’ Out with a Star,” in which Kermit prepares to go on his first date with Miss Piggy, invokes the legacy of Fred Astaire. This number makes direct references to three of Astaire’s most famous song and dance routines. First, the song’s title is a play on Irving Berlin’s “Steppin’ Out with My Baby,” which was performed by Astaire, Judy Garland, and the ensemble of *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, US, 1948). Later during the song’s dance interlude, Kermit picks up a hat rack and performs a ballroom dance across the room with it in a nod to Astaire doing the same in the “Sunday Jumps” sequence of *Royal Wedding* (Stanley Donen, US, 1951). Fozzie then turns on the hotel lamp and Kermit dances alongside his shadow on the wall, who continues to dance past when the real Kermit stops. Astaire did a similar routine in the “Bojangles of Harlem” sequence in *Swing Time* (George Stevens, US, 1936), but without the Muppet version’s ending gag of the

shadow continuing to dance independent of Kermit. These uses of homage allow the film to weave together the elements of artifice and sincerity through maintaining the use of gags while allowing Kermit's charm and sincerity to be the scene's main focus.

## I Wish I Was Back There: Classic and Contemporary Homage

In *Cover Girl* (Charles Vidor, US, 1944), Gene Kelly plays Brooklyn nightclub owner Danny McGuire in the first of two films. *Cover Girl* never had any sequels, but Kelly returned to the role of Danny McGuire thirty-five years later as his final film appearance in *Xanadu* (Robert Greenwald, 1980). This film's Danny was a jazz clarinetist and then a nightclub owner before quitting the music industry and becoming a construction mogul. His arc in *Xanadu* involves partnering with Sonny (Michael Beck) at the behest of the muse of dance Terpsichore (Olivia Newton-John) to open the titular roller disco. This partnership sparks the film's central theme of generational divides that allow the film's signature blending of classic and contemporary influences.

*Xanadu*'s narrative is based on the Rita Hayworth vehicle *Down to Earth* (Alexander Hall, US, 1947), in which Terpsichore (Hayworth) comes to New York to fix a new Broadway musical which she sees as mocking Greek mythology. The key difference between the muse's interventions in *Down to Earth* versus *Xanadu* is that only in *Xanadu* is the resulting creative venture successful. Modifying the story in this way allows for a full endorsement of both the old and new creative styles embodied by Sonny and Danny, giving both older and younger viewers something to latch onto. Audience members who are Kelly's age or grew up on classic movie musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, US, 1952) and *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, US, 1951) can emotionally identify with his character having given up on his youthful artistic passions in favor of financial stability, while younger audience members can connect with Sonny's frustration with the status quo and miserable day jobs.

Unfortunately, the film was released too late and the contemporary elements had fallen out of favor with the general public. Produced on the heels of the massive success of *Saturday*

*Night Fever* (John Badham, US, 1977), by 1980 a sizable backlash had formed against the perceived cultural excesses of disco music. Just a few weeks before production started on *Xanadu* in 1979, anti-disco DJ Steve Dahl oversaw the Disco Demolition Derby, in which over 10,000 disco records were burned between baseball games at Comiskey Park (Thomas 2019). This demonstration was merely the beginning of an extended racist and homophobic backlash to disco. As the genre was going out of fashion, production on *Xanadu* was too far along to be stopped—guaranteeing widespread critical mockery of the final film.

In contrast, *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, US, 1978) was released while the modern cultural elements it pays homage to were still in the zeitgeist. *The Wiz* blends the classic and the contemporary to create something fresh and new out of an old story. Emotional identification in the film is created through the classic elements eliciting feelings of nostalgia for older media while the contemporary elements add new thematic concerns that make the story feel relevant for a new generation of filmgoers. However, the successes of *The Wiz* were not acknowledged by the consensus of the time which painted the film as a critical and commercial failure for largely racist reasons.

Alfred L. Martin Jr. writes that "*The Wiz* was ultimately a Black-cast blockbuster film that deployed ciphers and codes legible to Black reviewers, not necessarily white ones, who often used *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, US, 1939) as the basis for deciphering and decoding *The Wiz*" (58). He examines how the film's production and distribution focused on attracting white audiences to recoup the film's massive $23 million budget made white viewers "the primary target for the film, while Black spectatorship and reviews were taken for granted" (67). This led to the narratives around reception of the film being primarily influenced by white critics and audiences, ignoring the largely positive response from Black filmgoers. Reviews

mainly focused on negative comparisons to the 1939 adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* starring Judy Garland. They ignored that *The Wiz* is not simply another version of the L. Frank Baum novel, it is a near-complete reimagining of the story that updates it to reflect Black culture, media, and social issues.

In terms of classic influences, *The Wiz* functions as a sort of spiritual successor to the cycle of all-Black film musicals that were made in the 1940s and '50s. Like *The Wiz, Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, US, 1954) reimagines a classic narrative—in this case George Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875) —for a contemporary setting and all-Black cast, and both were adapted from Broadway musicals. It was also a large spectacle that served as a vehicle for popular actors and musicians like Harry Belafonte, Pearl Bailey, Diahann Carroll, and Dorothy Dandridge, with the latter's performance as Carmen leading to the first nomination of a woman of color for Best Actress at the Academy Awards. Whereas *The Wiz* features an original songbook and pop-inspired score, all of the music in *Carmen Jones* is taken directly from Bizet's classical opera with new English lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II.

This stands in contrast to films like *Stormy Weather* (Andrew L. Stone, US, 1943) which serve more concretely as musical predecessors for *The Wiz* as opposed to the narrative antecedent in *Carmen Jones*. *Stormy Weather* is very light on story, which mainly serves as filler between the musical numbers that make up the majority of the film. All of the songs in the film are jazz standards either written by Black composers (Shelton Brooks, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, etc.), or introduced to the public by popular Black performers at venues like The Cotton Club (the title song was originally performed by Ethel Waters). The lack of narrative allows the film to function solely as a showcase piece for popular performers of the early 1940s

like Bill Robinson, Ada Brown, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller (in one of his few film appearances), Katherine Dunham, Dooley Wilson, and the Nicholas Brothers; many of whom simply appear as themselves. *Stormy Weather* also contains a more direct link to *The Wiz* through its inclusion of Lena Horne as romantic lead Selina Rogers.

In *The Wiz*, Horne plays Glinda the Good Witch. She is depicted briefly in the beginning as creating the snow tornado that brings Dorothy to Oz and does not return until right before the end when she informs Dorothy of the power of the silver shoes and sings the ballad "If You Believe." The song takes inspiration from classic styles of Black music, with its emphasis on powerful vocals and emotion-driven delivery being drawn directly from blues and soul music of the first half of the 20th century. Her appearance promotes a sense of nostalgia on the part of viewers who are familiar with her work at MGM in the 1940s. It is hard to watch her performance of that song and not connect its message of recognizing your own power and standing firm in your convictions with Horne's struggles against racism in Hollywood and her lifetime of civil rights activism. She repeatedly fought her abjection from both the industry as a whole and even the films in which she starred, where she was often relegated to specialty numbers that could easily be cut for screenings in the Jim Crow South. Her presence in this role of comfort and guidance for Dorothy and her friends bridges the gap between the two generations of Black talent showcased in the film.

Diana Ross as Dorothy and Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow represent the new generation of Black musical stardom, carrying more modern styles of music along with them. By 1978, Diana Ross had already left the Supremes to pursue a solo music career and film roles in *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, US, 1972) and *Mahogany* (Berry Gordy and Tony

Richardson, US, 1975). Michael Jackson did not reach the peak of his stardom until after *The Wiz* (in large part thanks to his collaborations with Quincy Jones after they met on the set of *The Wiz*), but prior to its release he had achieved major success as part of the Jackson 5. Ross and Jackson's more modern styles of performance are well-suited to the syncopated funk stylings of Charlie Smalls' score. Like in *Xanadu*, the presence of both classic and contemporary stars provides a point of identification for viewers of any age range.

*The Wiz* is also notable its referencing of contemporary social issues in a way that was relatable to Black and other abjected or marginalized viewers. The film was released after the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, and thus Sidney Lumet and screenwriter Joel Schumacher decided to urbanize the design of Oz and relocate Dorothy and her family to Harlem instead of Kansas. Disregarding whether these changes are problematic in execution, this represents a willingness on the part of the creative team to fully modernize the narrative and aesthetics in a way that the Broadway musical chose not to; transforming the film from what could have been essentially the same as earlier adaptations but with a different soundtrack into one that both literally and metaphorically incorporates the lived experiences of Black Americans, inviting them to take an active part in one of America's most popular stories that up to that point had previously not included them. This forms a sense of emotional identification between the Black audience and the characters in ways that were not present in the stage musical.

English professor Alissa Burger discusses this in her book *The Wizard of Oz as American Myth: A Critical Study of Six Versions of the Story, 1990-2007*, writing that "*The Wiz*'s resituation of the *Wizard of Oz* narrative from an African American perspective highlighted the always already white image of American identity unaddressed in earlier versions" (100). Burger

reads elements of the film as reflecting issues of racial discrimination in the United States and Dorothy's companions as representations of contemporary issues regarding race and gender. In particular she points out the film's running gag poking fun at the characters' inability to hail a taxi. At first this is a source of frustration for Dorothy until the first rendition of "Ease on Down the Road," when the Scarecrow proclaims their lack of need for a cab and they set off on foot together. In later reprises, we then see the characters actively refusing to take the taxis by walking around and dancing on top of them, "seizing their own unique means of success rather than acquiescing to the newly-opened status quo" (102). This adds another layer to Dorothy's character, as in this version she starts off as a shy schoolteacher terrified of stepping outside her comfort zone and over the course of the narrative starts the process of overcoming her fears through the power of friendship and solidarity. It also reflects what Burger calls the "alternative means of self-empowerment" used by people from marginalized groups to cope with the realities of discrimination in an unjust society. This resistance to abjection then becomes a major element of the film's portrayal of Dorothy's three companions.

Burger analyzes the Scarecrow, the Tin Man (Nipsey Russell), and the Cowardly Lion (Ted Ross) in terms of archetypes of Blackness and particularly Black masculinity. This creates a sense of emotional identification similarly to how the Muppet characters having real-world inspirations creates a sense of familiarity to this new cast of characters, but in *The Wiz* these choices are specifically aimed at connecting with Black viewers who have a higher likelihood of falling into some of these archetypes themselves or knowing other people who do. The Scarecrow has internalized a sense of inferiority from the crows constantly putting him down, reminding him of his abjection, and telling him there is no way he can possibly "win" or pull himself out of his current sense of lack; referring both to physical mobility as he is initially

unable to come down from the pole until Dorothy steps in to help him as well as his status in society. The Scarecrow is initially extremely down on himself, believing that he has no brain and constantly comparing himself to the white thinkers whose quotes he reads from pieces of paper that fall out of his body. The final moment of his arc is towards the end of the film when he says another one of these quotes, and when Dorothy asks him who wrote it, he replies, "I did." Like Dorothy, he needs to learn to believe in his own abilities and not let other people decimate his self-esteem.

The film's focus on the Scarecrow and his character arc alongside Dorothy's also plays into Ngai's descriptions of cuteness. For a film with a lot of extremely ornate costume and makeup design, the Scarecrow's face is remarkably simplified. He does not appear to be wearing much makeup save for the rounded black triangle which flattens and hides the shape of his real nose. In combination with his large afro wig, the exaggerated nose and simple design calls to mind the image of the clown—which reinforces the childlike elements of both the aesthetic of cuteness and the insecure youth archetype that the character represents—Michael Jackson was only nineteen years old during principal photography, and the innocence of his character makes him especially susceptible to accepting his abjection as natural and correct.

The portrayals of the Tin Man and Cowardly Lion are similarly informed by race, but more consciously incorporate gendered elements as well. Alissa Burger relates the Tin Man's characterization to how bell hooks describes "woman-hating black men [who] are really shown to be in need of love from females" (*Black Looks: Race and Representation* 105). hooks describes this archetype of Black masculinity as being "tormented by their inability to fulfill the phallocentric masculine ideal as it has been articulated in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"

(89), which Burger compares to the Tin Man defining himself "in relation to his role as an unconventional romantic hero" (104) when he describes himself to Dorothy and the Scarecrow by saying "The genius who created me only took care of my dashing good looks, my razor-sharp wit, and my irresistible attraction to the wrong women." The Tin Man is introduced as having been suffocating underneath the literal weight of his ex-wife Teenie who he deeply resents. This added set-up (absent from prior versions of the *Wizard of Oz* story) pays off during the poppy sequence in which he must cry onto Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion to get them to wake back up. The Tin Man thinks he cannot do it because he does not have a heart, until the Scarecrow encourages him to think of Teenie, and the ensuing tears express both his disdain and desire for her as he uses the skills he thinks he does not have to save his friends.

The Cowardly Lion represents a different version of Black masculinity, one of a failure to conform with strictly defined gender norms. In Rhonda Williams' essay "*The Wiz*: American Culture at Its Best," she describes the Lion's introductory song "I'm a Mean Ole Lion" saying that it "implies the external tough façade portrayed by Black men to scare off people before they can discover any hurt or sensitivity" (198). The Cowardly Lion's masculinity was called into question in his former society which caused him to be cast off, and he now faces an identity crisis in which he longs to perform dominance and power to prove that he is worthy of being King of the jungle. It is only through his journey with Dorothy that he realizes he was courageous all along and he does not need to conform to society's expectations of him. To paraphrase what Dorothy sings to him after he reawakens from the poppy spell, he can be a lion in his own way.

Through playing up these archetypal representations of Blackness, Sidney Lumet and the rest of the creative team created a version of the *Wizard of Oz* narrative that does not just differentiate itself through non-traditional casting and musical style. Rather, the film was crafted to solicit emotional identification among Black and other marginalized audiences through adjusting the original character types to represent real social issues without preaching or talking down to the audience. It also represents a star-driven musical in which the specific personae of its stars are not consciously employed outside of the musical styles they are known for, instead using them as more general representations of previous and contemporary generations of musical talent so that audiences of all ages can find at least one character to connect with. However, the way that musicals of this period interacted with the specific images and personae of their stars would continue to transform.

**Eyes, Hair, Face, Image: Refiguring Stardom and Revising History**

Just over a month before the release of Barbra Streisand's longtime passion project *Yentl* (US, 1983), an *LA Times* profile recounted that "Streisand repeatedly said during interviews that 'Yentl' has obsessed her for fifteen years in ways that are intertwined both personally and professionally. And she didn't seem fazed by the repeated rejections of her 'Yentl' project… 'Yentl,' they said, was too Jewish or not commercial or Streisand was too old and fat to play the girl/boy part of the plot" (Pollock 1983). This was nothing new for Streisand. Her very rise to stardom was defined by her refusal to conform to ideas of traditional roles of femininity and culturally imposed beauty standards. Her independence, strong will, self-deprecating humor, and perceived "ordinariness" compared to the film stars as glamor icons like Lana Turner and Faye Dunaway was what endeared her to audiences, young women and gay men in particular, who latched onto her relatable and modern persona.

This is all a part of Barbra Streisand's star image. In Richard Dyer's famous book *Stars*, he outlines the various pieces of information used to construct the specific image of a film star; namely promotion, publicity, films (especially vehicles), and criticism/commentaries (60). He draws a line between promotion and publicity, with promotion being deliberate image making by film studios while publicity either is or appears to be more authentic (61). Also relevant here for the images of Streisand and Madonna, as well as previously discussed stars Diana Ross and Michael Jackson, are the albums which were a part of their star image long before their jumps to film stardom. Dyer also examines stars as embodying social types, including but not limited to "The Pin-Up," "The Rebel," and "The Independent Woman" (48-59).

Defining any star strictly by general social type is extremely limiting, which is why the specific star image is so important for understanding how the presence of stars in films is used to

signify. However, in terms of the types dissected in Dyer's book, both Barbra Streisand and Madonna fall most closely under the "Independent Woman" type, who he describes as having been embodied in the 1930s and 40s by Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Rosalind Russell, and Joan Crawford. Dyer and Jack Babuscio see the emphasis of "Independent Woman" types playing around with sexual roles as a part of camp, in which the fixation on outward appearances, especially in cases involving crossdressing, illustrates that "sex roles are superficial—a matter of style" (59).

The persona of the "Independent Woman" is also closely tied with the idea of social abjection. Both Barbra Streisand and Madonna mobilize the status of women (and in Streisand's case the Jewish diaspora as well) as an abjected group in society to endear themselves to female spectators as well as people who belong to other abjected groups like queer people and people of color. They both own their status as figures of marginalized communities, inviting audiences to join in with them as they rebel against and mock social structures relating to gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

The specific star image of Madonna is analyzed in the essay "Madonna as a Symbol of Reflexive Modernisation" (Van den Berg and Ter Hoeven 2013), which looks at how the pop star "made certain transgressive messages accessible for the mass public" (148). They cite her popularity in Puerto Rico during the 1980s as showing women and girls alternative ways of being that departed from the extremely traditional Catholic norms that structured their lives. They also cite the way in which she "both subordinates herself to and mocks the male gaze" (148), like Dyer and Babuscio claim of the "Independent Woman" type, deconstructing the category of "Woman" and presenting it as a performance. Her overt support of LGBTQ+ people is also notable, due to the height of her popularity coinciding with the rise in anti-queer

sentiment brought on by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These elements of her star image brought her extreme popularity, but also a consistent stream of backlash. It is then that the legacy of Eva Duarte de Perón enters the picture.

Madonna lobbied hard to play Eva Perón in the film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's smash hit musical based on her life, which made stars out of the original West End Eva Elaine Paige and her Broadway counterpart Patti LuPone. On his website, the film's director Alan Parker recounts that "While spending Christmas in England in 1994, I received out of the blue a letter from Madonna… Her handwritten, four-page letter was extraordinarily passionate and sincere. As far as she was concerned, no one could play Evita as well as she could, and she said that she would sing, dance and act her heart out, and put everything else on hold to devote all her time to it should I decide to go with her" (1996). Both Madonna and Eva Perón remain to this day figures of controversy, and it is easy to see why Madonna related to Evita so strongly.

Madonna has long had a fascination with Latin and Hispanic culture that has popped up regularly in her music. The most obvious example of this being her hit song "La Isla Bonita" (1986), but Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo have also been cited as major influences for her music videos. She moved to Portugal for several years and even told Kurt Loder in an interview that she was "Spanish in another life" (Cinquemani 2019). While these appropriative acts of identity crossing have received criticism, they have also played a part in why she has been so successful in Latin America, particularly areas dominated by Catholicism. Her willingness to criticize the Catholic church where other popular musicians would not dare was a major source of controversy throughout the 1980s and 1990s when she was at her peak,

and the demands from social conservatives to abject her play a major role in her star image to this day.

*Madonna: Truth or Dare* (Alek Keshishian and Mark Aldo Miceli, US, 1991) documents Madonna's 1990 *Blonde Ambition* tour, the people who made it happen, and the backlash encountered on various stops. Towards the beginning of the film local police show up to the final show in Toronto and threaten to arrest Madonna for "lewd and indecent display" over the simulated masturbation in the choreography for "Like a Virgin." Later, during the final leg of the tour, Pope John Paul II attempts to have the show banned. These examples of backlash as well as the massive success of the tour commercially and creatively mirror the various biographical accounts of Eva Perón.

Scholar of Latin American history Marysa Navarro writes of books written about Eva in the 1950s as falling into one of two categories: "either to extol her greatness or attack her quite viciously" (135). The positive works were full-out hagiographies that were published in Argentina during Juan Perón's rule. These books depicted Eva as a saintly figure who "worked tirelessly to help the downtrodden," referring to her with phrases like "la dama de la esperanza" (the lady of hope) and "la abanderada de los descamisados" (the standard bearer of the downtrodden (135). This is a stark contrast to how Navarro describes the anti-Perón biographies of the time:

> Evita is generally depicted as a minor actress, without talent, born on the wrong side of the tracks, a slut who slept her way out of the gutter and proved to have a great deal of talent at the manipulation of men. Consumed by resentment and/or ambition, she created Perón, a cowardly puppet she propelled to the presidency. Vulgar, vengeful, cunning and unforgiving, she was the real power in the Peronist government. A veritable shrew and a hypocritical social climber only interested in designer clothes and jewels. (136)

It is these accounts, particularly *The Woman with the Whip* (Mary Main 1952), upon which Webber, Rice, director Hal Prince, and original actors Elaine Paige and Patti LuPone (on the

West End and Broadway, respectively) based their portrayal. However, Madonna interprets the biographical Perón differently.

As previously mentioned, Madonna has a history of championing progressive causes that earned her both praise and backlash from various groups, particularly around the HIV crisis of the 1980s and '90s. She was living in New York City during the peak of the epidemic and lost many of her close friends and mentors including her high school dance instructor Christopher Flynn, roommate Martin Burgoyne, and artist Keith Haring. She recounted in a speech at the GLAAD Media Awards the time when she went to the AIDS ward in a hospital and hugged all the patients as well as her experience smuggling drugs over the US-Mexico border to give to her friends and the horror she experienced upon realizing the drugs only made their condition worse (Shaffer 2019). She even had an insert in all copies of her 1989 album *Like a Prayer* with information about the virus (Abadsidis 2018). Her activism earned her a still-thriving queer audience, but also strong backlash. There was a consistent stream of rumors at the time that she herself was HIV positive, a homophobic tactic often used to undermine the credibility of AIDS activists (Browne et. al. 1991). So why would Madonna invest herself a project that paints the figure she relates to so closely as being a scheming, manipulative, gold-digging shrew? Possibly because unlike previous generations of stars, she and her contemporaries had the power to change that depiction.

During the classical Hollywood era, contrary to what publicity of the time would suggest, stars were not discovered. Rather, they were carefully crafted by studio executives and thought of as just another asset owned and controlled by film studios to help sell their product to audiences. Zoë VanDerPloeg says of Greta Garbo's arrival in Hollywood, she was "immediately ordered by MGM to have her hair and makeup redone, get dental work, and lose weight" to

make her “more befitting to the image of a glamorous Hollywood star” (25). By contrast, Barbra Streisand famously refused this treatment and it became a defining part of her persona as discussed above. Stars of the classical era did not have much control over their personae in this way. Garbo became bored of her usual vampy seductress roles while her fans were still enthralled by them, which caused issues between her and the higher-ups at MGM. Garbo began to show up late to set, sometimes not bothering to come to work at all; but her protests to MGM proved futile. Says VanDerPloeg, “The studios could manage their stars like scripts, budgets, and real estate… Stars were input towards a final product that producers controlled” (26). Garbo’s vehicles began to make less money for the studio, with *Conquest* (Clarence Brown and Gustav Machaty, US, 1937) losing MGM between $600,000 to $1.4 million (VanDerPloeg 27). Despite a temporarily successful rebranding with her comedic turn in *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, US, 1939); Garbo’s star faded and her role in the system was taken over by newer, younger stars like Marlene Dietrich and Ingrid Bergman.

By the 1970s, writes David Stevens in his essay “Redford and Streisand: The Shifting Star Persona in 1970s Hollywood,” “As fewer films were making money… stars were no longer under contract and had more power. Agents represented stars and could negotiate more money from studios and stars could demand higher salaries as part of the package… Their command of higher salaries could result in lacklustre films… but could also create the space for investing in smaller pet projects” (270). Barbra Streisand’s pet project was *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, US, 1983), which she changed greatly from the original short story by Isaac Singer to be more in line with her star persona.

A review of *Yentl* in *Film Quarterly* says of the changes made in adaptation, “For Singer, Yentl’s confused sexual identity is ‘evil’ and perverse, her marriage to Hadass an ‘act of utter

depravity' that inevitably leads all three characters to misery and alienation. Streisand's *Yentl*, on the other hand, portrays its characters with respect, and views Yentl's confusion with extraordinary empathy" (Fernley and Maloof 39). In other words, while Isaac Singer sees Yentl as someone who has made unforgivable transgressions and thus deserves her abject status; Barbra Streisand uses this abjection as a way to get the audience on Yentl's side. Emphasizing Yentl's struggle to be accepted for who she is outside of the confines of rigidly prescribed gender roles endears the character to audience members who have experienced similar instances of discrimination or abjection across a wide variety of social groups. This also came with the side effect of alienating people who have not experienced these forms of abjection, including Isaac Singer. In a pseudo-interview he conducted with himself in the *New York Times* for the express purpose of calling Barbra Streisand a self-centered egomaniac, he said that the story "was in no way material for a musical, certainly not the kind Miss Streisand has given us. Let me say: one cannot cover up with songs the shortcomings of the direction and acting" (Singer 1984). For Singer, Yentl's abjection is deserved; but for Streisand it is an injustice that must be corrected.

Streisand was able to change the story in this way because of the industry power she had amassed as the biggest female star in the world to get *Yentl* made, but even with that she still had to enlist the help of her own production company. Barwood Films was founded in 1972 and had produced many of Barbra Streisand's films throughout the 1970s including *A Star is Born* (Frank Pierson, US, 1976) and *Up the Sandbox* (Irvin Kershner, US, 1972). Forming an independent company to produce her own films was something that Greta Garbo and her star cohort were not able to do, instead having to resort to engaging in unproductive power struggles with the studio executives who had complete control over their careers. In the new era stars like Streisand had more freedom to make the projects they cared about and felt were important. It also gave stars

who hailed from marginalized communities the ability to fund their own projects that lent sympathy and a voice to people who were largely ignored during the classical era.

Similar to Streisand's influence on *Yentl*, Madonna's persona and increased influence over certain elements of production compared to previous stars explains many of the changes made in the adaptation from stage musical to film musical. Like in *Yentl*, these alterations serve to emphasize the protagonist's status as an abjected figure as one to sympathize with, and presents the figure of Eva Perón in a more rounded and humanizing manner than in the original productions.

The film's version of Eva is established immediately as a socially abjected figure. Like in the show, it opens with a cinema full of patrons reacting in horror to the announcement of her passing, but the film goes a step further by visually linking Eva's massive state funeral with her childhood experience of being forced out of her father's funeral due to her family's lower class status, something that was only mentioned in the stage musical but never shown. Thus the first time we see Eva in life she is being mistreated in a time of great hurt, whereas the first time we see Eva in the show she is already fully committed to the lifestyle of callously manipulating and discarding men once they have given her what she wants from them. This also manifests in the way the passage "Screw the middle classes, I will never accept them! And they will never deny anything to me again! My father's other family were middle class and we were kept out of site, hidden from view at his funeral. If these are the people of Buenos Aires, I welcome the chance to shine in their city" is delivered. In the show this is the first time the audience is made aware of the funeral incident, and Eva delivers it while screaming in a fit of rage. In the film, the lines are changed to "Screw the middle classes, I will never accept them. My father's other family were middle class, and we were kept out of sight, hidden from view at his funeral." Notable here is the

removal of the lines "And they will never deny me anything again" and "If these are the people of Buenos Aires, I welcome the chance to shine in their city." In the show, this passage is meant to establish Eva's anger towards the upper classes of Argentina as well as signal her desire to enact revenge upon them. In Madonna's hands this statement does not provide any narrative information that was not already known to the audience through the staging of the opening "Requiem for Evita." Instead, the lines are delivered to emphasize the long-term impact this event has had on Eva and the pain she still feels at not having been able to properly grieve the death of her father.

Alterations to song order and character assignment in the first third of the film reinforce Eva's abjection. Originally Agustín Magaldi (originated by Mark Ryan on the West End and played by Jimmy Nail in the film) is abandoned by Eva immediately after their arrival in Buenos Aires and she then begins her rise to fame through a series of affairs. The film moves "Another Suitcase in Another Hall" up from its original place after "I'd Be Surprisingly Good for You," in which Eva convinces Juan Perón (originated by Joss Ackland, played by Jonathan Pryce in the film) that their sexual and political pairing up would be mutually beneficial. The song was originally performed by the character known only as "Perón's Mistress" (Siobhán McCarthy on the West End, Andrea Corr in the film) as she ruminates on her sudden ejection and wonders what will become of her. In the film the song is performed by Eva after Magaldi abandons her to rejoin his wife and children. Eva's excitement about her arrival in Buenos Aires is immediately ended when Magaldi abjects her, and the staging of the song follows her as she proceeds to drink away her sorrows before failing at attempts to find work. This reframes her series of affairs depicted in "Goodnight and Thank You" as a last resort survival strategy as opposed to the original show where her manipulations were the plan from the beginning. In the stage musical

even her interactions with Magaldi in Junín are manipulative, just a ploy to get her transportation to the big city; whereas in the film Madonna's earnest performance suggests that she actually had feelings for him and was genuinely hurt by his abandoning her. The film's version of Eva still manipulates men and engages in diva behavior, but the dialed-back nature of Madonna's performance recontextualizes it from being ruthless attempts at attaining absolute power into a longing for attention and external validation that she receives sexually from the men she sleeps with in exchange for work and later from the people of Argentina who hail her as their savior.

The film also places more emphasis on continued anti-Perón protests in the final act where the original show only occasionally alludes to them. The stage version does showcase dissent, but almost exclusively through the character of Che (David Essex on the West End, Antonio Banderas in the film) who is the show's main voice of cynicism from the working class. Eva comes under additional scrutiny from the aristocratic ensemble in "Perón's Latest Flame" and "The Actress Hasn't Learned the Lines (You'd Like to Hear)," but these are presented as flimsy critiques aimed at discrediting her due to her being new money through her work in the entertainment industry and relationship with Juan. It allows Eva to look more sympathetic as she becomes increasingly preoccupied with outdoing the Argentine upper classes in terms of her outward demonstrations of wealth and glamour as well as charitable actions through her foundation; but it doesn't factor much into the overall narrative. Che is a much more prominent character in the overall film, second only to Eva herself, and the sequences featuring his criticisms of the Peróns are not presented in the comedic pseudo-*My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, US, 1964) "Ascot Gavotte" style that the aristocrat scenes are, thus his criticisms are given more weight.

The sequence that ushers in the beginning of Eva's decline due to uterine cancer, "Santa Evita," depicts a large Catholic ceremony at which she is the center of attention, juxtaposed with a scene of police violence against a group of anti-Peronist protestors among whom Che is in attendance. By the conclusion of the sequence, Eva has passed out on the floor of the church and Che is left wounded in the street. The addition of Che's refrain, "Turn a blind eye, Evita, turn a blind eye" demonstrates that this Eva's naivete even in power has allowed her to become seduced by the attention and adoration she has craved since childhood to the extent that she is blinded to the atrocities committed by her husband. The show doesn't include this juxtaposition. Instead it simply allows the ceremony to continue and finishes with Che asking "Why try to govern a country when you can become a saint?" This version of the sequence more directly implicates Eva in the violence of Juan Perón's rule, where the film depicts her as more of a prop for Juan, easily distracted by positive attention and dedicated to her foundation to the point of not noticing anything else. This portrayal of Eva as being corrupted by power as opposed to the original where she is drawn to power because she is already morally bankrupt allows the film to adopt a more sympathetic approach to suit Madonna's wishes while also giving her death more emotional weight because we can still remember free-spirited innocent she was at the beginning of the film.

The addition of the song "You Must Love Me" emphasizes this point through its use of flashbacks to Eva in her prime while also reinforcing this interpretation of the character as someone who wants more than anything to be accepted. This song replaces the sequence from the show called "Dice are Rolling," in which despite her obviously declining physical health Eva attempts one last power grab for the vice presidency. In this new sequence, Eva sings lyrics that appear at first to be directed at Juan, such as "Why are you at my side? How can I be any use to

you now?," but are also about her relationship with her supporters and the people of Argentina. She realizes that she needs to take final steps to ensure that her legacy and public image will survive even after she dies, deciding to make her final radio broadcast to the people of Argentina to tell them that she will never truly leave.

## Conclusion

It should by this point be obvious to state that the movie musical has never truly been dead. The decades between 1930 and 1969 saw their budgets and run times grow to such unmanageable sizes that they were doomed to fail. As cultural tastes shifted away from the glamour and escapism represented by late classical era musicals like *Hello, Dolly!* (Gene Kelly, US, 1969) and towards more grounded adult-oriented dramas, it became necessary that the form of the musical change if they were to survive in this new era. As such, what died at the end of the 1960s was the specific subcategory of the bloated road-show musical epitomized by entries like *Camelot* (Joshua Logan, US, 1967) and *Doctor Dolittle* (Richard Fleischer, US, 1967).

This period from the 1970s through the 1990s represents a less commercial transitional stage between the classical era of film musicals and their twenty-first century rebirth jumpstarted by the successes of *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, US and Australia, 2001) and *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, US, 2002) and lasting through *Les Misérables* (Tom Hooper, US and UK, 2012). These new post-classical musicals are able to explore more cult, counterculture topics as they were no longer tentpole films that needed to appeal to as wide of an audience as possible in order to turn a profit. *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, US, 1972) was now free to take on a more sexually-charged energy, dark tone, and explicitly portray gay and bisexual characters on screen in ways that would not have been allowed by the Freed unit. With this increased freedom of topics came an ability to present alternative forms of identification. *The Great Muppet Caper* and *Little Shop of Horrors* promote identification with "thing-characters," while *The Wiz*, *Yentl*, and *Evita* render the abjected figure in explicitly sympathetic and relatable terms.

Changes during the course of this period of film musicals are also observed. The films explored in this project that were released in the 1970s and 1980s (with the exception of *Yentl*)

have a much stronger sense of irony and are more playful than their 1990s counterparts. The zaniness and fourth wall-breaking humor of *The Great Muppet Caper* contain a string of insincerity that exists alongside the desire to have the audience form an affective relationship with the Muppet characters; and *The Wiz* uses the artificial qualities of camp to reimagine Oz as a fantastical version of New York City.

By the 1990s the films begin to have larger budgets and bigger stars. *Yentl* exists as a precursor to this phenomenon but still largely foregrounds the camp elements of the crossdressing plot. Films like *Evita* and *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, US, 1995) attempt to recalibrate the post-classical musical as a prestige art form, with larger budgets and bigger stars. The tradeoff for this is that these 1990s films tend to contain fewer transgressive elements. *Evita* becomes refigured as a 1940s-style fallen woman melodrama, while the real life story of Pocahontas is imagined as a Shakespearean star-crossed lovers story about overcoming hate and bigotry.

These more prestige-oriented pictures end up paving the way for the 2000s boom exemplified by *Chicago*. *Evita* in particular set the stage for a wave of films that attempt to combine the aesthetics of prestige non-musical dramas with the conventions of the musical film. *Nine* (Rob Marshall, US, 2009) recruits a cast of prestige dramatic performers like Judi Dench, Daniel Day-Lewis, Nicole Kidman, and Marion Cotillard to present European art-house cinema in the style of MTV; while *Les Misérables* drags a high-octane operatic melodrama down into Holocaust drama aesthetics in an attempt to make a gritty, realistic three hour sung-through musical.

After the 2000s boom there is another distinct wave of musical films that we are currently living through. *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, US, 2016) managed to do what *Les Misérables*

seemingly could not, recuperating the movie musical as a prestige vehicle and hybridizing the Freed unit aesthetic of its musical numbers with the grounded literalism and Hollywood worship of Oscar-bait dramas; while *West Side Story* (Steven Spielberg, US, 2021) more recently blended throwback style with updated racial politics and the hindsight of the last sixty years of history to reimagine the show as a period piece as opposed to the then-contemporary setting of the original. *The Greatest Showman* (Michael Gracey, US, 2017) set the new trend of courting the high-school theater kid audience with generic inspirational stories and radio-playable pop hits. The closest this new era has come to recreating the magic of the 1970s-90s period is *Cats* (Tom Hooper, US and UK, 2019). It still contains the aspirations of prestige that characterize the post-*Chicago* wave, but this is undercut at every possible moment by the nightmarish "digital fur technology" that made the film an easy target for widespread mockery in the same way as *Xanadu*.

The post-classical era of movie musicals is still wildly under-studied. For decades these films have been written off as unimportant and irrelevant by scholars of the musical film, while studies of camp and cult film have repeatedly ignored the musical altogether. Despite that, this mode of filmmaking has been extremely resilient considering the ebbs and flows of public interest, and as my analysis demonstrates, post-classical musical films have endured in part through their distinct modes of emotional identification, In the cases discussed, I argue that the post-classical musical's deployment of emotional identification illustrates the genre's potential to queerly interrogate imperialist, Western categories of abjection. As Hollywood experiences another renaissance of the movie musical, now framed as a prestige global export, it has become even more important to extend the film musical's historiography to include the past fifty years of

creative output and to attend to the ideological implications of the postclassical musical's affective regimes.

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